

# CAPTAIN FUTURE

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FEATURING  
**CALLING  
CAPT. FUTURE**  
A Complete Book-Length  
Novel of Solar Doom  
By **EDMOND HAMILTON**

A THRILLING  
PUBLICATION

# Calling **CAPTAIN FUTURE**

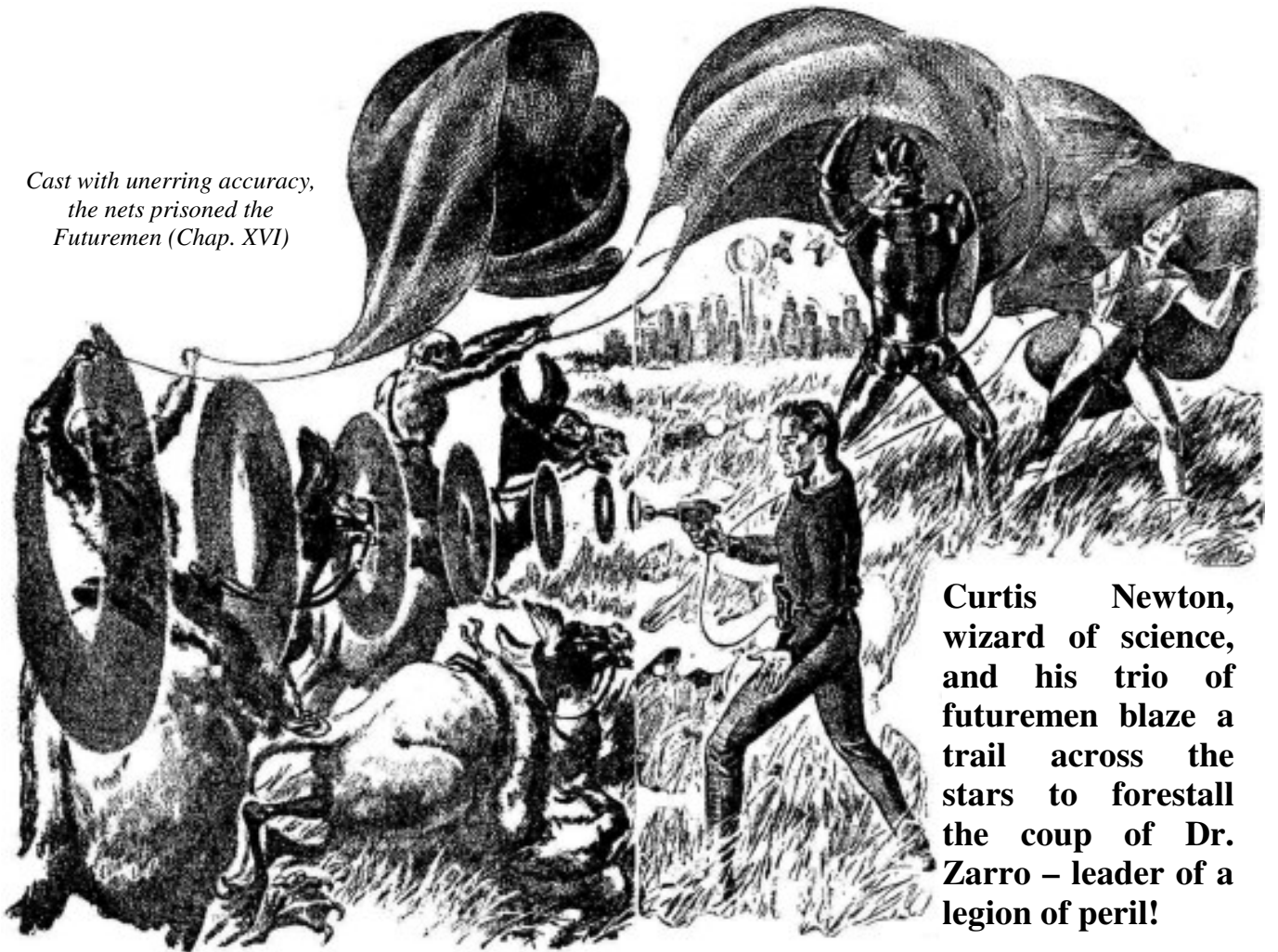
A Complete Book-Length Novel of Solar Doom

By

**EDMOND HAMILTON**

Author of "Captain Future and the Space Emperor,"  
"The Three Planetears," etc.

*Cast with unerring accuracy,  
the nets prisoned the  
Futuremen (Chap. XVI)*



**Curtis Newton,**  
wizad of science,  
and his trio of  
futuremen blaze a  
trail across the  
stars to forestall  
the coup of Dr.  
Zarro – leader of a  
legion of peril!

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**CHAPTER I**  
*The Menace from Space*

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**T**HE big liner *Pallas* throbbed through space on its regular run from Venus to Earth. In the brightly lighted saloons of the big shop, throngs of men and women drank, laughed, talked or danced to the haunting music of the native Venusian orchestra.

Up in the television room, "Sparks" yawned over his instruments. Then the youthful Earthman operator looked up quickly as the stocky first mate of the liner entered the room.

"Call Earth Spaceport Four and tell them we'll dock at ten sharp tomorrow," the mate ordered.

Sparks punched his switches, pressed the call-button. The television screen broke into light. In it appeared the chief dispatcher, on duty at Earth Spaceport 4.

The dispatcher heard the report and then nodded.

"Okay, *Pallas*. We'll have Dock Fifteen ready for –" Then it happened!

The television went blank as an untuned wave of incredible power crowded onto it. Then the image of a man appeared in it.

"What the devil –" Sparks gasped. The man in the screen was an extraordinary-looking individual. He seemed an Earthman, yet his tall, gaunt, black-clothed figure, his enormous bulging forehead and skull, and his hypnotically burning black eyes, gave to his aspect some indefinable but startling aura of the superman.

"Doctor Zarro calling the Solar System peoples," he rasped in a deep, harsh voice. "People of the nine worlds, I bring you warning of a dreadful peril – a peril which your bungling, stupid scientists have not yet even discovered.

"A huge dark star is rushing upon our Solar System from the boundless abyss of outer space! This colossal dead sun is coming from the direction of the constellation Sagittarius – its exact position is Right Ascension, seventeen hours, forty-one minutes, Declination, minus twenty-seven degrees, forty-eight minutes. It is coming straight toward us and will reach our System in several weeks, at its present speed. This on-coming monster will wreck our System – unless it is turned aside."

**D**OCTOR ZARRO'S rasping voice deepened into a reverberating thunder.

"I can turn aside that oncoming dark star, if I am given power to do so in time!" he shouted. "I alone! I am master of forces unknown to your ignorant scientists, for I am not really a native of this System at all. Who I am or what I am does not matter in this emergency.

"I am going to form a legion of men who believe in me and will help me avert this peril – a Legion of Doom! But to prepare the forces that can turn aside the onrushing menace, I must have complete authority over

all the resources of the System. I and my Legion must have temporary dictatorship over the System, if this terrible danger is to be averted."

The figure of Doctor Zarro vanished from the television screen, leaving the operator and the mate of the *Pallas* thunderstruck.

"Who the devil was that?" gasped the stocky mate. "He didn't look completely human!"

The young operator shook his head dazedly. Now the Earth Spaceport dispatcher, reappearing in the television, cried:

"Did you get that broadcast of the man who caned himself Doctor Zarro? He crowded onto all wave-bands – every television in the whole System heard him!"

The dispatcher switched hastily off. Young Sparks looked excitedly up at the mate.

"Do you suppose there's anything to his warning? If a dark star really is coming toward the System –"

"Nuts, there can't be anything to it," the mate declared. "It's just a publicity stunt, but a queer one."

"It didn't sound like a stunt," Sparks muttered uncertainly.

He pressed switches, tuning in on many stations. A kaleidoscope of faces passed across the television screen. A hurricane of messages was being flashed back and forth between planets, concerning the startling broadcast of the self-styled Doctor Zarro.

"He's sure stirred up the System!" the operator declared. "And judging from the messages, not everybody is as skeptical as you."

A buzzer sounded from atop the television set.

"General Government Call!" exclaimed Sparks, his youthful face stiffening. He reached and touched a stud.

An official of the System Government appeared in the television. He spoke with decisive firmness.

"This is to inform the System peoples that the so-called Doctor Zarro who broadcast a warning tonight is merely a cheap faker trying to scare the System," said the official. "His assertions are not true. Astronomers have quickly checked the position in space he gave, and found nothing. The dark star does not exist!"

"What did I tell you?" scoffed the first mate as the System official switched off. "Just a crazy fake, that's all."

"Maybe," muttered the operator. "But that man didn't look like a faker. He looked queer, powerful – super-human!"

"Rats – he's just a crank alarmist," repeated the stocky mate. "The Planet Police will soon hunt him down."

**B**UT the Planet Police did not hunt Doctor Zarro down. Two weeks later the Mercurian newscaster was announcing:

"– and so the Planet Police have been completely unable to find the mysterious Doctor Zarro who made

that broadcast, for his wave was of a strange new type whose source could not be located or analyzed.

"Karthak, Saturn: A disastrous atomic explosion in this colony today took toll of—"

The crowd of chromium-miners and engineers in this little drinking-shop in one of the Twilight Cities of Mercury paid no further attention to the news bulletins. One of them, a big, bald Earthman miner, had started arguing with a little Mercurian engineer.

"I tell you, I heard that broadcast," the Mercurian insisted, "and that Doctor Zarro wasn't any Earthman! He looked —"

"Look — there he is now!" yelled one of the crowd, pointing at the televisor.

They stared stupefiedly. The newscaster had been crowded off the ether, and the tall, gaunt, burning-eyed image of Doctor Zarro had appeared in the screen.

"You did not believe my warning, people of the nine worlds," Doctor Zarro thundered. "you chose to believe your stupid 'scientists' instead. But now you shall see for yourself. The dark star approaching is now grown so large that it can be seen in small telescopes.

"Look for yourselves to the position in space I mentioned, and you will see that monster dead sun that is coming nearer to us each fateful minute. Look — and see for yourselves whether your 'scientists' or Doctor Zarro was right."

The figure of Doctor Zarro vanished from the televisor, leaving the gathered miners and engineers gasping.

"Another fake warning!" cried the bald Earthman.

"I wonder," muttered the little Mercurian engineer. He turned to a younger Mercurian. "Atho, you have a small telescope, haven't you? Get it and set it up — we'll see for ourselves."

Presently, in the dark street of the metal Mercurian city, they were crowded around the small electro-telescope that was pointed toward a spot in the constellation Sagittarius.

"There is something there!" the young Mercurian cried. "I can see it!"

One by one, they stared through the eyepiece. They saw a tiny disk of darkness out there in the Milky Way.

"It's a dark star, all right," muttered the little engineer. "And it must be of great size, to present a visible disk far outside the System."

**T**HE motley interplanetary group of men looked at each other. A chill of doubt had settled on them.

"If a dark star is rushing toward the System, it will wreck the nine worlds as Doctor Zarro warns!" cried a wide-eyed Venusian. "Maybe we ought to give him the System-wide authority he asks for."

"Aw, I still don't believe it," declared the bald Earthman miner. "Let's see what the Government has to say on it."

They crowded back to the televisor in the drinking

shop. A Government announcer was on.

"People of the System, our scientists have now located a dark body of some kind in Sagittarius," admitted the official; "But there is no danger from it! As far as the scientists have ascertained, it has almost no mass. So there's nothing to fear."

"See?" exclaimed the bald Earthman miner triumphantly. "I told you it was all nonsense."

But the others looked worried. One of them, the younger Mercurian, voiced what all were thinking.

"The scientists said at first there was no dark star at all! Now they admit that Doctor Zarro was right, that there is a dark star. They claim it lacks sufficient mass to harm us, even though it's big. Suppose the scientists are wrong again? Suppose Doctor Zarro's warning is right?"

They looked at each other in wild surmise.

"If it is, then Doctor Zarro is the only one who can save us from the dark star! He was the one who told us about it when our scientists denied even its existence —"

The bald miner shook his head. Like all modern people, he had always had complete faith in the scientists of the System. That faith was still unshaken, even though Doctor Zarro had proved the scientists wrong once.

"I still take our scientists' word against this mysterious Doctor Zarro's," he declared stubbornly. "They'd tell us if there was any real danger —"

This particular Earthman might persist in his faith. Others, in various quarters of the System, were losing it rapidly.

"There is danger! Terrible danger to the whole System! And only Doctor Zarro can avert it!"

The speaker was an Earthman colonist of Saturn, a deeply-tanned man of forty whose face could not conceal his deep-seated worry.

His wife and family and a few friends were gathered with him in his ranchhouse living room. Outside in the night stretched the vast plains of Saturn, with lanky Saturnians riding to and fro on their grotesque steeds in the light of the brilliant moons, herding the queer planetary cattle.

"The dark star exists — the scientists can't dispute that — and it's coming on toward the System at terrible speed, judging from the way its visible size increases," the rancher continued earnestly. "If it isn't turned aside somehow it will wreck the whole System. And Doctor Zarro's the only one who can possibly turn it aside."

"How do you know that even Doctor Zarro can do that?" demanded a Colonial Office clerk skeptically.

"I don't know, but who could do it if he can't? He discovered the approaching dark star long before the scientists could even see it. Hence, he must have powers greater than any known to our science. I say: give him the System-wide power he asks, and let him do what he can."

"It means setting him up as a dictator over the whole System," pointed out a neighbor Earthman rancher.

"It's better to have a temporary dictator than to see the nine worlds wrecked by a catastrophe!"

The Earthman voiced what more and more people in the System were thinking. The scientists had been proved wrong once by Doctor Zarro. What if they were wrong again? The answer to that meant life or death for the System.

**M**ORE and more people were proclaiming that they believed Doctor Zarro's warnings. And the mysterious prophet's followers, his Legion of Doom, had appeared throughout the System. They all wore a black, disklike emblem on their sleeves and carried a similar emblem on the bows of their space cruisers. They sped through the spaceways of the alarmed System, mysterious couriers of the enigmatic Doctor.

"Doctor Zarro always broadcasts at this time," the rancher's wife was saying. "Let's see if he's on tonight."

They switched on the television. Minutes later, the impressive figure of the doctor crowded on the screen.

"People of the System, your scientists have told you there was no danger," he shouted. "But where are those scientists now? Where is Robert Jons, the Mercurian astronomer who ridiculed my warnings? Where is Henry Gellimer, the astrophysicist who denounced me as a faker? Why have the great scientists' who laughed at my warnings disappeared?"

"Those scientists have escaped from the Solar System to avoid being trapped by the coming catastrophe!" Doctor Zarro thundered. "They have fled with their families, going outside the System in space ships to wait until the catastrophe is over, and then they will return to whatever worlds are spared. They are saving themselves, while you billions of people who believed in them will perish!"

As the dark prophet vanished from the screen, the Earthman rancher and his friends, stunned, looked at each other.

"If those scientists have really fled from the System, that proves that Doctor Zarro is right!" cried the rancher.

"We don't know yet that it's really happened – Doctor Zarro may be lying about it," said the clerk worriedly.

"Here's a Government bulletin!"

The harassed face of a System Government official on a System-wide hookup appeared in the screen, for the Government was now following each of Doctor Zarro's broadcasts with reassuring statements. This statement was not reassuring.

"People of the System, it is true that many of our most eminent scientists and their families have disappeared. But we are sure they have not fled – we believe foul play is responsible. We beg the System not to cred-

it the statements of this Doctor Zarro, but to have faith that there is no danger –"

"Have faith?" cried the rancher of Saturn. "How can we have faith in the scientists' assurance that there's no danger, when they've fled to save themselves? There is danger – and Doctor Zarro is the only chance we have to avert it!"

"I believe now you're right," his neighbor rancher agreed troubledly. "We'll have to force the Government to turn over all power to Doctor Zarro!"

**I**N front of the great tower that housed the System Government, in the city of New York on Earth, a vast crowd was demonstrating this night.

"The President – and Council – must resign – and yield their power – to Doctor Zarro – and the Legion – till the danger is past!" the crowd was shouting in unison.

James Carthew, the President of the System Government, stood at the window of his office, looking down at the surging, terrorized throng. His secretary waited anxiously beside him.

"This can't go on," Carthew said tightly as he looked down at the swaying crowd being held back by police. "A little more of this, and they'll overturn the Government by force."

His fist clenched.

"This Doctor Zarro is a cunning plotter playing upon the fears of the System to attain dictatorial power! He's the most diabolically ingenious schemer that has ever threatened this Government!"

North Bonnel, the young secretary, shook his head in troubled doubt.

"But, sir," he reminded, "Doctor Zarro did foretell the coming of the dark star, when our greatest scientists with the most powerful telescopes could not even see it."

"I know, and I can't understand that," Carthew admitted. "But that doesn't change the fact that we're up against a devilish scheme to usurp power over the whole System. There can't be any real danger in that approaching dark star when it has such a ridiculously low mass. The public only thinks there is danger, and Doctor Zarro is fanning their fears higher every hour."

The door of the office burst open. The man who entered wore a dark uniform with silver stars on the shoulders. He was Halk Anders, commander of the Planet Police.

"Sir, I have to report," he told the President breathlessly as he saluted, "that those crowds are getting out of hand. We can hardly hold them out of this building now. I've had calls from headquarters on the other planets, and the people there are rioting too, calling for Doctor Zarro to be given full emergency authority."

Carthew's lined face whitened.

"Haven't you been able yet to locate this Doctor

Zarro?" he cried. "If we could arrest him and stop those inflammatory broadcasts of his –"

The stocky commander shook his head.

"We've been unable to find Doctor Zarro's headquarters. His broadcasts are on a new-type wave that we can't track down. We've tried to trail the ships of his Legion of Doom, but they always manage to give us the slip in space."

"What about Jons and Gellimer and all the other scientists who vanished?" Carthew asked. "Have you learned anything?"

"No, sir."

North Bonnel turned haggardly to his superior.

"What are we going to do, sir? If the public terror increases like this, the Government will be in Doctor Zarro's hands in a week!"

JAMES CARTHEW'S pale face set. He looked out through the eastern window of the tower room, at the fun moon that was rising majestically in the heavens like a great silver shield.

"There is one man who can smash Doctor Zarro's plot, if anybody can," he muttered. "I did not want to call upon him before this, for he is not the kind of man

to be annoyed with matters the regular authorities call handle –"

The secretary stiffened. His lips trembled.

"You mean – Captain Future?"

"Yes, Captain Future," the President said, his eyes still fixed on the rising moon. "If anybody can stop Doctor Zarro and his Legion, Captain Future and those three weird comrades of his can do it."

He turned abruptly, desperate determination written on his kindly, bewildered face.

"Televisé an order to have the North Pole signal-flare set off at once, Bonnel!"

A half hour later, amid the frozen wastes of eternal ice at the North Pole, there blossomed a huge flower of flame as a great, dazzling magnesium flare was detonated.

Far out in space that brilliant beacon was visible. Throbbing, winking and blinking, it cast its beams out through the void in silent, urgent appeal.

"Calling Captain Future!"

Calling the great, glamorous foe of evil, to a struggle with the mysterious Doctor Zarro's plot against misled humanity!

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**CHAPTER II**  
*The Futuremen*

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**A** BARREN, deathly white waste stretched across the surface of the Moon. Beneath the glare of the blazing sun, the lunar plains rolled in eternal silence toward the colossal craters that towered like menacing jagged fangs. Upon this desolate world there was no air, no sound, and no human life — except in one place.

Upon the floor of Tycho Crater glittered something like a round crystal lake. It was a big, glassite window set in the lunar rock. Underneath that window, excavated out of the soft rock, was the artificial cavern that was the laboratory and home of the most famous man in the System — Captain Future.

The big laboratory of the cavern home was bathed in light from the window above it. Here loomed mechanisms and racks of instruments in bewildering array. Giant generators and condensers that could furnish limitless atomic power. Big telescopes and spectro-telescopes whose tubes protruded through the lunar surface.

*Saturnian rope-snakes pinioned  
Curt's limbs (Chap. III)*



Chemical and electrical apparatus of bewildering complexity and design. All the crowded equipment of the System's supreme master of science!

The two individuals working tensely in a corner of the laboratory could be heard over the throbbing of a machine.

"Time to shift the electron-flow, Simon?" the deep, clear voice of one was asking.

"Not yet, Curtis," answered the other's voice, a rasping, metallic, unhuman one. "Transmutation is not complete yet."

These two were working with a spherical machine into which the great atomic generators were pouring vast power.

One of the two was a big, red-headed young man in a gray synthesilk zipper suit. His lithe, broad-shouldered figure towered six feet four. His tanned, handsome, debonair face and flashing gray eyes had a rollicking humor in them that could not hide keen intelligence and deep purpose.

He wore a big ring on his left hand – a ring whose nine jewels were motivated by a tiny atomic power engine that kept them moving slowly around a glowing central jewel. This ring, whose jewels represented the nine worlds, was known to the whole System as the identifying emblem of Captain Future, the wizard of science and the implacable foe of evil.

Captain Future – or Curtis Newton, by the name so few knew – stood ready by the lever of the spherical machine. On a pedestal, watching the gauges of the mechanism, was his fellow-worker.

This was Simon Wright, the Brain. He was just that – a living human brain that had no body. Instead, his brain was housed in a square, transparent serum-case, in the front of which was his resonator speech apparatus, on the stalks of which in turn were his lens-eyes.

"Transmutation's almost complete now," the Brain declared in his metallic artificial voice, his glass lens eyes closely watching the gauges. "Stand ready to shift the electron flow."

A moment later he spoke quickly. "Now!"

Curt Newton slammed down the lever. The throbbing of power into the spherical machine ceased.

The red-headed scientific wizard unclamped a door and opened it. Out of the mechanism poured a stream of white powder.

"That's done it!" Curt exclaimed. "A hundred pounds of copper, transmuted into pure isotopic boron."

**H**E stepped back and mopped his brow, and then grinned at the Brain. "Whew, that was a job! But it will save us a trip all the way to Uranus, to get that rare isotope."

"Aye, lad," rasped the Brain. "This transmutation of elements is one of your greatest achievements yet."

Curt's gray eyes twinkled at him.

"You're an old fraud, Simon," he accused. "You know as well as I do that I could never have achieved it if you hadn't worked with me."

At that moment, there was a sudden explosion of angry, arguing voices from another chamber of the cavern home. One was a loud, Booming, mechanical-sounding voice. The other voice was hissing, sibilant and furious.

"Grag and Otho are at each other again!" exclaimed Captain Future impatiently. "I swear those two will drive me crazy yet."

He raised his voice in a call. "Grag! Otho!"

Two creatures of unhumanly weird appearance entered the laboratory in answer to his call.

One of them was a rubbery white android, or synthetic man. Otho, the android, was manlike in figure, his synthetic flesh having been molded into human form when he had been made. But his hairless white head and face, his slitted green eyes that were flashing now with anger, were not like any human's. Nor could any human move with his wonderful quickness and agility.

Grag, the metal robot, was the other disputant. Towering seven feet high, his mighty metal arms hinted incredible strength. The chief features in his bulbous metal head were his two photo-electric eyes that gleamed with living light, and the mouthlike opening of his speech mechanism. There was no creature in the whole System stronger than Grag, the robot.

Perched upon Grag's shoulder was a queer, bearlike little animal of inorganic silicate flesh, with strong paws, a sharp, inquisitive snout, and bright little black eyes. It was a moon-pup, one of the strange non-breathing creatures found on the lunar plains, who assimilated food elements by direct ingestion of the mineral they could crush in their powerful teeth. The little gray creature was contentedly chewing on a piece of copper now.

"Now what's the trouble between you two?" Captain Future demanded of the robot and android. "Can't Simon and I work for a minute without you two getting into your arguments?"

"It's Grag's fault!" hissed Otho furiously. He pointed to the little gray bearlike animal. "That damned moon-pup pet of his has eaten up one of my best pistols!"

**G**RAG, the robot, cuddled the little gray moon-pup protectively with a great metal hand. "It's not Eek's fault, master," he told Captain Future in loud indignation. "Eek was hungry – and he loves copper."

"Either that moon-pup leaves here or I leave!" stormed the android. "The beast eats any metal it can get its paws on – and when it gets hold of some precious metal, it gets howling drunk on it! It's got a lot of other habits that make it a pest. It was crazy of Grag to catch the cursed thing and make a tame pet of it."

"We humans like to have pets," the robot defended.



"Otho does not understand, master, because he is not human like us."

"Not human like you?" Otho howled furiously. "Why, you walking machine-shop, anyone can see that I'm a flesh-and-blood human while you're nothing but a clever mechanism! If I—"

"Now don't start that argument again!" Captain Future interrupted hastily. "I've heard enough of it."

"Aye, and so have I," rasped Simon Wright, the Brain, his lens-eyes dourly surveying the two disputants. "You two are always arguing about which is the most human. And I, who really was human once, can tell you that it's nothing worth arguing about."

"Simon is right," Curt Newton said severely. "Every time you two have any time on your hands, you start scrapping with each other, and I'm getting tired of it."

Despite his severity of tone, there was a fond twinkle of affection in the gray eyes of the big red-headed scientific adventurer, as he surveyed the robot and the android and the Brain.

These were the Futuremen, the loyal trio of comrades who had fought and sailed around the whole System with him! These three weird comrades of his, unhuman in form yet superhuman in abilities, had stood at his side in more than one great struggle out in the solar spaces. And, furthermore, the three had reared Curt Newton from babyhood to manhood, in this very cavern home on the Moon.

Twenty-five years before, Captain Future's parents had come secretly to the moon. Roger Newton was a young Earth biologist who dreamed a great dream. He hoped to create life – artificial, intelligent living creatures who could serve mankind. But his work was in danger. Certain ambitious men coveted his scientific discoveries and tried to steal them.

Roger Newton had decided to seek refuge on the wild, uninhabited Moon. He had sailed secretly in a small rocket for the Moon. And with him had gone his young wife, Elaine, and his loyal co-worker and assistant, Simon Wright – the Brain.

Simon Wright had been a famous, aging scientist who was about to die of incurable disease. Newton had by brilliant surgery removed Simon's brain and transferred it into a special serum-case. Ever since, the Brain had been his most loyal friend.

Newton and his young wife and the Brain had reached the Moon safely, and had built an underground home beneath Tycho Crater. There, soon after their arrival, a son was born to the man and woman – a boy whom they named Curtis. And there they began the work of creating artificial living creatures.

**G**RAG, the robot, was the first creature created by Roger Newton and the Brain. Their second creation was not of metal but of synthetic plastic flesh molded into a manlike android – Otho, the synthetic

man. These two artificial creatures, intelligent, strong, faithful, showed Roger Newton that he had at last realized his dream.

Then disaster struck. The evil plotters who coveted Newton's scientific secrets had trailed him to the Moon. There was a fight – and Roger Newton and his young wife were slain, before the robot and the synthetic man killed the murderers.

Dying, Elaine Newton entrusted her infant son to the care of the three unhuman creatures, Brain, robot and android. She begged them to rear him to manhood and implant in him a hatred of all those who used scientific gifts for evil ends – to train him as a relentless foe of an such as would oppress or exploit the System people.

Simon Wright and Grag and Otho had kept that promise. They had reared little Curtis Newton to manhood. And the Brain, with its wonderful scientific knowledge, had so schooled him that he became a wizard of scientific ability surpassing his teacher. Grag, the robot, strongest of living beings, had fostered his strength until it was superhuman. And Otho the android, swiftest and most agile of all creatures, had taught him unmatchable speed and deftness.

Thus Curtis Newton had grown to manhood on the lonely Moon, with his three unhuman tutors. When he had reached manhood, the Brain had told him the story of his origin, and had repeated the dying wish of his mother that he become champion of the System's peoples against those who would oppress them.

"Will you take up this crusade against interplanetary evil, Curtis?" the Brain had asked. "Will you embark on this crusade, this fight for the future of the System?"

Curtis Newton had made his fateful decision, one that was to change history.

"Yes, Simon – someone has to stand up for the System peoples against their exploiters. And, with you three helping me, I'll do my best."

He had added half-humorously: "Since you say I'll be fighting for the future of the System, I think I'll call myself – Captain Future."

As Captain Future, then, Curt had offered his services to the System President in the war against interplanetary crime. At first doubtful of this strange, red-headed young man, the President had in a desperate emergency called upon his aid.

Captain Future and the Futuremen had demonstrated their power, swiftly, relentlessly. Since then, the President had called him time and again by the agreed signal. And time and again, Curt Newton and his three strange, loyal comrades had gone forth in perilous struggle.

**C**URT was thinking of all that now, as he faced his three comrades. "You two are more than human to me," he told Grag and Otho impulsively. "So why can't you quit this continual jealousy about which is the most

human?"

"Otho is too overbearing," Grag boomed, cuddling the moon-pup in his metal arm. "He should remember that I was made before he was."

"Of course you were—you were such a bad job that they had to try again and make me before they were satisfied," Otho jeered, with a mocking gleam in his slitted green eyes.

"Will you let him talk so, master?" appealed Grag angrily to Curt Newton. "He —"

"The signal!" cried the Brain suddenly.

Simon's lens-eyes had glanced up through the window overhead at the great green sphere of Earth. The cry of the Brain made the other three look up instantly.

There upon the great cloudy green planet hanging in starry space, upon the white patch at the North Pole, a blazing pinpoint of light was pulsing and throbbing.

"It is the signal!" Captain Future said gravely. "We're needed."

Captain Future's debonair tanned face had changed, grown grim. His nostrils were flaring, his brilliant gray eyes had something chill and hard as steel in them now.

The Futuremen were gripped by the same strange emotion. The call from Earth! The tocsin that summoned these four to action! It was for this call that they waited through long weeks, living and working in the lunar laboratory.

Captain Future's voice rang like a silver trumpet summoning to battle.

"To the *Comet*! That call admits of no delay. The President never calls for nothing."

"Pick me up, Grag," rasped the Brain's calm, metallic voice.

The robot picked up the handle of the Brain's case. With the moon-pup clinging to his other arm, Grag started with hasty strides after Curt Newton and Otho.

Ten minutes later a small ship shaped like an elongated tear-drop rose from an underground hangar on the lunar surface. It was the *Comet*, super-swift craft of the Futuremen, known far and wide through the System as the swiftest ship in space.

Two hours later, so swift was its flight, the *Comet* screamed down through the stratosphere of Earth's night side. Curt Newton dropped the little craft straight toward the great Government Tower that rose above all other structures of brilliant New York.

The *Comet* came to rest on the truncated tip of the tower. As Curt and the Futuremen emerged, they saw in the plaza far below a great crowd that surged riotously against a line of Police.

Curt's lip tightened.

"Something's damned wrong, from the look of things. Come on — hurry —"

They hastened down a stairway that led directly into the private office of the System President. The three men in that office, Carthew, his secretary, and Com-

mander Anders of the Planet Police, spun around startledly.

"Captain Future!" cried Carthew, his voice shrill with relief, his fine face working as he came hastily forward.

**Y**OUNG Bonnel and the burly Commander stared, not without awe, at the tall young wizard of science and his companions.

Curt Newton's big figure radiated power and confidence as he stood there, the weird trio of the Futuremen behind him — giant Grag, the Brain he held, and the rubbery android.

"What's wrong, sir?" Curt demanded of the President. "What does that rioting crowd down there want?"

"They want me to turn the System Government over to Doctor Zarro and his Legion!" burst Carthew.

"Doctor Zarro?" Curt's eyebrows rose. "Who the devil is that?"

"You haven't heard him?" cried Bonnel incredulously. "Why, the whole System has heard his broadcasts about the dark star."

"What dark star?" snapped Captain Future. "I've heard nothing. Simon and I have been engaged for weeks in advanced electronic experiments. Tell me what's been going on."

James Carthew told him, in hasty, stumbling words.

"Nine-tenths of the people now believe utterly in Doctor Zarro's warnings!" Carthew finished hoarsely. "They want me to turn over all power to him, because he claims he can avert the peril."

Curt's gray eyes snapped.

"Obviously this Doctor Zarro is merely using the dark star as a pretext to usurp dictatorial power. You say the System astronomers are convinced that there is no real peril in the dark star?"

"Yes. They all agreed that the dark star has far too small a mass to be a danger. Though it is hard to believe so large a body could have so small a mass."

"Simon and I will check on that by observing the dark star for ourselves," muttered Curt. "But first this Doctor Zarro has to be caught and silenced before he spreads more panic."

Commander Anders shook his head hopelessly.

"We can't find Doctor Zarro! It is impossible to locate the hidden base he and his Legion are using. And more scientists keep disappearing — Kansu Kane, the astro-physicist of Venus Observatory, vanished an hour ago!"

"It's legitimate to infer that Doctor Zarro's Legion is behind these vanishings," Curt said. "We must have a starting point. I think we'll go to Venus and try to pick up the trail —"

The desk televisor buzzed suddenly. Commander Halk Anders sprang toward it.

"I ordered all calls from Venus routed to me here,"

he exclaimed. "It may be one of our agents there –"

He pressed a button. In the televisior screen appeared the face of a strikingly pretty Earth girl, with dark, wavy hair. Her small, firm face was pale, her brown eyes flashing excitedly.

"Joan Randall!" exclaimed Curt Newton.

He recognized the girl as one of the ace secret agents of the Planet Police. She had helped him on Jupiter recently in the case of the Space Emperor.

"Captain Future!" cried the girl joyfully. "Then you're working against Doctor Zarro? Thank heavens!"

**S**HE spoke with urgent rapidity. "I think I've got a lead to this Doctor Zarro. I was here on Venus when Kansu Kane, the scientist, vanished an hour ago. He was kidnapped by the Legion of Doom. I trailed the Legion men who did it to their ship, and heard them say their next job would be to seize Gatola, the Martian astronomer –"

Joan suddenly stopped. She exclaimed: "Someone's trying to get in here! If the Legion saw me and followed me –"

She disappeared from the screen. They heard the crash of a bursting door, then a scream. The televisior went dark.

"Joan!" cried Captain Future. There was no answer.

"The Legion of Doom realized she was spying on them! They've kidnapped her too, lad!" rasped the Brain.

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### CHAPTER III

#### *On Desert Mars*

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**T**HE cold night wind whispered across the Martian desert, seeming to murmur of mystery and a mighty past. It sighed like a chill, alien breath toward the lighted towers of Syrtis, the equatorial Martian metropolis in the distance.

Out here in the moonlit desert a mile from the city Syrtis, the *Comet* lay motionless between two concealing sand dunes. Inside the little ship, in the super-compact laboratory that occupied its mid-section, Captain Future was rapidly preparing for a perilous enterprise.

His red hair almost touched the ceiling as his tall figure strode to and fro, explaining his plan to the Futuremen.

"It's our one chance to get Joan Randall out of the hands of the Legion of Doom, and to get a lead to Doctor Zarro!" he explained, his gray eyes alight. "That's why I wanted to come straight to Mars from Earth, after we realized Joan had been captured. Joan said that the Legion, or those of it who kidnapped Kansu Kane, were coming next to Mars to abduct Gatola, the astronomer-director of Syrtis Observatory. They should arrive here

tonight for the attempt. When they come, I'll be waiting for them!"

The Brain's lens-eyes doubtfully watched the keen, eager brown face of the young scientific wizard.

"But if the Legion men heard Joan telling us of their plans, they won't be foolish enough to come here," he objected.

"I doubt if they heard. We've got to chance it. They'll have Joan and Kansu Kane with them as captives when they come to kidnap Gatola. We'll turn the tables on them – if we're lucky."

Grag the robot shifted his great metal body uneasily. He had been standing listening with Otho and the Brain, with the little bright-eyed moon-pup chewing playfully on his arm.

"Of course we can overcome these Legion men, master," he said with heavy subtlety.

Curt grinned at him. "Nothing doing, Grag – you stay here in the ship with Simon. Otho goes with me."

"You always take him!" Grag complained loudly. "Why can't I go too?"

Otho laughed jeeringly. "Do you suppose we want a bunch of rusty machinery clanking along with us through the city? You stay here with your crazy little pet – and keep him from eating up my equipment, or I'll toss him out into space somewhere."

Eek, the gray moon-pup, thrust its sharp snout toward Otho and made a furious grimace, its chisel-like teeth clashing.

The moon-pup was telepathic, that being the only means of communication evolved by its species on the airless, soundless moon. It fully understood Otho's dislike, and reciprocated heartily.

"You have hurt Eek's feelings!" Grag boomed wrathfully. "you are always picking on him, just because he has to have a little metal to eat sometimes."

"A little?" echoed Otho. "The cursed beast ate half a steelite stanchion today before we stopped him!"

**C**URT NEWTON had turned and was speaking earnestly to the Brain, whose case rested on his special pedestal.

"Simon, while I'm gone you can make some photographic and spectroscopic studies of the dark star. Especially, we need some accurate measurements of its mass."

"Aye, lad," rasped the Brain. "I should have them all in a few hours."

The mid-section of the *Comet*, in which Curt and the Futuremen now were, contained all the facilities the Brain would need for his researches. Electro-telescopes, spectro-telescopes, bolometers, and compact spectro-heliographs crowded the corner devoted to astronomical science. Marvelous photographic equipment occupied a place next to the file, which contained spectra of all System bodies and of thousands of stars, and

atmosphere-samples of all worlds.

Yet this was only a corner of the flying-laboratory of the scientific wizard. The botanical section held hundreds of specimen plants and vegetable drugs from many planets. In the mineralogical cabinet were samples of minerals from Mercury to Pluto, The chemical section held containers of every element known to science. as well as wonderfully complete chemical apparatus. And the bio-medical corner comprised every necessary instrument for exhaustive biological research, as well as a folding operating table upon which Captain Future had more than once shown his superlative skill in surgery.

The laboratory was completed by an exhaustive reference library – a library without books. It was a square metal cabinet that held every scientific book and monograph of value that had ever been published, reduced to microfilm which could be read through a special apparatus.

"I'll check all data on the dark star," the Brain was repeating to curt. "But you be careful, lad!"

"I'll look out that he doesn't do anything rash, Simon," promised Otho importantly.

"And who'll look out for you, you crazy excitement-hunter?" demanded the Brain witheringly of the android. "Trouble draws you like a magnet."

Curt laughed at the crestfallen android.

"Come on, Otho – the observatory is on the other side of Syrtis, two miles away. We'll have to hurry."

They emerged into the nipping chill of the Martian night, tramped through the sands toward the lighted towers of Syrtis, Curt in a long, swinging stride, Otho moving as lithely and soundlessly as a shadow.

Curt looked up with a tingling of his blood at Phobos and Deimos, the two brilliant moons hurtling low across the brooding desert. It had been months since he had been on Mars, and the magic of this old world of whispering deserts touched him strongly.

Ahead bulked the city. It was a typical Martian city of slender stone towers whose upper stories were larger than the lower, giving them a topheavy look. Dizzy galleries and stairs joined the towers. Only on a low-gravity world was such architecture possible.

Captain Future could see that the brightly lit center of the city was crowded. From it came a babel of excited voice.

"Shall we see what's going on?" Otho asked eagerly. The devil-may-care android was always drawn by excitement.

"No, we've enough on our hands now," Curt told him severely. "We mustn't lose any time getting to the observatory."

HE and Otho skirted the crowded central streets, keeping their concealing cloaks and hoods wrapped around them.

Earthmen colonists, planters, prospectors and space-sailors were in the crowds. They were out-numbered by the throngs of native Martians, big-chested, stilt-limbed men with leathery red faces and bald heads.

Captain Future heard an Earthman colonial official speaking with hoarse earnestness to the seething crowd.

"Don't let Doctor Zarro's alarmist broadcasts drive you to rash action!" he shouted. "The Government and scientists have assured us there is no danger from the dark star –"

"The scientists!" jeered a fierce Martian voice. "They denied at first there was any dark star at all! And now most of them have fled out of the System for safety."

"Yes!" yelled a chorus of supporting voices. "They can't help us in this peril. Doctor Zarro is the only one who can save us. Give Doctor Zarro the power he asks!"

"The crazy fools!" muttered Otho. "Begging for a dictator, just because they're scared by a pack of lies."

Curt's tan face was grave. "Unless Doctor Zarro and his broadcasts are stopped soon, he'll be the System dictator. Things are worse than I thought – we've little time!"

HE and the android pressed on across the city and soon reached the Syrtis Observatory. It lay a little outside the city in the desert, its huge dome bulking black and silent.

In the shadowy interior, a bald, red, middle-aged Martian sat at a lighted desk beneath the great telescope, calculating. He sprang up with a cry as he glimpsed Curt and the unhuman android.

"What – who –," he stammered. Then as Curt held out his left hand, he glimpsed the big ring. "Captain Future!"

"You're Gatola, director here?" Curt said sharply. The Martian, staring awedly at him nodded.

"A party of the Legion of Doom is coming to kidnap you. They'll be here any moment."

Gatola's eyes dilated. "Gods of Mars, if they –"

"But you're not going to be here when they come, Gatola," Curt continued. "Otho, my comrade, will take your place."

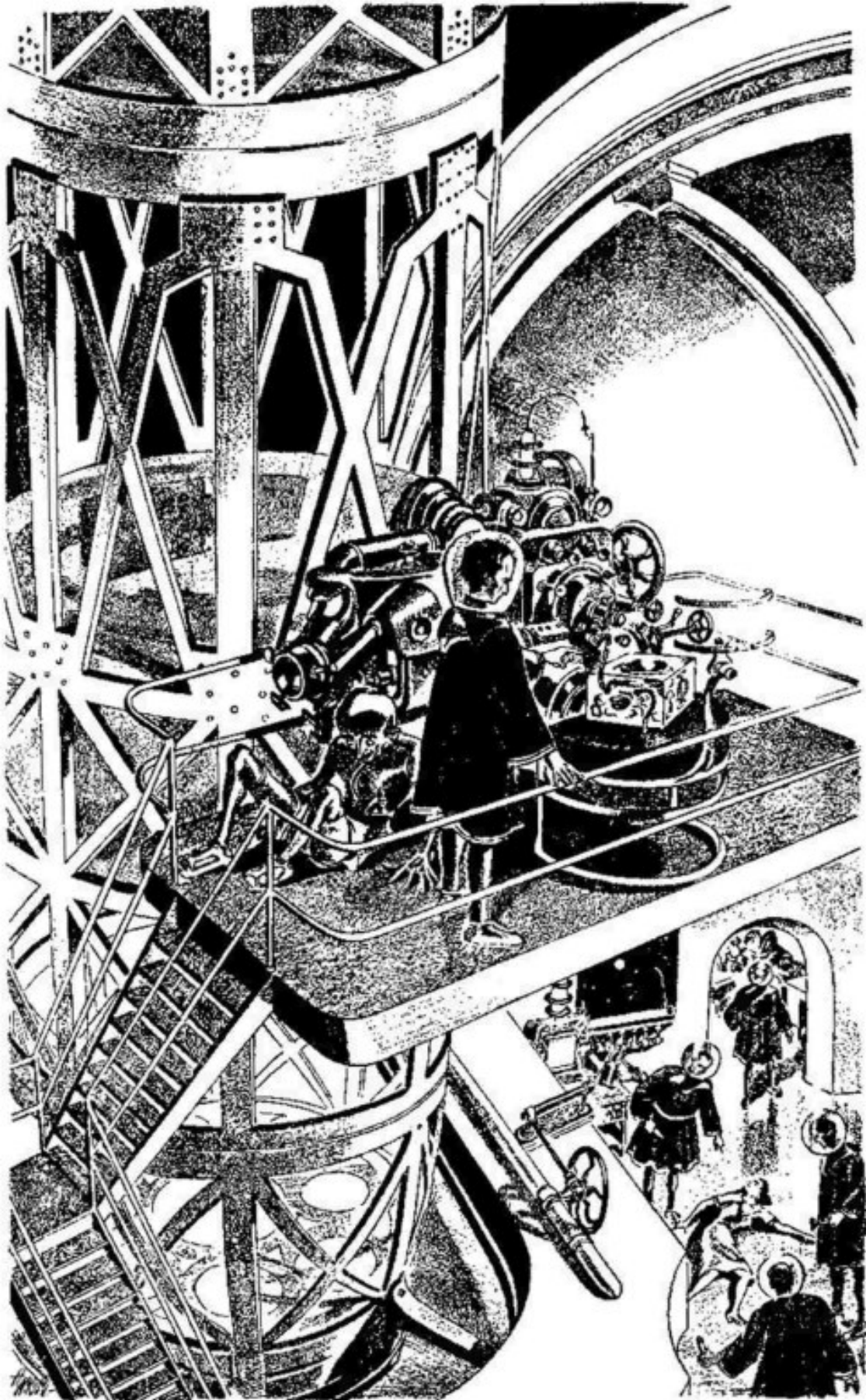
He turned to the android.

"All right, Otho – make up as this Martian. And hurry it!"

"Do I ever lag?" hissed Otho indignantly. He was clawing his disguise-equipment from a square pouch at his belt.

From a small lead flask, Otho sprayed a colorless chemical oil onto his head and body.

Otho's rubbery white synthetic flesh was wholly unlike ordinary flesh. It could be softened by chemical agents, and when soft, it was as plastic and easy to mold as clay. That fact made the android the greatest



*"So this miserable brain in a box is the famous Brain," mocked Doctor Zarro (Chap. IX)*

master of disguise in the System's history.

In a few minutes Otho's queer flesh became soft and putty-like — all except his hands, which he had been careful to leave unchanged. Now he began to mold the flesh of his own body into new outlines, like a sculptor working on himself!

His legs he molded into thin, stilt-like ones similar to the Martian's. He expanded his chest. And finally he molded his face into an exact replica, feature for feature, of Gatola's face.



*Captain Future*

Then his flesh hardened, grew rubbery and firm again, retaining the new outlines. Rapidly Otho stained himself with red dye from his make-up pouch. And Otho finally stood, an exact replica of Gatola, as though an uncanny twin.

"All done, Chief," Otho reported to Captain Future, speaking in an accurate reproduction of the Martian's voice.

Gatola's eyes were protruding in amazement. But Curt gave the Martian no time to voice his bewilderment.

"Leave here at once, Gatola," Captain Future ordered. "Otho will take your place here for tonight. Understand?"

"I don't understand," said the Martian dazedly, "but I'll go. I'll go home, and stay there."

When the Martian had gone, Curt gave Otho his final instructions.

"If the Legion of Doom ship comes, it will land outside. Part of its crew at least will come in here to seize Gatola — you. I want you to argue with them, resist

them, do anything short of getting yourself killed, to delay them in here. That will give me a chance to get into their ship and get Joan and Kansu Kane out."

"It sounds dangerous for you!" Otho protested. "Why couldn't we have had a squad of the Planet Police here to seize these mysterious devils when they come?"

"The Legion would resist and Joan would probably be killed," Curt retorted. "And I'm counting on getting a lead to Doctor Zarro from what she's learned."

"And you are sort of anxious about this Police girl anyway, aren't you?" Otho asked slyly.

Curt gave him a cuff that sent the laughing android spinning.

"This isn't any time for your damned nonsense. Get over to that telescope and try to act as though you knew something about astronomy."

"What do you mean, 'act'?" Otho hissed indignantly. "I know more about other worlds than the old men who sit in these places and peer at them. I don't study astronomy — I live it!"

Chuckling, Curt hastened back out of the shadowy observatory. He crouched down in the shadow, loosening his proton-pistol in its holster, and waited. Time passed slowly. But Captain Future had learned patience from Grag the robot, who could sit for a week without moving his metal limbs. The red-haired scientific wizard remained concealed, watching and waiting.

Presently Phobos set. The night became pitch dark, except for the thin rays of the great hosts of stars shining down upon the age-old deserts. A little wind moaned through the night.

Curt noticed a small black object circling high against the stars. At first, he thought it was a Martian owl. Then his super-keen hearing caught the dim throbbing of muffled rocket-tubes.

"The Legion of Doom ship!" he muttered. "Coming for Gatola —"

**N**OW the ship was swooping down in a wide spiral toward the observatory, swinging down out of the stars without lights and with its rocket-tubes almost silent, a black, phantom craft — its attached space boats and grim batteries of atom-guns vaguely outlined. It came to rest near the observatory, and Curt saw its door opening.

A dozen men emerged, soundlessly as shadows. Two took up their places as guards outside the ship's door, the starlight glinting on their atom-pistols. The others moved silently and rapidly toward the observatory.

Captain Future crouched lower in the shadow as they passed. In the starlight, they appeared as Earthmen wearing a gray uniform, on each shoulder the black disk of the Legion of Doom. Led by hulking, heavy-treading giant, they entered the building.

"Damn those guards!" Curt thought, peering at the

two Legionaries standing outside the ship door.

He drew out a disklike instrument from his tungstite belt. "Annoying, but necessary," he muttered. "I'll have to resort to invisibility, if I want to avoid their giving an alarm."

One of the greatest secrets of the red-haired scientific wizard was his power of making himself invisible. He did it by giving his body a temporary charge of force which refracted all light around it, making him completely unseen. The effect lasted only for ten minutes – but that should be time enough, Curt thought.

He held the disklike instrument over his head, and pressed its stud. An unseen force streamed down through his body, tingling through every fiber. Looking down at himself, he saw his body becoming rapidly translucent, misty. At the same time, darkness seemed to close around him.

He heard an uproar from inside the observatory – Otho shouting in Gatola's voice, a clatter of feet and banging of furniture. Otho was doing his part to hold up the Legion men in there.

Curt found himself in utter darkness. He knew that he was now completely invisible. All light was being refracted around him – and that left him entirely without power of vision.

But Captain Future had spotted the exact direction and distance of the door of the Legion ship. Now he moved toward it.

Curt, from long practice, and because of his super-keen sense of hearing, could move without sight almost as well as an ordinary man who saw. He crept hastily forward, and as he neared the ship he could bear the breathing of the two guards outside its door.

He passed right in between them, stepping up through the air-lock of the ship and into a metal corridor. He heard voices, throbbing cyclotrons. He stood, waiting tensely for the invisibility to pass – he must have sight, to find Joan in this ship. The uproar from inside the observatory was louder. Otho was doing nobly in the job of making trouble for his abductors. Curt could imagine that the android was having a wonderful time in there. The darkness enveloping Captain Future began to dissipate. His invisibility was passing. In a moment, he could see.

He stood in a corridor leading toward the stern of the Legion cruiser. Back there were the droning power-cyclotrons, and the voices of the men who tended them. Curt, from his encyclopedic knowledge of space craft, concluded the prisoners would be forward.

**T**HE big red-headed young man found a corridor leading forward and raced soundlessly along its dim length, his proton-pistol gripped in his hand.

"Otho can't keep that up much longer," he muttered under his breath. "Where the devil –"

A Legion man popped out into the corridor from a

compartment. He stared at Curt, then reached for his atom-gun.

Curt was already triggering his proton-pistol. It could be set either to kill or to stun, and it was a stunning ray that licked out now. The pale, thin beam dropped the man in his tracks.

Then Curt saw the door in the corridor that had a bar across it. He unbarred and swung it open. Inside was a dark little blank-walled chamber, but he could see two people.

One was an Earth girl in a gray silk zipper suit, sitting with her dark head bowed tiredly in her hands. The other was a little, withered, wasplike old Venusian.

"Joan! Kansu Kane!" Curt whispered tensely. "Come on – we're getting out of here!"

Joan Randall looked up, and as she saw the tall, broad-shouldered, red-haired young man standing with pistol raised in the doorway, she uttered a little cry of pure, tremulous joy.

"Captain Future! I knew you'd come –"

"Not so loud!" Curt cautioned. Then he whirled round. "Too late – you've done it now!"

A shout of alarm from somewhere in the ship had followed the girl's cry. Legion men from the stern appeared in the corridor, running toward them. Curt's proton-beam flashed and dropped half of them. But others were yelling to the party in the observatory.

"It's a trap of Captain Future! Come away!"

Curt plunged forward, triggering his proton-pistol. But one of the Legion men, an evil-faced Earthman dwarf, had produced a handful of wriggling things that he flung at Captain Future.

"Rope-snakes!" screamed Joan. "Look out –"

It was too late. The pink, wriggling things were Saturnian rope-snakes, tamed and used by interplanetary criminals.

They flashed around Curt's limbs with incredible speed and tightened, pinioning him. Others had fastened around Joan and Kansu Kane. Curt struggled to break the living bonds.

The evil-faced Legion dwarf was shouting to the outside.

"Kallak, come on! Let Gatola go – we're blasting off!"

The Legion men from the observatory, led by a huge, hulking Earthman giant, came rushing back into the cruiser.

"Cyclotrons on – blast off!" the dwarf yelled.

The ship's rocket-tubes roared. It lurched up from the ground as Captain Future fought furiously to free himself.

But Otho had come running toward the rising ship. His eyes blazing, his body battered by fighting, the synthetic man leaped up toward the still open door of the ship.

No one in the System but the android could have

made the incredible leap. Otho's hands clutched the edge of the door, and he dangled in space as the ship roared up across the dark desert.

CURT, struggling, yelled a warning as he saw a Legion man stoop to drag Otho into the ship so the door could be closed. The Legionary, still believing that the android was Gatola, was trying at the last minute to capture him.

Otho and the Legionary who had grabbed him were struggling when the ship lurched wildly as more rocket-tubes were cut in. Curt was struggling to get to the aid of the android but could not.

Then Otho and his antagonist, dislodged by the sudden lurch, were hurled out of the open door and fell downward together into the darkness. And the Legion cruiser roared on up into the starry sky.

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#### CHAPTER IV

##### *Flight into Peril*

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CAPTAIN FUTURE struggled to break free of his living bonds.

It was impossible. A half-dozen of the pink rope-snakes had wound around his arms and legs by now. These Saturnian serpents had incredible strength in their supple bodies. The criminals of the System had long made use of them, taming and training the creatures.

The Legion dwarf came over and looked down balefully at Curt. He was an Earthman of past middle age, with a seamed, repulsive face and malevolent black eyes.

Beside him stood the hulking Earthman giant he had called Kallak, an incredibly huge man with enormous shoulders, a small head, and a rather stupid face.

The dwarf kicked Curt's bound body viciously.

"So the famous Captain Future decided to set a trap for the Legion of Doom?" he snarled. "And then fell into his own trap!"

Curt, recognizing the futility of struggle, looked up calmly.

"I know you," Captain Future said levelly. "Your name is Roj – you were a biologist with criminal tendencies. You made that man Kallak a giant by glandular injection, and used him to help you in your crimes. You were caught five years ago, and you and Kallak were given life sentences on Cerberus, the prison moon."

"Your memory is good," said the dwarf venomously. "But you forget to mention that it was the evidence you obtained against me that sent me to Cerberus."

His eyes were ugly. "I've a score to settle with you, Captain Future. And I'll never have a better chance –"

The dwarf was drawing an atom-gun from his belt when one of the Legion men stepped forward,

These men of the Legion of Doom, Curt saw, were all Earthmen. Yet there was something queer about their appearance, something that did not escape Captain Future's keen eyes. There was a whiteness and immobility about their faces, a lack of expression in their eyes. Even their clothing had a strange, stiff look.

"Roj, you cannot kill this man," said the one who had stepped forward, in a slurred, husky voice. "Remember the orders of Doctor Zarro."

The dwarf swore, but put his pistol back into his belt.

"I'll call the Doctor," he said. "I think he'd want me to get this devil Captain Future out of the way."

The television apparatus of the ship was in a cubby off this corridor. Curt saw the dwarf approach it and switch on the set, then push the call-button.

He heard Joan and Kansu Kane, pinioned like himself by rope-snakes, twisting futilely near him on the floor.

"Take it easy, Joan," he whispered. "We'll get out of this somehow." His mind had settled into a calm, stern resolve.

The girl's voice was choked.

"It's all my fault you got into it, Captain Future! If you hadn't tried to rescue me –"

Roj had got his call through. In the screen of the television appeared the head and shoulders of a man.

It was Doctor Zarro. And Curt, lying helpless, stared up at the image of the supreme plotter he had vowed to smash.

DOCTOR ZARRO'S gaunt, black-clothed figure was rigid, his enormous, bulging skull poised stiffly as he heard the dwarf's report. Then his burning, hypnotic black eyes looked down from the screen at the prisoners.

"So – Captain Future, the supreme meddler of the System, tries to meddle with me," rasped Doctor Zarro in a harsh, deep voice. His superhuman eyes flamed at Curt. "You fool! I am the only one who can save the System from the peril rushing toward it!"

"Don't try to tell me that," Curt retorted, his gray eyes and tanned face contemptuous. "If there really was any peril and you could do anything, you'd put your abilities at the service of the Government. You're simply scheming for power."

"I've met others like you," Curt continued stingingly. "The Lords of Power, who had half the System in their grip. The Space Emperor, who loosed an evil blight on Jupiter. I broke their devilish schemes. And I'll break yours. That's a warning."

"You warn me?" echoed Doctor Zarro violently. "You forget, Captain Future, that you're the prisoner!"

"Shall I kill him at once, Doctor?" the dwarf Roj



cried eagerly.

"No, you must not kill him – and you know why," the black prophet rasped to the dwarf. "Bring him on out here to headquarters with the others. I think he'll like our Hall of Enemies."

Roj sniggered with evil mirth, "Yes, yes, Doctor – he will enjoy the Hall, and so will the girl and the Venusian."

Kansu Kane, the captive Venusian astronomer, raised his voice in shrill protest.

"This is all an outrage!" shrilled the waspish little Venusian to the image of Doctor Zarro. "I shall take extreme steps, unless you release us. I shall report you to the Police, sir!"

Curt Newton, despite his situation, could not help smiling at the angry little scientist's threat.

Doctor Zarro paid the astronomer no attention. He was rasping orders to the dwarf.

"Make all speed for headquarters," he told Roj harshly. "And see that you keep that devil Future safe – he's got the reputation of being slippery, remember."

"He won't slip out of my hands," Roj promised with malevolent emphasis.

Doctor Zarro disappeared from the televisor. The dwarf turned and snapped orders.

"Put all three prisoners back in the supply room, where we were keeping the girl and the Venusian," he commanded.

The huge, stupid giant Kallak stooped and lifted Captain Future's bound form as though he were a child. Curt realized that this glandular giant's strength was colossal.

Legion men picked up Joan and Kansu Kane. They were tossed unceremoniously into the small chamber in the fore of the ship, where Joan and Kansu had previously been confined.

Roj took Captain Future's tungstite belt and proton-pistol from him, and tossed them out into the corridor. Then the dwarf brought out a small instrument which he touched to bring forth a long, twanging sound.

**A**T that sound, the pink rope-snakes that pinioned the prisoners relaxed and uncoiled. The creatures flashed wrigglingly out to the dwarf in the corridor, and into the bag he held.

Captain Future sprang up instantly. But as he did so, the door of the chamber was slammed and the bar fell across it outside.

Curt helped Joan Randall and the Venusian to their feet.

"This is a nice little cage to get myself into," he declared disgustedly. He was feeling the sting of self-reproach.

Kansu Kane, the withered little Venusian, was bursting with wrath, and his indignation exploded shrilly.

"I have never been so rudely treated in my life! The idea of tossing the head of the South Venus Observatory, the discoverer of the Cepheid Nebula, the author of the double-spectra theory, like a sack of vegetables!"

He fairly sputtered. "I shall make these men rue this! I'll prosecute them through the interplanetary courts! I am not a vengeful man, but this treatment is too much!"

Curt could not help grinning at the testy little man's shrill indignation.

"Calm down – you can't prosecute them just yet," he told the Venusian.

Joan Randall had come to Curt's side. She looked up at him, her brown eyes wide and her fine, firm little face pale with self-reproach.

"If I hadn't cried out when you appeared, this wouldn't have happened," she said heart-brokenly.

Curt patted her shoulder. "You couldn't help it, Joan. And you did more than any other secret agent when you got on the trail of the Legion of Doom at Venus, and gave us the tip that they were coming here to Mars to abduct Gatola. It's too bad that the scheme Otho and I prepared fell through."

"Do you think Otho was killed when he fell from the ship with that Legion man?" Joan asked anxiously.

"That's worrying me, though Otho can stand a lot," Curt said. His lips tightened. If any harm had come to him, God help these Legionaries, he thought. He'd have revenge for Otho!

"What could you do about it?" said Kansu Kane gloomily. "We can't even escape from this chamber."

Captain Future smiled at the morose little man. "I've been in tighter places than this, and got away."

Through the window, he looked out on interplanetary space. The Legion cruiser, quivering to the thrust of its rocket tubes, was throbbing at ever-increasing speed through the void.

The red disk of Mars and the blazing sun lay dead astern. The cruiser was flying directly outward.

"We're heading for the outer part of the System," Curt muttered. "The only two planets in the sector of space ahead of us are Uranus and Pluto. Doctor Zarro's base may be on one of those two worlds."

"Captain Future, who are these men of the Legion?" Joan asked. "I don't mean Roj and Kallak – I mean the others. They look like Earthmen, yet there's something strange and stiff about them. Their voices are queer, too. And when one of them touched me, his hands didn't feel like the hands of an Earthman at all."

"They're certainly an odd-looking bunch," Curt agreed, frowning. "I wonder if –"

**T**HEN he broke off impatiently. "This is no time for speculation. The important thing is to break loose before we're delivered to Doctor Zarro. I don't know what his Hall of Enemies may be, but I've an idea it's something highly unpleasant."

Curt felt the loss of his tungstite belt. Inside that belt, hidden in secret compartments, were compact instruments and tools that had gotten him out of more than one tight spot.

He inspected the window, a mere little glassite loop-hole.

"If we broke this, we'd simply perish of asphyxiation when our air leaked out into space," he muttered. "So that's out."

The door was the only other alternative. It was solid metal, and the bar outside it was heavy. Strength would not avail here.

But he thought he saw a glimmering chance. He sat down and took off the big emblem ring on his left hand. With deft fingers, he began taking the famous ring apart.

"There's a tiny atomic engine in this ring that keeps its 'planet' jewels moving," the red-haired wizard of science told his companions. "But it'll take me time to take it apart."

"I don't see what good your tiny engine will do you," said Kansu Kane, staring.

Curt smiled. "You never can tell! Maybe I can book it up to the ship's rocket-tubes, and make the craft turn around."

Kansu Kane looked astounded. "Hook it up to the —" Then the Venusian stiffened. "You're joking, young man. And your jokes are in bad taste, considering our situation. My great work on the nature of the Andromedan binaries is only half completed, and here I am, being hauled off to the wild outer regions of the System! And you, sir, can make jests about it!"

Curt chuckled. "Calm down, Kansu. If my idea works, we'll get you back to the Andromedan binaries."

The cruiser throbbed on and on. As he worked on the minute parts of the ring mechanism, Curt was thinking of the Futuremen. He knew that they would never rest until they found him. But they would have no idea of whither he had been taken. Lacking a clue, they would have to comb space helplessly in blind search.

"We must be well beyond the orbit of Jupiter," Kansu Kane declared. "And still flying on outward. I thought you had some wonderful idea for getting us out of here."

"It isn't very wonderful, but it may do the trick," Curt replied, getting to his feet. He held out the tiny instrument in his hand. "I've made the little atomic engine of my ring into an atomic blast. It will spend all its energy in a few minutes, but it may be able to cut through the metal of the door and the bar."

"And even if it does, and we get out of this dismal chamber, what then?" asked Kansu Kane gloomily. "Are you going to try to capture the ship?"

"Too many of them for that," Captain Future said. "We'll try to sneak away in one of the space-boats. If we can do that, we can get to a television somewhere

and call the Futuremen to come in the *Comet* — and then we'll find out whether Doctor Zarro's secret base is at Uranus or at Pluto."

Curt approached the door, listened, and then, satisfied that no one was in the corridor outside, turned his tiny instrument against the metal at the edge of the door.

A LITTLE jet of white atomic fire burst from the diminutive improvised blaster. It burned into the heavy metal in a ragged, scorched gash. Deeper and deeper it cut.

Curt was tense. His little jet of force was now burning deep into the metal, but he knew that the atomic energy stored in the tiny instrument must be almost exhausted. He played the jet up and down, seeking to cut through the bar outside.

The hissing fire-jet sputtered, then went out. The little tool was exhausted, useless.

Captain Future pressed gently against the door. It did not give. The bar outside still held.

He felt a pang of disappointment. Putting his shoulder against the door, he heaved with all his strength.

The door flew open. The bar had been almost cut through — and his strong push had broken it completely.

"Come on!" Captain Future whispered to the others, his gray eyes snapping with excitement. "There's a space-boat on the starboard side forward — I noticed it when the ship landed back there at the observatory."

They started forward in the corridor. Curt was looking for something as he advanced. Then he saw what he sought.

There was a small gun-locker at the side of the corridor, hung with atomic weapons and tools. In there, upon a hook, hung his own gray tungstite belt and proton-pistol.

"I was hoping I could find this," he exclaimed joyfully, taking a rapid step toward the locker.

"Captain Future!" Joan's cry was low, agonized.

A stiff-faced Legionary had just entered the corridor from the control-rooms forward. The man reached for his gun.

Curt was already diving for the gun-locker. With the phenomenal speed that Otho the android had taught him, he snatched his proton-pistol, whirled, and fired.

The thin, pale beam lanced down the corridor and dropped the Legionary stunned in his tracks.

"Quick!" cried Captain Future, buckling his belt on hastily. "They'll find this man in a minute."

He was leading them into a low, cramped compartment at the starboard side. Outside its wall, bolted to the hull of the cruiser, was one of the little space-boats intended for use as life-boats in case of wreck. A round door gave entrance through the wall of the cruiser into the little craft.

Joan Randall scrambled through into the space-boat.

Kansu Kane was following, when the little astronomer stopped.

"I've got to go back to our cell!" he exclaimed. "I left some of my notes on the Andromedan binaries there – I was studying them and left them on the floor"

The little Venusian actually started back. But Captain Future grabbed him in time.

"Are you crazy?" Curt demanded. "Get in there after Joan."

Kansu Kane sputtered. "You can't order me around like a servant, sir! I have rights –"

Curt ended the argument by shoving the irate little astronomer bodily into the space-boat. He leaped in after him, spun shut the round door of the space-boat; and then began hastily unscrewing the bolts that held it to the cruiser hull, with the wrench hung there for the purpose.

**T**HE last bolt gave way. Captain Future leaped forward through the single compartment of the space-boat, to the simple controls. He opened one of the throttles carefully.

The space-boat veered aside from the towering wall of the racing cruiser, and began moving off in a course at right angles to that of the larger ship. It was impelled by a subdued blast of its own small rocket-tubes.

The Legion ship, a black, unlighted mass, moved on away through the vast gulf of starry space, rapidly disappearing. Curt turned the space-boat in a course back Sunward.

"We've made it!" Joan cried eagerly. "Oh, Captain Future, I never thought –"

Kansu Kane interrupted wrathfully.

"All my notes, all the fruit of weeks of work left in that ship!" he sputtered to Captain Future. "And you dared lay hands on me –"

"Be quiet – we're not out of danger," Curt interrupted sternly. "They'll find that stunned man quickly. When they do, and discover our escape in this boat, they'll turn back –"

He was opening the throttles to the limit as he spoke. The little space-boat darted Sunward at mounting velocity.

Abruptly it shuddered, bucked wildly, and then righted itself and sped smoothly on again.

"What was that?" Kansu Kane asked startledly.

"Ether-current," Curt replied briefly. The tanned face of the red-headed scientific wizard tautened. "We're in a dangerous part of space –"

"Captain Future! They're after us!" Joan cried.

Curt turned swiftly. Back there against the stars, the black mass of the Legion of Doom cruiser was again rapidly growing visible.

"I thought they would be," Curt said between his teeth. "And they've got more speed than we –our only chance is to duck and dodge until we lose them."

The old thrill of space-fighting came to Captain Future as he twisted and dodged out here between the stars. But the cruiser had too great an advantage in speed to be shaken off. And twice the space-boat ran into strong ether-currents that tossed it violently, making it lose ground. The Legion cruiser was steadily overtaking them.

Curt wondered why the cruiser didn't blast them out of space with its atom-guns. They could have done it, he knew. Why had Doctor Zarro been so determined to make them prisoners?

"They're getting closer," Joan faltered.

The space-boat was suddenly caught by another and stronger ether-current, that gripped it and swept it away despite the force of its rocket-tubes.

**C**APTAIN FUTURE fought to break clear of this strong, invisible current, but the rocket-tubes seemed utterly powerless. At appalling speed, the space-boat was whirled through the void.

He realized the terrible peril into which they had fled. Its nearness had been haunting him during all this time.

"The cruiser has given up the pursuit!" Joan cried joyfully. "They're turning back – leaving us!"

Captain Future's tanned face was grim.

"They're doing so because they don't want to be trapped as we're trapped."

"Trapped?" cried Kansu Kane. "What do you mean?"

"We can't get out of this ether-current," Curt gritted. "It's too strong. And its whirling us on into the most dangerous spot in space, one from which no interplanetary ship has ever escaped."

Joan's hand went to her throat. "You mean –"

Captain Future nodded grimly.

"Yes. We're being carried into the Sargasso Sea of Space."

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## CHAPTER V

### *Trail to Pluto*

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**W**HEN Otho, the android, and his antagonist, were hurled from the speeding ship of the Legion of Doom, the starlit desert was fully fifty feet below.

Plunging down through the darkness, fiercely clutching his opponent, Otho made a supreme effort to twist his own body uppermost.

The synthetic man, the swiftest and most agile of beings, succeeded in his maneuver. In the split-second of fall, he turned his antagonist beneath him, and it was that other man who hit the ground and cushioned Otho's fall.

Even so, the shock of impact nearly stunned Otho.

Groggily, after a moment, he staggered to his feet.

"Devils of space, that was close!" he hissed pantingly.

He bent over his opponent, whose body had been crushed beneath him. The Legionary lay still, instantly killed.

Then Otho's eyes bulged from his head. He stared down at the dead body as though unable to credit his senses.

"Am I going crazy?" he exclaimed to himself. "How in the name of the nine worlds –"

An incredible, unnervingly fantastic thing had happened.

The Legionary with whom Otho had struggled had been an Earthman. As they had fought up there in the door of the ship, as they had fallen in the starlight, Otho had seen that clearly.

But now, in death, the Legion of Doom man had magically changed into a creature of weird and unheard-of aspect.

His crushed body was now that of a semi-human being covered from head to toe with short, thick white fur! The feet were two-toed, and the grotesque hands two-fingered. The head itself was a flattened, unhuman one, even the face covered with white fur. There were two eyes, huge, black, pupil-less orbs staring in death.

The creature wore a leather harness. To its belt had been attached a cylindrical metal instrument or weapon, but this had been crushed to fragments by the shock of impact.

"Have I gone delirious from the shock?" gasped Otho. "I can't be seeing this!"

Then a far-off, dying drone of rocket-tubes recalled his attention. He looked up and saw the Legion of Doom cruiser, a tiny black spot, rocketing up into the starry sky and disappearing.

Wild dismay and anger filled the android's mind at the sight.

"They're gone – with the chief their prisoner! And there's no telling where they're taking him!"

His rubbery body, still in its Martian disguise, was rigid in impotent wrath.

"If I was just in that cursed ship –!"

Otho had one trait that was even stronger than his devil-may-care lust for excitement and adventure. And that was his loyalty to Captain Future. And now he had let Doctor Zarro's dark Legion take his chief prisoner.

"I've got to get back to the *Comet*!" he told himself fiercely. And then he groaned. "What Grag will say to me about letting the chief be taken! And I deserve it!"

**O**THO started across the starlit desert in a swift run, but in a moment he turned and came running back.

He had remembered the dead body of the magically transformed Legionary. That weird, furry corpse might be a clue to Doctor Zarro's Legion. He would take it for

the Brain to inspect.

The furred body was heavy, as Otho slung it across his shoulders. But in his throbbing anxiety and anger, he hardly felt its weight. Again he started across the sands, intending to skirt around the city Syrtis to the hiding-place where the *Comet* waited.

Only the stars' white eyes looked down on him. Only the stars, and the whirling sand-devils that glided before the night winds and whispered of the mysteries of old Mars.

Otho kept well out from the lighted towers of Syrtis. And finally he stumbled up to the gleaming, quiescent bulk of the *Comet*, lying silent between the concealing sand dunes.

He touched the secret button in its side and the door slid open. Otho stumbled in, and dropped the body on the floor.

The compact laboratory in the mid-section of the *Comet* was in semi-darkness. The Brain was peering through the biggest telescope toward Sagittarius, while Grag, the robot, was exposing photographic plates on a smaller telescope at the Brain's directions.

Grag's great metal figure turned quickly, and the lens-eyes of the Brain turned to see also, as Otho entered.

"It's me – Otho!" the android said hastily, seeing that they did not recognize him in the Martian disguise.

Simon Wright guessed instantly from Otho's battered appearance that something was wrong.

"Where is Curtis?" the Brain rasped sharply.

Otho gulped. "They've got him – the Legion of Doom. It was my fault, partly."

The android told rapidly what had happened. When he had finished, there burst from Grag a booming roar of rage.

The great robot, his photo-electric eyes blazing, advanced ominously toward the crestfallen android.

"You let them take him?" boomed Grag. He clenched huge metal fists furiously. "I told the master you would get him into trouble! I wanted him to take me. But no, you talked him into taking you. I knew this would happen!"

"It wasn't altogether my fault," flared Otho defensively. "I waited in the observatory as he ordered, and when the Legion men came in, I delayed them as long as I could, dodging about and not letting them catch me. But then there was an alarm from the ship and they returned to it – I tried to follow, but was pushed off."

"If I had been there I would have torn that ship apart before I would have let them take away the master in it!" Grag shouted.

The cold, austere, rasping voice of the Brain cut across their argument like an icy sword.

"Be quiet, Grag," Simon Wright ordered. "This will get us nowhere. We must follow that ship, quickly."

"I don't know where it's heading for," Otho admitted

miserably. Then the android added quickly: "But I did bring back one of the Legion of Doom — dead. And the queerest thing happened to him as he died."

HE told them of the magical transformation of the Earthman Legionary into a strange furred creature, in death.

"I want to see that body," said the Brain instantly. "Grag, put me down by it."

The Brain's lens-eyes moved to and fro on their flexible stalks, keenly inspecting the grotesque corpse.

"I've never heard of a race like this before," muttered Simon. "And I can't understand how it could look like an Earthman when it was living."

"It did look just like an Earthman, dressed in a uniform." Otho affirmed emphatically.

"Did it feel like an Earthman when you were struggling with it?"

Otho hesitated. "I don't remember very well — yes. I do remember now! It felt furry in my grasp, as we fell. I'd forgotten that."

"Then," the Brain declared, "this creature was never an Earthman. It simply had some means of making it appear like one, some strange means of giving the illusion that it was an Earthman."

"But why should the illusion vanish so suddenly when the thing died?" Otho demanded.

"You see that broken instrument at the creature's belt?" the Brain said. "It's too badly shattered to find out anything from. But I believe it may have been a device to create the illusion that disguised this creature as an Earthman. The instrument was shattered in the fall, and so the illusion vanished."

"It seems a pretty far-fetched idea," muttered Otho. "And yet it's about the only one that explains what happened."

Grag had been pacing to and fro in wild restlessness, with clanking strides. Now the robot uttered an angry shout.

"Why do we stand here talking, when master has been taken?" he boomed furiously. "Why don't we follow?"

"We have to know where to follow, Grag," the Brain explained calmly.

"Yes, we can't just comb the whole System for that ship," Otho added.

"Don't talk to me!" Grag told the android. "It's all I can do to keep from giving you a thrashing, as it is."

"You and ten thousand metal junkmen like you couldn't do that!" flamed Otho, springing to his feet.

Eek, the moon-pup, had awakened and had ambled over to the group. Now, sensing its metal master's anger with Otho, the little gray beast bared its teeth belligerently at the android.

"No more of this quarreling!" Simon Wright's cold voice lashed. "That is an order."

The two other Futuremen relaxed their angry stiffness. Bodiless the Brain might be, unable even to move without help, yet both Otho and Grag were subservient to the vast, calm intellect housed in that transparent serum-case — the intellect that had helped create them.

"Put this body on the operating table under the X-ray lamps," the Brain ordered. "I've been studying its eyes, and I think I have a clue to where it came from."

Otho unfolded the operating table, and Grag laid the white-furred body on it and switched on the powerful X-ray lamps.

Through fluoroscopic spectacles that were slipped on over his lens-eyes, the Brain studied the interior anatomy of the furry corpse.

"I was right!" he declared finally. "This creature is a native of Pluto or somewhere near it."

"How can you tell?" Otho asked doubtfully.

"Those huge-pupiled eyes prove that the creature originated on a world of eternal dusk, one with less light even than Neptune," the Brain answered. "The furry, light-boned body must have evolved on a cold, medium-sized world. That means Pluto, for it's the only world in the System which answers those conditions."

"But maybe the creature came from some world outside our System completely?" Otho suggested.

"No, that's impossible," rasped the Brain, "for its eye-retinas are adapted to ultra-violet radiation exactly like that of our Sun. No two suns emit exactly the same kind of radiation. This creature comes from within our System — from Pluto."

"But no one has ever seen such creature as this on Pluto!" Otho objected. "The native Plutonians don't look like this."

"Pluto is still largely unexplored," Simon reminded him. "That icy planet and its three moons may hide more than one unknown race in their frigid wildernesses."

"Then Doctor Zarro's and the Legion's headquarters must be out there at Pluto?" Otho cried eagerly.

"I'm sure of it," the Brain replied. "It is possible that all the men of the Legion of Doom, who seemed to be Earthmen, are really creatures like this one, in some illusion-disguise."

Otho gasped at that suggestion. But Grag's mind clung to one thing — his master.

"They will have taken master to Pluto, then?" he cried. "We go there after them?"

"We go at once!" the Brain snapped. "Blast off Mars at once and lay a course straight for Pluto."

A few minutes later, with Grag at its controls, the *Comet* rose from the starlit Martian desert, shot up above the lighted towers of Syrtis, and rocketed headlong into the void.

"Better turn on the ship's camouflage, now that we're clear of Mars," the Brain rasped. "We don't want that Legion ship to spot us pursuing them."

Grag obeyed, pulling down a burnished red lever beside the throttles. The result was amazing.



*Doctor Zarro*

The *Comet* suddenly became a real comet! Captain Future had long ago devised this perfect method of camouflage for his craft. It was achieved by projecting a dense discharge of glowing ions from the rocket-tubes. That cloud of electrified atoms, clinging around the ship and trailing behind it in space, made the *Comet* to all appearances live up to its name.

The camouflaged ship rushed on. As the hours dragged by the Brain used a small telescope in the control-room to continue his scrutiny of the tiny dark spot in the constellation Sagittarius.

"How can you think of that dark star now, when the chief is in danger?" Otho exclaimed to him.

**S**IMON glanced at the android with cold, calm lens-eyes.

"I am as worried about Curtis as you," he said, "but I must continue these studies of the dark star he asked me to make. He will need all possible data to combat Doctor Zarro's plot."

"He will, if he's still living," Otho said gloomily.

"Master still lives!" boomed Grag loudly, with perfect faith. "We will find him – you will see."

Otho gloomily resumed his survey of space ahead. In a moment there was a hissing cry from the android.

"Something ahead! It may be the ship we're after!"

They saw it – a big, queer-looking space ship coming toward them, driving nearer by the second.

"It can't be the Legion ship, for that's going the other way –"

"It's diving on us – it's going to ram us!"

The strange ship ahead was swooping down into the

path of the camouflaged *Comet*, and would collide with it head-on.

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## CHAPTER VI

### *Graveyard of Space-Ships*

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**M**EANWHILE, what had happened to Captain Future and his companions?

The Sargasso Sea of Space! The legendary, mysterious peril to navigation that was dreaded by every space-sailor in the System!

Joan Randall's pretty face was pale and stricken, and little Kansu Kane stared bewilderedly, as Captain Future told them that their space-boat was being drawn into that deadly trap.

The space-boat was still being carried at frightful speed through the void by the ether-current gripping it. The Legion of Doom cruiser, recoiling from the danger, had vanished.

"It's my fault," Curt Newton said, his tanned face self-accusing. "I knew from the currents that we were getting near the Sargasso. But I thought I could escape it and shake off pursuit."

"You were wonderful to get us out of that ship!" Joan cried loyally to the red-haired scientific wizard. "And you'll get us out of the Sargasso – I know you will."

"What is this Sargasso of Space you're talking about?" Kansu Kane demanded. "I'm no space-sailor – I never heard of it."

"You know what an ether-current is, don't you?" Captain Future asked him. "Well, there are many strong ether-currents, strange running tides in the luminiferous ether itself, out in this part of the System. They all flow into a central vortex, and anything that is carried into the vortex can't get out again, against the currents. That central vortex is the Sargasso Sea of Space."

Curt reached for the throttles. "I'll try once more to break out of the current," he muttered. "But I'm afraid –"

He opened the throttles to the limits. It was futile. The power was not enough to get them out of the remorseless grip of the ether-current that was sweeping them fatally on into a dreaded, unknown region of space.

Captain Future shut off the rockets. "No go," he said, shaking his red head. "Might as well save our power, until we get into the central vortex. Then we'll see what we'll see."

Joan smiled at Curt shakily. She had an unchangeable confidence in him. Curt knew. He wondered gloomily if that confidence was to be destroyed. For he could see only a thin chance of escape from this strange space-trap.

"Better get some sleep," he said, and she obeyed.

Captain Future peered ahead, his handsome, tanned face keen and unafraid. He sensed that they were approaching the central vortex of the vast maelstrom of ether-currents. For the space-boat was now being rolled over and over and bumped roughly as it was borne on.

Joan awoke from the motion, and rubbing her eyes, came anxiously to his side. There was still nothing visible to the eye, yet they knew they were entering the boiling heart of the vast invisible whirlpool.

"Hang on to a stanchion," Captain Future told the other two in a low voice.

**C**LINGING for support, they felt their craft battered about by titanic, unseen tides. Everything was topsy-turvy.

Then, after terrifying minutes of chaotic movement, the space-boat seemed to enter smooth, undisturbed space. It floated now as placidly as though on a millpond.

"Why, we're out of the currents now." Kansu Kane faltered, peering out with myopic eyes.

"We've escaped from the Sargasso?" Joan cried joyfully to Captain Future.

Curt shook his head. "I'm sorry to disillusion you. We've reached the dead-center of the whirlpool of currents, an area of undisturbed space at the heart of this space-maelstrom."

He opened the throttles, starting up the rockets.

"We'll try to buck our way back out, but I'm pretty sure it's useless."

Rockets flaming, the little boat shot back in the direction from which it had come. In a half-minute it plunged again into the titanic, invisible ether-currents. The currents grasped the craft once more and flung it like a toy back into the dead-center.

"Thought so," Curt muttered. "We're in here to stay, unless we can devise enough new power to carry us out."

"Where do you expect to find any additional source of power in this empty hole in space?" Kansu asked hopelessly.

"There," said Captain Future quietly, pointing ahead.

They stared. Far ahead, a vast jumbled metal mass floated motionless in space. The mass was lenticular in shape, and hung at the very center of the dead-area here in the maelstrom.

As their craft hummed closer, they saw that this far-flung, jumbled mass was a great aggregation of space ships and debris of all descriptions. All this flotsam was held together by its own slight mutual gravitation.

"What is it?" Joan Randall whispered awedly.

"It is the graveyard of space ships," Curt said. "The last resting-place of every ship that has been sucked into the Sargasso Sea of Space since interplanetary

travel began. No ship has ever escaped here — all that blundered in are still here."

He steered the space-boat straight toward the edge of the vast wreck-pack. Now they could see it more clearly.

In the pack were space ships of every kind that had ever sailed the System. Great Jovian grain-boats, dumpy Martian freighters, streamlined liners from the Neptune and Uranus routes, black cruisers of the Planet Police, ominously armed pirate ships, even small space-yachts. These dead ships floated, rubbing slowly against each other's sides. And between and among them floated all kinds of interplanetary debris that had been swept into the maelstrom — meteors large and small, fragments of splintered asteroids, bits of metal wreckage, and stiff, space-suited bodies of dead men who perhaps had floated in the void for years before drifting into this last resting place.

**U**NUTTERABLY awe-inspiring was the sight, here in the thin, pale sunlight of outer space. Here was the end of many a brave-hearted voyage. Here many a good ship that had once throbbed from world to world had come to peace and quiet at last. Here was a Valhalla of space ships and space-men, whose eternal tranquility and silence would not be disturbed until the System ended.

"Do you think there are any living people in those ships, Captain Future?" asked Joan Randall in a low voice.

"I'm afraid there's no chance of that. The air-supply of any ship that drifted in here would soon be exhausted, and then any living people aboard would die."

"Then we will perish when our boat's air-tanks are empty?" the girl cried. "Only two days from now?"

"We're going to try to get out of here before then!" Curt said grimly. "There's just a chance that if we fitted up this space-boat with additional cyclotrons taken from some of these wrecks, it would give us enough power to fight out through the currents. We'll have to go through the wrecks first and see if we can find enough cyclotrons in good condition," he added.

Joan shuddered. "Search through those deathly, silent ships?"

"You can wait in the space-boat with Kansu Kane, if you want," Curt told her. "It'll be strenuous work searching."

"No, no, I want to go with you!" the girl cried.

"Well, I don't," Kansu Kane said sourly. "Maybe I can, reconstruct my lost Andromedan notes from memory, while you two are scrambling around in there."

Curt and Joan donned the black suits and glassite helmets. He tested the suit-phone to make sure it was working, and then they passed out through the tiny air-lock of the space-boat.

They stepped out into sheer space and floated to-

gether, seeming suspended magically in nothingness at the edge of the vast wreck-pack, with stars above them and stars below them. Then Curt drew the impeller-tube from the belt of his suit. He fired it, and its tiny rocket-blast sent him gliding toward the nearest wreck. Joan followed, using her impeller also. Curt bumped against the side of the wreck. It was a cargo-ship that bore the name, "Thenia, Venus," on its bows. They clambered back along the top of its torpedo-shaped hull, and found the whole stern was crushed as though by a giant hand.

"A meteor did that," Curt told the girl through the suit-phone. "No use looking in it for good cyclotrons. Come on."

The next wreck, a big liner, was the "Paris. Earth." It seemed undamaged, and Curt and Joan managed to enter it through an air-lock whose doors were wide open.

Inside the liner, an unnerving scene met their eyes. The enclosed decks were strewn with dead passengers, Martians, Venusians, Earthmen and men and women of other races, lay about, stiff and frozen. Yet, perfectly preserved, they all seemed sleeping.

"What happened to this ship?" Joan whispered, her face white inside her transparent helmet.

"They must have blundered into the Sargasso and then run out of air," Curt muttered. "Looks like somebody here opened the air-lock doors finally, to bring a quick, merciful death."

Curt went back down to the cyclotron-rooms. The great, cylindrical generators of atomic power were unharmed.

"So far so good. We've got to have more."

They entered an old-looking liner of the type built long before, that had been attacked by space-pirates. Its strong-room had been looted, its officers blasted down, and then the attackers had punctured its hull by atom-gun fire, slaying all in it.

"I never realized so many horrible things had happened in the System in the past," Joan said, shivering.

"This particular thing happened a long time in the past," Captain Future remarked. "The ships here in the center of the wreck-pack are all old ones. We'd better work back out toward the edge of the pack, where we'll be more likely to find good cyclotrons in the newer ships"

But when they scrambled out of the liner of long-ago tragedy, Joan pointed suddenly deeper into the wreck-pack.

"What can that be, Captain Future?"

Curt stared. She was pointing at a strange object several ships away. It was a cylinder of blank gray metal several hundred feet long, without the lines of a ship at all.

"I don't know — it's certainly no space ship of our System," Curt declared. "It may be from outside the System — a queer wreck out of interstellar space that drifted into the System and was caught here in the Sar-

gasso."

His gray eyes kindled with scientific interest. "We'll take a look. Come on, Joan."

They started toward the enigmatic cylinder. But they stopped again, before they reached it, stricken with wonder by the appearance of the craft that floated next to it.

**T**HIS was a space ship of ridiculously small size and flimsy appearance. It was crudely designed, with projecting rocket-tubes of an ancient, inefficient type. The little vessel was the most antiquated and obsolete of any they had seen yet.

"Why, it looks like one of the first space ships that was ever built!" Joan cried. "Could men ever have sailed space in a craft like that?"

Curt's tanned face was suddenly tense and strange.

"I've an idea I know what craft this is," he said. "Yes, I'm right-look at the name on its bows!"

The name was *Pioneer III*.

"*Pioneer III*?" cried Joan. "Why, that was the ship of Mark Carew, the first man ever to —"

"The first man ever to sail beyond Jupiter," Captain Future finished softly, staring almost in reverence at the clumsy little craft. "Mark Carew, the second great trail-blazer of space — the man who first visited Saturn and Uranus and Neptune, and who was lost in space in a later voyage. And this is where he was lost, here in the Sargasso."

The mystery of the interstellar cylinder was forgotten for the moment in the intense interest aroused by this new find. Curt and Joan pried with a bar until they were able to enter the little *Pioneer III*.

The ancient little ship had carried a crew of only six men. They lay dead, frozen, eternally preserved— those Earthmen who long and long ago had roared out into the void in their tiny craft, to blaze the trail for all those who would come after.

Awedly, Captain Future stepped gently toward the control-cubby in the prow. There, in the pilot's chair, sat the frozen body of a dark, thin-faced man of middle-age. He sat there, his worn face seeming almost lifelike, his open black eyes staring out eternally through the window of his little ship.

"Mark Carew!" breathed Joan, in a hushed whisper. "I've seen so many monuments and pictures of him. The second man ever to sail space — only Gorham Johnson was before him."

Curt's eyes had glimpsed the notebook clutched in the dead explorer's hand. Gently, he took it from the stiff fingers.

It was a diary. He and Joan together read the last entries on its open page.

*Jan. 22. (Earth calendar.) Our voyages are over. We shall never reach Pluto, as I had hoped. That is re-*



*served for some , other pioneer. For yesterday we ran into appalling ether-currents, that swept us into this dead, empty area from which we cannot escape. Our air cannot last long, we were almost out and had counted on replenishing our supply on Saturn.*

*Jan. 23. We found one of our air-tanks, on which we had relied, empty. It had sprung and leaked, unknown to us. Death is a matter of hours. We have sat here, silent, thinking of the Earth we shall never see again. Will our bodies ever be found, we wonder? It does not matter – yet I would like to see Earth's blue skies again.*

*Jan. 24. Crew half unconscious – air failing – partial asphyxiation. This is – the end. The end of us, but not – of our work. Others will come after us. I seem – to see – all space filled with ships – in some future time. Maybe – Gorham Johnson and I and our men – will be remembered. Hand stiff – eyes failing – can't write – more –*

That last scrawled entry trailed away. There was no further writing in the little book.

Captain Future, a hard lump in his throat, raised his hand to his helmet in salute to the sitting, staring corpse.

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## CHAPTER VII

### *Encounter in Space*

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**T**HE red-haired scientific wizard and the girl climbed out of the silent little ship that was mute monument and tomb of brave men.

Captain Future's attention was at once re-engaged by the big gray metal cylinder that floated in the wreck-pack close by. He had momentarily forgotten it, but now his interest was rekindled.

"That cylinder must be a ship from outside the System!" he exclaimed. "Come on – we haven't much time, but I'm going to have a look at it."

Joan Randall clambered pluckily with him to the side of the enigmatic, huge cylinder. They hung there, peering along its curved wall. There seemed no doors or port-holes in it anywhere.

"I don't like the look of it," faltered the girl, her brown eyes distrustful. "It looks too strange and alien."

"There can't be anything living in it after all this time," Curt assured her. "And there must be a door in it somewhere. I wish we could find and open it."

Next moment, he stiffened inside his space suit and heard a sharp cry from Joan. A door was opening in the cylinder.

It opened like the iris shutter of a camera, expanding

from a tiny aperture into a circular opening ten feet across.

"What opened that door?" cried the girl, panic-stricken. "We weren't even near it."

Curt's gray eyes flashed. "That door must be telepathically operated-when I wished a door would open, it opened!"

His scientific passion kindled. "What kind of a race would devise such mechanisms? Come on, Joan!"

**W**ith fearful reluctance, the girl followed him through the magically opened door. They found themselves in the interior of the great cylinder, a maze of girders, catwalks, and machines of unguessable design and purpose.

Along the sides were metal shelves, atop each of which glowed a purple lamp. The purple beams of each lamp bathed a grotesque, motionless creature lying apparently frozen on each shelf.

The creatures were wholly alien.

They looked like horrid hybrids of octopus and man. Each had a scaly body with horny protuberances along its spine from the head down, and four tentaclelike arms.

"They must have come from another star – drifted into the Sargasso here while exploring our System, long ago," murmured Captain Future. "They don't look like air-breathing creatures to me."

"What is the purple light over each of them?" Joan asked fearfully.

"I don't know – some kind of preservative force," Captain Future muttered. "There's a mystery here."

He found some tanks along the wall. All were empty. They had contained a reddish liquid, whose traces remained.

"Blood was carried in these tanks!" Curt asserted. "It must have been their food. And when they ran out of it –"

He approached the front end of the cylindrical ship. There was a control board there, with levers, dials and switches of unfamiliar aspect – fruit of an alien science and mechanics.

**A** GLOW of colored light broke out around the control board as Captain Future and Joan approached it! Their nearness had actuated some delicate mechanism amid those tangled devices.

Then Curt noticed that the purple lamps over the two octopus-creatures nearest the control-board had gone out. And that those two creatures were stirring.

"I understand now!" he cried, leaping forward, alarm in his eyes. "They ran out of food – blood – and so they put themselves into suspended animation. But they set a detector to wake their two leaders whenever any warm-blooded creature entered this ship –"

He was pawing desperately at the grotesque control-



*Dead ships floated around them (Chap. VI)*

board, seeking to smash the detector, wherever it was.

"If those two wake completely, they'll wake all the others by turning off the lamps — our lives won't be worth anything. They need our blood!"

"Captain Future!" screamed Joan. Curt whirled around, and at the same moment was gripped by scaly tentacles.

The two octopus-creatures had awakened more rapidly than he had dreamed possible! One had seized him, sliding a tentacle around his knee, another around his throat, two others around his chest.

The other creature was scrambling toward the glowing control-board, to wake all the others lying in suspended animation!

Joan Randall, her face ghastly white inside her space suit helmet, was trying to tear away the tentacles around Curt. Captain Future, by a fierce effort, got his arm free and snatched out his proton-pistol.

He fired point-blank at the octopus-creature who was reaching his four tentacles to the switches of the control-board. The proton-beam dropped the grotesque creature in a scorched heap.

The thing holding Curt whirled him up to dash him against the floor. But Curt shot again, down at the thing whose tentacles held him aloft.

The proton-beam tore into the scaly body, and Captain Future tumbled to the floor as the octopus-man slumped dead.

Curt staggered up and looked around wildly. None of the other octopus-men sleeping under the purple-lamps had stirred. The detector which had been set off by Joan and himself had been designed only to awaken the two leaders of the alien crew, who had then meant to awaken all the others.

"That was close!" Curt panted. "Food was what they

wanted – blood. Where in the Universe could they have come from? Intelligent creatures, immune to cold of space and airlessness, but requiring vital blood-elements –"

"Let's get out of here, Captain Future!" pleaded Joan shudderingly. "This place is unclean, unholy!"

Curt Newton would have given a year of his life for the opportunity to study and analyze the products of an unhuman science which were all around him. But he recognized that it was impossible, with time and danger pressing upon him as they were.

Reluctantly, he left the gloomy, mysterious vessel. Once outside, he wished that the door would close. And silently, the aperture shut.

"Those others in there they'll sleep on, perhaps forever now," he said, staring at the strange ship.

Explorers from far off in the Universe, sleeping on eternally at the heart of the graveyard of space ships!

CURT looked around at the jumbled ships of the wreck-pack, at whose center they were.

"We'll work back to the space-boat," he decided, "and search the newer ships out at the edge of the pack. We ought to find more good cyclotrons out there."

And so it turned out. As Curt freed each cyclotron, he dragged it out of the wreck and hauled it along the edge of the wreck-pack to their little space-boat.

Hours passed as Captain Future toiled. Finally he had ten cyclotrons crowded into the stern power-compartment of the space-boat, and bolted precariously to its floor.

He was panting as he finished the task and looked up at Joan, who had helped him as much as possible.

"Will we be able to get out now?" she asked eagerly. There was a most unbecoming smear of grease on her nose.

"We'll either get out or blow ourselves into the next dimension. You and Kansu all ready? Here go the fireworks!"

He switched on the cyclotrons as he spoke. A dozen huge conical generators of atomic energy began throbbing back in the compartment that had originally housed but two. Their droning became a quivering vibration that seemed to be shaking the craft apart. It was deafening. Unnerving – yet Curt turned the power higher still.

Then when the space-boat seemed about to come bodily apart from the vibration, Curt opened the throttles of the stern rocket-tubes.

They were slammed deep into their recoil-chairs by the crushing thrust of an unimaginable acceleration. A torrent of atomic flame was bursting back from the rockets, hurling the little boat forward at dizzying speed.

The wreck-pack dwindled behind them. Curt held the throttles tense, ready. Then they hit the maelstrom

of ether-currents that raged around this central dead-area.

For a moment, Curt thought the end had come. That hell of boiling, invisible currents batted at the space-boat like giant hands, seeking to force it back into the center of the vortex, while its super-powered rocket-tubes forced it wildly forward.

But the space-boat's super-power was driving it out of the vortex of currents!

Curt dared not cut down the power yet. Tense minutes passed, as the small craft fought out through the weakening currents. Then abruptly they were out of the last current; and the space-boat was hurtling through undisturbed space like a meteor.

Instantly Captain Future cut all the cyclotrons but two.

"Whew!" breathed the big red-haired young man.

"You're the only man in history who ever brought a ship back out of the Sargasso Sea of Space!" cried Joan, her brown eyes shining.

"And now that we're out, what?" Kansu Kane demanded, looking sourly around the vast emptiness of space.

"We'll run back toward Jupiter," Captain Future snapped. "Get a call through to the Futuremen from there."

"And I can get a ship back to Venus from there," said Kansu Kane emphatically. "This knocking around space may be all right for those who like it, but I don't."

THE little craft throbbed Sunward, toward the white speck of Jupiter. But in a few moments, Curt Newton peered closer ahead, the muttered a joyful exclamation.

"Here come the Futuremen now!" he cried. "They must have got onto our trail somehow."

Joan Randall and the little astronomer peered with him, but saw only an ordinary-looking, little, glowing *Comet* that was approaching in an outward direction.

"I can't see anything but that little *Comet*," complained Kansu Kane.

"What *Comet* is it?" Curt asked him blandly.

Kansu scratched his head. "Why, I don't know – come to think of it, there's no *Comet* follows an orbit like that."

Captain Future laughed. "It's not a *Comet* – it's the *Comet*, my ship. The boys are using my *Comet*-camouflage."

"How are you going to hail them without a televisor?" Joan asked anxiously.

"I'll have to take a chance to stop them," Curt said. "Hold tight!"

He moved the throttles and sent the space-boat diving straight down into the path of the *Comet* as though intending to bring about a collision. And that was what Grag and Otho had seen!

As the two ships rushed together, Curt's keen eyes got a lightning-glimpse of Grag and Otho and the Brain in the control room of the camouflaged ship. He waved his hand, and at the last moment to avoid collision sent the space-boat curving upward.

"They'll have seen me!" he told Joan confidently. "The eyes of those three don't miss much!"

In fact, the glowing *Comet* was rapidly decelerating. Presently it and the battered space-boat hung side by side in space.

Captain Future and his two companions, in their space suits still, floated in a few moments to the side of the *Comet*. A moment more and they were all shedding their suits and helmets inside the little tear-drop ship.

"Master, I knew nothing could happen to you!" boomed Grag the robot in deafening tones, gripping Curt's arm in a metal grasp that was almost crushing. "I told Otho that we would find you safe-though it's small thanks to him."

"What happened to you on the Legion of Doom ship, Chief?" Otho hissed eagerly. "Did you fight your way out? Did you kill many of the scum?"

"No, my bloodthirsty friend, I did no killing," Curt laughed. "I contrived to get us out without that – and then like a fool, I blundered in my flight right into the Sargasso Sea of Space."

"The Sargasso?" Simon Wright's lens-eyes hung questioningly on his face. "How did you get out of there, Curtis?"

Curt told them. "I'm sure now that the base of Doctor Zarro and his Legion is on Uranus or Pluto," he finished.

"It's on Pluto, boy," the Brain told him. And Simon went on to tell of his study of the strange, white-furred body of the disguised Legionary, and of their start for Pluto.

"Pluto, eh?" Curt muttered, his gray eyes staring thoughtfully. "Then my guess was right."

**H**IS eyes flashed. "We're going on to Pluto at once, then! There's not much time for us to smash this Doctor Zarro. The whole System is already in such panic that a few more days will see that plotter given the dictatorial powers he wants."

Kansu Kane, the little astronomer, had been staring in appalled wonder at the trio of unhuman Futuremen. The little man shrank back in panic when great Grag turned his photo-electric eyes on him.

"Who is this, Master – a captive?" boomed the metal robot.

"No, it's Kansu Kane – the Venusian astronomer the Legion kidnapped," Curt said hastily.

Simon Wright's lens-eye fixed on the little man. "The Kansu Kane who was author of the double-spectra theory?" asked the Brain.

Kansu straightened proudly. "Yes, that was my

work"

"That theory is the most impossible hypothesis I ever encountered," rasped the Brain. "How could you possibly advance it?"

The little astronomer bristled. He forgot his awe of the Brain in his indignation.

"You must be crazy to question it!" he cried furiously. "I proved conclusively in my calculations that –"

"Let's postpone the scientific arguments till later," Captain Future suggested hastily. "We're wasting time here. Grag, start up again – the course is straight for Pluto."

"Yes, Master," boomed the big robot joyfully, and hastened with clanking strides to the control room. "I'll get up full speed again."

"Later, I want to inspect that furry body you spoke of," Curt told the Brain rapidly. "Meanwhile, what about your observations of the dark star?"

"I'm puzzled, Curtis," the Brain confessed. "That dark star is undoubtedly of tremendous size, according to my photographs and visual observations. Yet the measurements of its mass show a small mass such as is impossible for so large a body."

"Could some unknown factor be putting your mass-measurements in error?" Curt asked.

"It's possible," admitted the Brain. "I'd need more and bigger equipment to ascertain that."

"When we get to Pluto, you can make some studies with the equipment at Tartarus Observatory. If it turns out that that dark star really possesses large mass, it will threaten the System with disaster, Simon."

"I know," muttered the Brain. "The whole thing is puzzling."

Captain Future turned and found Joan sitting in a space-chair, her face pale.

"Grag," he ordered, "set the automatic pilot and get out some food. Joan is starved."

The big robot obeyed, coming back and unfolding a jointed table, and then bringing forth a queer variety of substances and instruments for the "dinner." To Joan and Kansu Kane, sitting around the table with Curt Newton and the Futuremen. it was the strangest meal they had ever partaken.

**C**URT, Joan and the Venusian ate ordinary inter-planetary food brought from a vacuum preserving-compartment. There was frozen Earth beef, Martian desert-apples, flat, hard cakes of "space-bread" made from Jovian grain, and a big flask of black Venusian swamp-grape wine.

Otho could eat ordinary food in case of necessity, but preferred the pure synthetic chemical food-elements by which he best satisfied his hunger. The android quaffed down an unappetizing-looking glassite bowl of pure chemical liquid, and was done.

Simon Wright had no need to eat, for he had no

body to keep alive. The Brain habitually took his refreshment in a stimulating massage of vibrations. Grag had put a little projector of such vibrations over the transparent case of the living Brain, and Simon silently basked in the refreshing force.

Grag himself, whose huge metal body was powered by atomic energy, calmly opened a hinged plate in his mighty metal torso, and placed a small mass of copper in the receptacle there, to keep his power-plant going. He closed the plate, and then fed the rest of the copper to Eek. The little gray moon-pup gulped up the pure metal instantly, his eyes gleaming with satisfaction.

"Will he eat any metal at all?" Joan asked the robot wonderingly, as she watched Eek.

Grag showed his pleasure at having his pet noticed.

"Yes, he will eat any metal," he boomed, "but he likes the heavier metals best."

"Why doesn't Eek eat your fingers?" Joan asked the robot curiously. "They're metal – and he's always chewing on them."

"My body is of impregnable 'inert' metal which even Eek's teeth can't make any impression on," Grag told her. "Besides, he prefers copper, and especially silver or gold, to anything else."

"He certainly liked the flavor of my silver tube of make-up dye," hissed Otho, staring belligerently at the moon-pup. "He must have, for he ate it an up."

Joan took a heavy gold bracelet from her wrist and held it out to the moon-pup.

"Take it, Eek," she said.

"He cannot hear – you must think, and he will hear your thought," Grag told her.

Joan obeyed. As the moon-pup telepathically sensed her permission, it accepted the bracelet instantly.

It chewed the gold with every appearance of extreme pleasure. In a few moments, though, its limbs began to wobble.

"Too much gold makes Eek a little sick sometimes," Grag said anxiously.

"Sick? You mean drunk!" jeered Otho. "Any metal of higher atomic number than zinc gives that beast delirium tremens. Look at him now!"

In fact, Eek was unsure of his movements and his bright little eyes seemed somewhat glazed.

"He's probably singing at the top of his voice, telepathically," laughed Captain Future.

**W**HEN the strange meal was over, Grag returned to the controls with a definitely intoxicated Eek.

The *Comet* fled on through the void. Simon Wright and Kansu Kane resumed their argument about the Venusian's theory. Otho, always easily bored, amused himself by trying one disguise after another. It made Joan shudder despite herself to see the android time after time soften his flesh, and mold it into new features and shapes.

She looked back at Captain Future. The big red-haired young man was lounging back in a space-chair, staring off into nothingness while his strong fingers plucked absently at his pet instrument, a twenty-string Venusian guitar.

Haunting music of a half-dozen different worlds, drifting snatches of subtle, unearthly melodies, came from the instrument. Yet Joan watched Captain Future's brooding, handsome face and abstract gray eyes, knew that his mind was far from music.

She knew that it was of Doctor Zarro he was thinking, of the struggle with that dark prophet-plotter and his weird Legion that lay ahead of them at Pluto, the perilous life-and-death battle for the System toward which they were rushing through space.

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## CHAPTER VIII

### *On the Arctic World*

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**D**OWN through the dusk of Pluto's day, toward the great dome of the colonial capital Tartarus, flashed the *Comet*.

Captain Future himself held the controls, and his keen eyes were fixed on a beacon a little north of the domed city.

"That's the space port beacon," he commented. "you remember, Simon – we've been here before."

"I remember too," muttered Otho. "We almost froze to death out in one of the equatorial blizzards."

The android was staring with intense dislike at the dusky forbidding landscape beyond the city – a vista of frozen black plains stretching into vast white ice-fields that rose far away into vague, gleaming ranges. Otho hated cold.

Grag, to whom heat and cold were all alike, stared imperturbably beside the Brain. And Joan Randall and Kansu Kane had crowded into the control room too, and were watching anxiously.

"Who's in charge of the Planet Police on Pluto now?" Curt asked the girl agent.

"Marshal Ezra Gurney," answered Joan. "You remember him?"

"Old Ezra? Of course I remember him – that hardbiten old interplanetary marshal and I have met all over the System. Last time was at Jupiter in the Space Emperor case."

"He was promoted for his bravery during that awful time on Jupiter," Joan said. "He's chief of this whole division of the Police now, with headquarters down here in Tartarus."

"We'll see him first thing, then," Curt declared.

Just west of the spaceport, a little out from the great dome of the city, rose a squat, curved-roofed building.

"Tartarus Observatory," Curt observed. "It has to be

outside the city so its telescopes won't be impeded by the dome. As soon as I come back from talking with Ezra Gurney, I'll take you over there for your research on the dark star, Simon."

"I am going with you into that city, Master," Grag declared firmly. "I won't let Otho get you into trouble again."

"Yes, Grag, I'm taking you, but not for that reason. You are impervious to cold. Go get that mysterious furry body Otho brought in. I'll want Gurney to see it."

Curt sent the door sliding open. A blast of freezing air struck in at them.

"Cold as ever!" Curt declared. "This planet will never be a winter resort, that's sure."

They stepped out into the bitter dusk, Joan on one side of the big red-headed adventurer, and Grag and his burden on the other. Eek, the moon-pup, was curled around Grag's neck as usual.

Night was coming – the night of Pluto, hardly darker than its day. Charon, the largest of the three moons, shone as a white disk near the zenith. Cerberus and Styx, the other two moons, were just rising to cast a strange, mingled, shifting radiance across the frigid landscape of their icy parent planet.

**C**APTAIN FUTURE glanced keenly up at the moons. Cerberus was the far-famed Prison Satellite, the bleak penal moon to which the worst interplanetary criminals of the whole System were sentenced. On Charon were trapping posts of the Earthmen who hunted the rare fur-bearing animals there. Only Styx had never been settled or visited by Earthmen. since it was completely water-covered and a landing on it was impossible.

Presently Curt and his two companions found themselves inside the dome of Tartarus, having entered by a sliding door automatically operated by an electric eye. Here inside the dome was a balmy warmth that was grateful contrast to the freezing chill outside.

Captain Future looked across the dusky city, whose streets were lighted by flaring atomic lamps. There were comparatively few people abroad. They met a few Earthmen colonists, who stopped and stared in wonder at the great metal figure of Grag, and the moon-pup clinging to his shoulder. They met a few native Plutonians too.

The Plutonians, indigenous natives of this frigid planet, were manlike people whose hulking bodies were completely covered by thick, long black hair. It covered even their round heads, and through its shaggy locks, their saucerlike, phosphorescent eyes peered forth as though from deep caverns.

This long black hair, evolved as a protection against the cold of the ice-fields in which they dwelled, seemed to make them uncomfortably hot in this warmed Earthman city. For most of the hairy Plutonians were visibly

gasping, and had opened the leather tunics which were their customary garment.

"What's that uproar?" Joan asked, as they passed near a bright-lit street from which came a continuous babel of cries.

Curt smiled. "That's the Street of Hunters – the Earthmen who go out into the ice fur-trapping like to celebrate, when they get back to Tartarus.

"Here we are!" he exclaimed a moment later, as they approached a square, two-storied black cement structure.

The emblem of the Planet Police was over its door. And an officer in the black uniform of the service stopped them as they entered, staring a little wildly at Grag's great figure.

Curt Newton held out his hand, showing the big "planet" ring whose mechanism he had rebuilt during the voyage.

"Captain Future!" exclaimed the officer. He stepped back, saluting respectfully.

Out of an inner office came hurrying a grizzled, gray-haired man who wore the Police uniform and a marshal's badge. His cold blue eyes lighted up at sight of the tall red-haired adventurer of space.

"Captain Future!" he yelled. "Danged if you're not a sight for sore eyes! And Grag an' Joan, too! What the devil are you doing way out here on Pluto?"

**E**ZRA GURNEY, veteran interplanetary frontier marshal, was pumping Curt's hand as he spoke, his pleasure manifest.

"Is there trouble here?" he asked hopefully. "There must be if you're here, Captain Future – you're sort of the stormy petrel of the System."

"Same old Ezra," Curt grinned. "Always looking for a scrap. Don't you think you're too old for such deviltry?"

"Me old?" cried the weatherbeaten marshal indignantly. "Why, I can take on any –"

He stopped suddenly. He had seen the grave look that lurked in Curt's eyes.

"What is wrong, Captain Future?"

"It's Doctor Zarro," Curt answered. "You've heard his broadcasts?"

"Who hasn't?" Ezra Gurney said soberly.

"I'm out to stop him," said Captain Future.

A cold light sprang into Ezra Gurney's eyes. "I remember a fellow back on Jupiter that got too ambitious for his own good," he said meaningly. "You stopped him, all right."

"Doctor Zarro's a greater menace, for he has frightened the people of the System into supporting him!" Curt declared. "I've got to find the base of him and his Legion, quickly."

Ezra stared. "You don't think it's out here on Pluto, do you?"

"I know it's here somewhere," Curt retorted. He told the old marshal of the captured Legionary of Doom who had turned into a furred, strange creature when he died, and had given them the clue that had brought them to Pluto. "There must be a race of such creatures here somewhere – and there's where Doctor Zarro's base is!"

"Let me see the critter you're talking about."

Grag unwrapped the stiff body. The old marshal stared wonderingly at the dead creature's white-furred figure, its strange two-fingered limbs, its flattened head and huge, pupil-less eyes.

"I never saw anything like this before," Gurney muttered. "There ain't any race like this on Pluto that I know about."

"Who would be most likely to know about this, if anyone does?" Curt asked.

Ezra Gurney stroked his chin, considering.

"I guess Cole Romer would be the best bet. He's chief planetographer here, head of the Pluto Survey that's tryin' to explore the planet. He's here in Tartarus now – I can call him over."

**C**OLE ROMER, when he arrived a few minutes later, proved an Earthman of forty, whose fine, scholarly face was hardened and reddened by long exposure to the fierce, frigid winds of Pluto on many exploring expeditions. The planetographer's intelligent eyes inspected the dead, furred creature with mounting perplexity.

"I never even heard of a race like this on Pluto, Captain Future!" he exclaimed. "Of course, there are vast stretches of ice-fields and marching glaciers out there which we know nothing about. But this looks like a member of an intelligent race, such as would have made themselves known before now."

Curt's tanned face was thoughtful.

"What about the moons?" he asked. "Could such a race exist on one of them?"

"It's possible," Romer admitted. "Of course there's nothing on Styx, which is all water-covered, but a lot of Cerberus, and more of Charon is unknown."

"But I'm not the one to tell you much about those two moons," he went on. "Victor Krim, the fur-magnate whose company has settlements on Charon, and Rundall Lane, the warden of the Interplanetary Prison on Cerberus, would know more about those two."

"Krim and Lane are both in Tartarus now, Captain Future," put in Ezra Gurney. "Krim came in today from Charon to meet fur-buyers from Earth, and Rundall Lane's here about the supply-ship that goes from here to Cerberus each month."

"Call them over here too," Captain Future ordered. His keen gray eyes had narrowed.

The name of the warden of the Cerberus prison had made Curt remember a matter he had resolved to inves-

tigate. He wanted to know how it came that Roj and Kallak, the criminals who were supposed to be in that prison, were in fact leading the Legion.

Victor Krim, the fur-magnate of the moon Charon, was first to arrive. He was a stocky, aggressive man with a square face and suspicious eyes. Curt disliked him at first sight.

Rundall Lane, the warden of the famous Interplanetary Prison on Cerberus, did not look to Captain Future like the type of man who would be set to guard the System's most dangerous criminals. He was thin, elderly, nervous-looking, constantly glancing around.

"I've heard lots about you, Captain Future," Lane said. "you sent a good many men to our prison, you know."

"I sent two there that didn't stay there," Curt said grimly. "I mean that dwarf biologist, Roj, and Kallak, the accomplice he turned into a glandular giant. Those two were sent to Cerberus for life some years ago. But I know they're not there now."

Curt saw Rundall Lane pale, as though taken aback by his knowledge.

"Roj and Kallak escaped a few months ago," he admitted. "They're almost the first men to escape Cerberus. We can't understand how they accomplished it."

The story sounded a little lame to Captain Future. He resolved to investigate further, but not now.

"Did either of you two men ever see or bear of a race of furred creatures like this on Cerberus or Charon?" he asked.

Both Rundall Lane and Victor Krim stared without recognition at the grotesque, white-furred body.

**L**ANE shook his head. "I don't think there's any species of creatures like this on Cerberus. Of course, I don't know much of the moon beyond the Prison, but my guards have explored it and they've never spoken of such creatures."

"That thing, whatever it is, didn't come from Charon," said Victor Krim loudly. "In fact, it couldn't have come from anywhere out here at Pluto."

The stocky magnate sounded a little too certain about it.

"What makes you so sure?" Curt asked.

Krim answered boastfully. "I know Pluto and its moons better than anyone else. My trappers and hunters go places even the explorers don't dare to go. You can take my word for it that there's no such race here."

"You can't be so sure as that, Krim," protested Cole Romer. "There's lots of Pluto your men haven't seen."

Victor Krim snorted. "I suppose you and your Planet Survey know more about this world than I do? Well, I haven't time to argue about it. I'm a busy man and I've got fur-buyers waiting for me right now. Anything more, Captain Future?"

"Nothing more, for now," Curt answered evenly.

"You can all go – and thank you for your help, gentlemen."

But as Krim and Lane and Romer left, Curt was thinking ruefully that they had not really been any help at all.

"You didn't learn anything of value from them?" Joan asked.

"Nothing much," Curt answered, though his face was thoughtful. He turned to the old marshal. "Ezra, I want to show this creature to one of the native Plutonians. Can you get one here?"

"Got one right here in the buildin'," chuckled the old marshal. "A hairy devil named Tharb, we use as a guide when police business takes us out into the ice-fields."

He stepped to the door and called an order, and presently Tharb, the Plutonian guide, entered doubtfully.

Tharb was a typical member of the hairy native race of the icy planet. His six-foot form was completely covered by long, shaggy black hair, from bullet head to toeless feet. His round, phosphorescent eyes peered awedly at Curt and at Grag's huge figure.

Then the Plutonian asked Ezra Gurney, in slurred, broken Earthman speech: "You want me go outside?"

"The hairy nuisances is always wantin' outside in the ice," Gurney told Curt. "It's too warm in here for them."

The old marshal pointed to the dead white-furred being that lay on the table.

"You see thing like that before, Tharb?"

Tharb turned his queer phosphorescent eyes upon the dead creature. Then the hairy Plutonian recoiled with a sharp cry.

"A Magician!" he yelled.

Curt jumped forward.

"You've seen such creatures before?" he asked quickly. "Why do you call it a Magician?"

Tharb was showing every evidence of an extreme superstitious fear and awe as he stared at the dead creature.

"I never see such things before.," he stammered. "But I hear of them. My grandfather, Kiri, who is very old, tell me of the Magicians."

Curt dropped into the native Plutonian singing language.

"What did your grandfather tell you of them?"

**T**HARB answered volubly in his own tongue. "My grandfather said that when he was a young man, long ago before the Earthmen came here, his people used to see the Magicians. They were furry white beings, who had great powers and strange wisdom."

"Did he tell you where the Magicians came from?" Curt asked eagerly.

"He never told me that – I never asked him."

Curt felt baffled for a moment. Then he asked the Plutonian: "Your grandfather Kiri still lives?"

"Yes," said Tharb, "he lives with my people in their ice-town, far north of the Marching Mountains and the icy sea, which you Earthmen call the Sea of Avernus."

"I'm going out and see this chap's grandfather." Captain Future said decisively.

"It's pretty forbidding country up there beyond the Marching Mountains," Gurney said.

"Nevertheless, I'm going," Curt rapped. "You'll lend me a Police rocket flier, Ezra? I'll take Tharb along as guide."

"And me too, master?" cried Grag anxiously.

Curt saw the robot's eagerness, and smiled. "Yes, you too. Grag – but you'll have to leave that moon-pup behind."

Grag seemed a little crestfallen. "Eek will be lonesome while I am gone. But I will leave him."

Captain Future hastened back out of the city with Joan and the robot and Tharb, the Plutonian. He went directly across the frozen, dusky spaceport to the *Comet*. There he told Simon Wright of the lead that was taking him into the interior wilderness of Pluto.

"Otho and Joan will stay with you," he told the Brain. "You can make your studies of the dark star over there in the Tartarus Observatory while I'm gone."

Grag put little Eek into a corner of the ship and then told Otho: "Take good care of Eek while I am gone."

Otho, already furious at being left behind, exploded.

"Take care of that drunken moon-pup? Do you think I'm cut out to be a nursemaid for that little metal-eating monstrosity?"

"If you were human like me, you would appreciate how nice a pet Eek is," Grag calmly informed the raging android.

Ten minutes later, Captain Future and Grag and Tharb were in a small streamlined Planet Police flier, rocketing up from the spaceport and beading northward. Curt wore a suit of furs, but the hairy Tharb and the impervious robot needed no protection.

At high speed, the little flier zoomed north across nighted Pluto, beneath the weird shifting radiance of the three big moons. The bubblelike dome of Tartarus disappeared from sight behind them. They flew on above endless fields of glittering ice. Through the ice-fields, a swift, wide river flowed almost due north.

"That is the salt river, Phlegethon," said Tharb. "We follow it straight to the icy sea."

**C**URT nodded. He was peering toward the towering white masses that loomed up vaguely ahead.

"Those are the Marching Mountains, Grag," he told the robot. "Remember them?"

Grag nodded uneasily. "Yes, I don't like them."

"My people too are afraid of them," Tharb confessed. "They have often times destroyed the towns of my tribe"

The Marching Mountains of Pluto, one of the great-



est natural wonders of the System, were soon almost below them.

This particular range was a vast wall of ice, a thousand feet high, that advanced with a shifting, flowing movement over the ice-fields in a southwestward direction. The crackling, crashing roar of its progress reached their ears as a deafening cannonade.

Mountains of ice, marching! The Marching Mountains were really vast glaciers, that moved at a speed many times faster than any glacier of Earth. Around and around this frigid planet eternally, their mighty ranges moved like ponderous, walking white giants.

"Master, above us!" Grag yelled suddenly.

A dark space cruiser, with the black disk of the Legion of Doom on its bows, was diving down on them.

"Ambush!" Curt cried, his gray eyes suddenly blazing. "I might have known –"

He swept their flier aside with a lightning movement. It was too late. The guns of the cruiser blasted atomic fire.

The whole flier rocked sickeningly as its tail and rocket-tubes were blasted away. Then it plunged toward the ice hundreds of feet below, while the Legion cruiser zoomed up and away.

"We're going to fall in front of the Marching Mountains!" cried Tharb wildly. "It is certain death!"

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## CHAPTER IX

### *Coming of Doctor Zarro*

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**A**FTER Simon Wright had watched Captain Future and his two companions depart, he turned his lens-eyes toward the others who remained in the *Comet*.

"Fly the *Comet* over to that Observatory, Otho," ordered the Brain. "I want to begin my studies of the dark star with their equipment."

"I'll go along and act as your assistant, if you wish," offered Kansu Kane.

"Ha, Kansu Kane," the Brain rasped, "that is spoken like a true scientist able to sink his pride where Truth is involved."

A strange brooding quality crept into the Brain's metallic voice.

"Yes, it is the search for truth that has occupied me all my long life, long ago when I was a human like yourselves with a body, and through all the years that I have dwelled bodiless in this serum-case. For a real scientist must never ask where his truth is taking him – he must only ask that he find it."

"Captain Future is a real scientist – the greatest in the System's history," Joan replied loyally. "And yet he can consider the welfare of the System's peoples, too."

"That is true," agreed the Brain. "But Curtis is an

exception. Reared as he was by us three unhuman guardians, he has an unhuman capacity for concentration and research. Yet he has remained human enough to appreciate human needs and desires and hopes."

The Brain looked impatiently at Otho.

"To the Observatory, Otho! I asked you minutes ago to start there."

Otho picked up the handle of Simon Wright's serum-case, and they all emerged from the little tear-drop ship and approached the Observatory. They passed through a heat-lock into its shadowy interior, whose warmth was grateful after the outside cold.

A hesitant-looking young Earthman astronomer approached them, looking a little awedly into the lens-eyes of the Brain, the legended unhuman master of science.

"The Observatory is at your disposal," he told them. "A call from Marshal Gurney asked us to turn over to you."

"Very well, you can go," rasped the Brain. "Otho, take me up to the eyepiece of the big reflector."

Once his case had been securely attached so that he could peer into the eyepiece of the great instrument, the Brain spoke to Kansu Kane.

"I'm going to check the size and mass of the dark star again. Will you stand by to assist?"

Otho and Joan watched from the floor of the great room, peering up at the two astronomers, human and unhuman, as they began their study high at the eyepiece platform of the great telescope.

With a soft throbbing of atomic motors, the shutter in the observatory dome rolled back, giving vision of a strip of brilliant, starry sky. The whole dome revolved until the constellation Sagittarius was in the telescope's field of view.

Out there in the Milky Way in that constellation, a small disk of blackness was very clearly visible. It was ominously bigger than it had been, obscuring more than one star in that crowded area.

**T**HE Brain rasped monosyllabic orders, and Kansu Kane obeyed, touching verniers and screws with expert skill. And as the Brain peered into the eyepiece, the dark thing out there in the starry void leaped into his vision, enormously magnified.

It appeared to the Brain as a vast, spinning black sphere, looming portentously against the star-strewn heavens as it thundered on toward the System. A dark star, a dead sun that had once flamed with blazing life, but that was now only a great cinder of the cosmos, hurled by fate toward the nine worlds.

Simon looked without fear at the awesome and terrifying spectacle. To the Brain, almost all human emotions such as fear and hatred had ceased to exist long ago, when he had been transferred out of his pain-racked human body into his new strange form. Only his

deep loyalty to and protective love for the helpless baby he had reared to brilliant manhood remained of the Brain's emotions.

The Brain checked the apparent diameter of the dark star, using Kansu Kane to take down the readings.

"It is nearer – much nearer," the Brain rasped when the result had been computed. "Within very few days it will be an alarming spectacle, even to the unaided eye."

"What about the actual dimensions?" Kansu Kane inquired keenly.

"We'll check that now," Simon answered, "and see if it agrees with my former determination."

When the new readings had been made, and the computing done, the Brain's voice held a quality of surprise.

"The same as before – that dark star is at least fifty thousand miles in diameter! It's unbelievable that it should have so little mass. Something must be distorting our mass-measurements."

"That problem has baffled me, too," confessed Kansu Kane. "I am beginning to believe now that my mass-measurements have been in error."

"Prepare the magnetoscopes and we'll make new measurements," directed Simon.

The Brain brooded over the problem as Kansu Kane bustled around the instruments. It was the greatest scientific mystery he had ever encountered. That colossal dark star thundering toward the System should, in the natural course of things, have enormous mass, but all astronomical measurements had indicated that its mass was negligible.

But if those measurements were really in error, if the dark star really was as massive as it might naturally be expected to be, Doctor Zarro's prophecy of solar disaster was not unfounded! Such a huge and massive body, if it struck the System would rip through the planetary orbits and suck worlds into it as it moved. And if it collided with the Sun, half or more of the System's worlds might well perish in the titanic catastrophe!

The Brain became suddenly aware that Kansu Kane's bustling movements had ceased. The waspish little astronomer had sunk down and lay prostrate, his eyes staring up emptily.

"Kansu! What is the matter?" rasped the Brain.

**T**HERE was no answer. Simon turned his lens-eyes down to Joan and Otho. They too lay prone, stiff, unmoving.

Then the Brain's keen microphone ears caught a hissing sound, as of flowing gas.

"Overpowering gas of some kind!" flashed the thought of the Brain. "It's being pumped into the building –"

That, he knew, could be the only explanation. But why, he wondered, had Otho been overcome by the

gas? The android was impervious to almost any poison and could breathe air that would kill a human, but that did not harm his lungs.

Then the Brain understood. This gas being pumped in was one which affected, not the lungs, but every cell in the body, paralyzing cellular chemical activity and thus "freezing" the whole body. Otho and Joan and Kansu Kane must still be conscious like himself, but their bodies were utterly paralyzed.

And the Brain could do nothing! His only powers of movement were his ability to move his flexible eye-stalks. He could only wait.

The hissing of gas ceased. Simon heard the sound of a door opening. Twisting his eyes downward, he saw a half dozen men in space suits enter the building.

They wore the black disk of the Legion of Doom on their shoulders. They were led by a tall, space-suited man, whose transparent helmet allowed his enormous, bulging forehead and skull, and gaunt face and burning eyes, to be seen.

"Doctor Zarro himself!" muttered the Brain. "I might have known."

Doctor Zarro looked down contemptuously at the stiff, helpless forms of Joan and Otho and Kansu Kane. Then, while his men guarded the doors, the tall, burning-eyed prophet climbed the metal ladder to the eye-piece-platform of the great reflector.

Doctor Zarro and the Brain stared at each other, the burning black orbs of the black prophet and the cold, glittering lens-eyes of Simon Wright meeting and clashing in tangible shock.

"So this is the famous Brain," mocked Doctor Zarro in a deep, harsh voice muffled by his helmet. "So this is the greatest scientist in the System, except for Captain Future – this miserable brain in a box!"

The Brain, completely unmoved, asked a question.

"Have you killed my friends?"

Doctor Zarro laughed mirthlessly.

"They are not dead – they are not even unconscious! But they cannot move, while the freezing-gas holds them."

The dark prophet bent closer.

"I heard you were coming here, Brain – and so I came too. You are going to tell me just how much you and Captain Future have learned about me and my Legion. If you tell, I will grant you the gift of quick death. If you refuse –"

"I will tell you nothing," replied the unfrightened Brain coldly.

"You had better think twice!" warned the tall prophet. "You are utterly helpless in my hands. I can make you long for death."

**S**IMON WRIGHT was calm. "A great many men in the past," he said, "have threatened me. They thought themselves safe to do so because I have no

body and cannot resist. But all those men regretted their threats."

"You think your Captain Future will avenge you?" Doctor Zarro's harsh voice was ugly. "Get rid of the idea, Brain! He is already destroyed – before ever I came here, I gave orders that have by now been carried out."

The Brain uttered a rasping laugh.

"You're not the first who has thought he had eliminated Curtis. You'll find you are mistaken"

Yet inwardly, the Brain was wondering. The quickness with which Doctor Zarro had learned that Captain Future was on Pluto was highly suspicious. It might be that the black prophet had in fact laid a deadly trap for Curt.

Doctor Zarro was speaking menacingly.

"I know that you and your red-headed captain trailed me here through the dead body of one of my Legionaries. What else have you found out?"

The Brain remained coolly silent.

"I'll make you talk!" the dark doctor cried.

He reached out to a little switch on the side of the Brain's transparent case. It was the switch of the compact perfusion pump which circulated serum through Simon's living brain, constantly purifying and stimulating it.

The switch clicked off. The perfusion-pump stopped instantly. And at once the Brain felt the effects.

A dull ache was his first sensation. Then the aching became stronger, became an increasing agony that seemed to spread fiery pain through every fiber of his brain.

The Brain's vision and hearing blurred as that torturing agony increased, as his starved cerebrum-cells cried for the serum whose flow had been stopped.

"Are you ready to be helpful now?" questioned Doctor Zarro mockingly.

The Brain could hardly see the dark figure hovering over him. But he answered, his rasping voice thick, slow.

"The answer is the same," he mumbled, indomitably.

He dimly heard Doctor Zarro's fierce exclamation of impatience. Then the rending, torturing agony became so intense that Simon could neither see nor hear.

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## CHAPTER X

### *The Marching Mountains*

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AS Captain Future's disabled rocket flier plunged down toward the ice-fields after being hit by the Legion cruiser that had attacked them, the red-haired adventurer's brain was working with lightning rapidity.

The blast of the cruiser's atom-guns had not com-

pletely destroyed the ship, thanks to Curt's swiftness of reaction in dodging. But the whole tail and rocket-tubes were shorn off, and icy air was screaming into the wrecked flier as it tumbled toward destruction, turning over and over .

Curt saw just one chance to avoid death in crashing impact below. While Tharb the Plutonian howled in panic, and Grag clutched amazedly to a stanchion to keep from being thrown out, Captain Future took the one chance left him.

He threw himself back to the stern of the falling flier. The single cyclotron that powered it was still there, unharmed. Clinging to it, Curt tore away the output power-tubes that had led to the now vanished rockets. Then the young wizard of science scrambled back to the controls.

"Master, we're going to strike!" yelled Grag.

Turning over and over, they were now very close to the gleaming ice. All that had happened had taken but seconds.

Curt's tanned hands grabbed the throttles. He waited an instant until, in its turning, the falling flier's stern was downward. Then he opened all throttles wide.

From the cyclotron, down out of the blasted tail, raved an uncontrolled blaze of atomic energy. That terrific fan of force, hitting the ice-field only yards below, checked the fall of the flier by its reactive push.

Next moment the crippled craft, turning on over, lost the braking effect. But it had been enough to slow their fall. They hit the ice with a crashing impact that stunned Curt Newton partially, but that did not destroy them as it would have except for his stratagem.

Curt got to his feet. Still a little groggy from the experience, he saw the hairy Plutonian and the big metal robot staggering up likewise.

"The Legion cruiser is gone!" Curt announced, peering up through a shattered window of the wrecked flier. "They thought we were as good as dead when they saw us fall."

"We are as good as dead!" yelled Tharb, the hairy Plutonian's big phosphorescent eyes dilated with terror. "Listen to that!"

Curt became aware of a thunderous, cracking, crashing sound that seemed growing louder and nearer by the minute.

"The Marching Mountains!" Tharb howled. "We fell right in their path!"

Captain Future's heart skipped a beat. He sprang out of the tangled metal wreck, the other two following.

In the brilliant moonlight, he stood petrified for a moment on the rough ice, staring northeastward. He and his companions looked frozenly up at an awful peril thundering down on them.

The Marching Mountains! The vast thousand-foot high range of icy hills that was but one of similar glacier-ranges which perpetually moved around the

planet!

**T**HE forefront of the appalling walking ice-range was a towering, gleaming cliff that was only a few hundred yards from them. And the whole cliff was advancing on them, moving at an incredible speed of many yards a minute, pushed forward by the vast glacial masses of ice behind it. From the icy moving cliff fell great bergs and masses of ice, over which the main range moved crushingly as it came on.

"Out of here!" Captain Future yelled, "We'll have to run for it – this way!"

"There is no use running from the Marching Mountains," cried Tharb hopelessly. "We cannot get out of their path and they will soon overtake us."

Yet the hairy Plutonian joined Curt and Grag as they started in a dead run away from the crackling, crashing glacial range.

It was characteristic of Captain Future that even as he and the robot and the Plutonian fled over the moonlit ice-fields from the pursuing death, his keen mind was trying to solve the problem of how that Legion of Doom cruiser had come to attack him.

It must be, Curt thought tensely, that Legion cruisers had been in hiding somewhere near the city Tartarus. And Doctor Zarro had ordered one, perhaps by television, to follow Captain Future and destroy him and his companions.

But how had Doctor Zarro even known that he was here on Pluto? No one in Tartarus had known it except Ezra Gurney, and the three men he had called in to ask for information – Victor Krim, the Charon fur-magnate, Rundall Lane, the warden of Cerberus prison, and Cole Romer, the government planetographer.

Could one of those three be Doctor Zarro? None of them had looked like the dark, burning-eyed prophet. But Curt, remembering the mysterious, baffling way in which the white-furred creature had been disguised as an Earthman, wondered flashingly if Doctor Zarro's impressive appearance was not a similar strange disguise.

"The ice gains on us, Master!" Grag's booming voice yelled over the ominous crackling roar from behind.

"Faster, Grag!"

"It is useless!" cried Tharb a moment later. "See – we can go no farther!"

Captain Future's heart chilled as he saw what lay ahead in the moonlit ice-field.

It was the salt river Phlegethon, which they had been following northward when the attack had come. A wide, deep racing torrent whose roar could be heard even above the deafening thunder of advancing ice from behind,

They reached the icy shore of the torrent. One glance showed Curt that to swim that wide, raging deep flood was impossible.

Tharb turned to them, and there was a certain fatal-

istic dignity in the hairy Plutonian's bearing.

"This is our end," he said, and stood gazing dully back at the oncoming glacial cliffs.

"Our end – nothing!" Curt yelled. His gray eyes flashing in the moonlight. "Grag, help me push one of these ice-cakes into the river! If we get one of these cakes into the river, we can float down on it and maybe get out of the path of the glacier-range before it reaches the river! That current is terrific – it will take us miles in a few minutes!"

**T**HARB, spurred out of his despair by the thin chance suggested, sprang with Curt toward a great flat ice-cake that lay partly in the water. They pushed with all their strength to slide the mass into the river.

Grag's physical strength was almost unlimited. Beneath his tremendous push, and that of Tharb and Curt, the big cake began to slide slowly into the water. Then it moved faster.

"Jump onto it before it floats clear!" Curt yelled. "Hurry, Grag!"

The flat ice-cake was already swirling out into the super-swift current, as the three comrades leaped.

Curt Newton and Tharb landed in a heap on the frozen surface. Grag, following, sprang a little short. The big robot's metal body began to slide over the edge of the cake.

Curt gripped his metal wrists, and pulled mightily. He just dragged back Grag's great figure in time.

"Dig hand-grip holes out of the ice!" Captain Future yelled to his companions. "It's going to be hard to hang onto this thing!"

"See – the Marching Mountains come on!" Tharb cried fearfully. "They will reach the river before we are past them!"

"Maybe not," Curt gritted. "Though it's going to be close."

The scene was like one of nightmare. The three great moons of Pluto, looking down upon the silver-lit, frigid world. The wild salt river raging northward through the ice-fields. The gigantic, portentous range of glacial white cliffs advancing thunderously and inexorably toward the river, from northeastward.

And in the center of the racing, whirling river, the big ice-cake riding the current at dizzying speed, and bearing on it the clinging trio – the fur-clad form of Captain Future, the crouching, hairy shape of Tharb, and the huge, gleaming metal robot.

The icy range of the Marching Mountains was now within a hundred yards of the river, bordering it like a towering white cliff, for many miles. Curt could see, far ahead, the end of the walking range. Would they pass it before it stamped over the river and crushed them?

His ears were deafened by the combined roar of maddened waters and thunderous crashing of the advancing glacier. The crazy pitching of the ice-cake they

were riding threatened each moment to dislodge them from the precarious hand-holds they had scratched out of the ice.

Now the advancing cliffs were within a few yards of the river. They towered over the racing current in ominous, on coming precipices. Great masses continually fell from them, and were crushed under by the main advancing glacial bulk.

Curt glimpsed the end of the looming cliffs, a little ahead. The current, as though sensing their dire peril, leaped faster. The ice-cake shot past the end of the moving range, at the moment that great white chunks were already falling on them from it.

"We're safe from the Mountains, anyway!"

Curt cried encouragingly.

"Master, look at that – the ice mountains conquer the river!" Grag cried wonderingly, staring back.

**C**APTAIN FUTURE glanced back and saw that the vast glacier was grinding on across the river, marching steadily on.

"Don't those Marching Mountains fill up the river every time they cross it?" he cried to Tharb.

The Plutonian shook his head.

"No, for most of the river's real current runs in deep underground channels, and as soon as the mountains have passed, the current clears away the ice left above."

They were soon out of sight of the appalling walking ranges. But the thunder of waters in their ears was still loud, their speed still slowly increasing.

"We can't get off this ice-cake until the current slows down," Captain Future shouted.

"It will not slow down – it will rush faster, in the great rapids that flow into the icy sea!" Tharb cried.

"The icy sea? The Sea of Avernus?" Captain Future shouted. "That's right – this river Phlegethon does flow into that ocean. And your people live beyond that sea, you said?"

"They do, but I doubt now that we will ever see them!" yelled the fearful Plutonian.

The river rushed them on. And presently Curt Newton glimpsed that ahead there was a sheer brink beyond which he could see nothing.

"Here's the rapids! Hold tight!" he yelled.

The ice-cake was to the brink in seconds. For a moment it seemed to hover there, terrifyingly poised.

Curt had a glimpse in that moment of what lay beyond. A long, icy slope, down which the river rushed in foaming rapids toward a great, moonlit, heaving ocean that stretched far out into spectral, shrouding mists.

"Here we go!" cried Captain Future, with a reckless laugh.

The ice-cake plunged down into the rapids. The next moments were a jumble of overwhelming sensations, of foaming white waters seeking to wash them off their precarious raft, of a dizzy spinning around and around,

of a sickening sense of falling into thunderous abysses.

Then as they clung, they became gradually aware that the whirling and pitching of the ice-cake was dwindling, that the roar of waters was rapidly lessening.

Drenched and half-frozen, Curt raised his head. They were out on the moonlit ocean – their ice-cake had been borne out onto the heaving waves with unbelievable quickness by the rapids. Now their forward motion was slowing down.

"We had better get to shore quickly," said Tharb apprehensively. "This ocean teems with monsters who would have us at their mercy on this clumsy mass of ice."

They started paddling with their hands in the icy water, urging their makeshift raft back across the moonlit ocean to the nearest shore, from which the river had ejected them.

Their progress was painfully slow, but Captain Future's hopes were mounting elatedly. If Tharb's grandfather, old Kiri, could tell the dwelling-place of the queer, white-furred Magicians, it was almost sure that the secret base of Doctor Zarro and his Legion would be found in that same place.

**G**RAG suddenly stopped paddling. "Look, master!" The robot's metal hand pointed toward a ripple that was approaching them through the moonlit water – a ripple that was ominously deliberate and steady in its advance.

"It's a bibur – one of the greatest and most terrible sea-monsters of our world!" yelled Tharb. "Paddle away!"

But their attempt at retreat was too slow to be of any avail. That rippling came closer, and they could clearly see it was caused by an enormous body swimming beneath the surface.

Then out of the moonlit sea a huge living thing broke surface. It was of brontosaurus bulk, its immense, sleek, wet, furry body urged forward by webbed paws, its snaky neck ending in a snarling head of great fangs and blazing red eyes.

Captain Future's proton-pistol flashed into his hand. He set it at highest power with a flick of his finger, then leveled it, pulled trigger.

The thin, pale beam hit the base of the bibur's neck and a sizzle of smoke rose from the wet fur. But the creature, not seriously hurt, came on with a hoarse shriek of rage that sounded like a steam-whistle.

"You can't kill it!" Tharb cried wildly. "Their hide is too thick for any weapon to penetrate!"

The enraged bibur was coming on through the water at express-train speed. Curt shot again, this time at one of its eyes.

The blazing right eye of the monster vanished as the ray hit it. The furred terror uttered another terrific shriek, and stopped to claw furiously at its head with a

giant webbed paw.

"Some of my people are coming!" Tharb suddenly screamed, pointing back out across the moonlit ocean. "They'll help –"

Curt turned for an instant, saw a small fleet of boats of some kind hastening toward them, flaring torches at their bows. Then a booming cry from Grag made him swing back around.

The bibur was resuming its interrupted charge. The monster, its small brain enraged to the last pitch by the pain in its eye, foamed through the water and reared up above the ice-cake and its three riders.

Captain Future loosed his beam, driving it steadily into the empty eye-socket of the creature. And what he had hoped for, happened. The potent beam pierced through bone into the brain.

The upreared bibur fell forward, dying. But its outflung paw hit the ice-cake and tipped it. In an instant, all three of the companions were in the icy water.

Curt went down but came up instantly, sheathing his proton-pistol and treading water. He looked around the moonlit sea. The enormous body of the dead monster was floating nearby. Tharb was swimming and yelling to the advancing boats.

But Grag was not in sight. The great metal robot had sunk like a stone to the bottom.

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## CHAPTER XI

### *In the Ice City*

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CAPTAIN FUTURE felt a sharp dismay as he discovered that Grag had sunk. He was not worried about the robot's life, for Grag did not breathe and could live under water for a long time. But it would be a difficult task to get him out of the depths.

Treading water, hampered by his furs and chilled by the icy sea, Curt turned and saw the little fleet of boats bearing down upon them in answer to Tharb's cries. The boats were small copper craft, propelled by sails of sewn hides. They were filled with hairy Plutonians like Tharb, staring at them across the moonlit waves.

The boats dropped their sails and came gliding to them. Hairy arms reached out and hauled Captain Future and Tharb aboard. Curt saw that these Plutonians had been fishing – there were masses of queer, silvery fish and coils of leather lines in the bottom of this boat.

Tharb had been talking swiftly to one of the Plutonians in this boat – a big, hulking individual.

"This is Gorr, chief of my people." Tharb told Captain Future. "They were fishing and heard our fight with the bibur."

"You are a brave man to have slain a bibur. Earthman," the chief, Gorr, told Captain Future, his phosphorescent eyes respectful.

"One of my comrades has sunk – he's down at the bottom now." said Captain Future. "I need your help to get him out!"

Tharb goggled. "But he is drowned, by now!"

Captain Future laughed. "Grag can't drown."

Captain Future had already devised a simple plan for getting the robot out of his predicament. At his request, the Plutonians gave him the strong hide anchor-ropes from all their boats. Rapidly, Captain Future fastened them together in a strong, long line of double strength.

His drenched clothing was like a shroud of ice around him, for the wind was blowing stronger. The six copper boats tossed uneasily on the surface of the silver ocean, while their hairy crews puzzledly watched this big, red-haired young Earthman working by the light of the three moons.

"I do not like this wind," said Gorr, looking uneasily at flat clouds coming up across the western sky. "We cannot, stay here long."

"I'm almost done," Captain Future said quickly. "This rope should be long enough to reach bottom."

He took from his belt his little atomic lamp, turned it on, and tied it to the end of his long leather rope. Then he lowered the brightly-burning little lamp down into the moonlit sea.

He had paid out almost all his rope before he felt the lamp reach bottom. He waited. then. Grag, down there, should be able to see the lamp and go to it.

"A blizzard-storm is coming up," Tharb said anxiously. "It will be dangerous out here on the sea."

There came a sudden strong tug at the leather line, and Captain Future uttered an eager exclamation.

"Grag has the line now! Help me haul him up."

Making sure that the robot understood his plan and was holding the leather rope, Captain Future and the Plutonians in the boat started to hoist Grag.

THE enormous weight of the metal robot, even though partially compensated for by the fact that he was in water, strained the muscles of Curt and his hairy helpers. But foot by foot, the tough leather rope came up and at last Grag's metal head and shoulders appeared above the water.

Captain Future helped the robot to scramble into the boat. Then the red-haired adventurer burst out laughing.

Grag was a ludicrous sight. Sea weeds were wrapped around him like festooned flowers, and he was smeared with ooze.

"I do not know why you laugh, Master," sputtered the big metal man. "It was a dark, bad place down there. And a huge fish attacked me – it tried to bite off my arm."

"I'll bet it got the surprise of its life when it found your arm was metal," chuckled Curt.

"Up sails!" the chief Gorr was shouting over the

moan of winds. "Unless we get off this sea before the blizzard comes, we'll never see the city Qulun again!"

Hastily the hide sails were raised. As the rising wind caught them, it sent the little fleet of copper boats spinning swiftly over the heaving, moonlit ocean. They steered a northeastward course, the craft of Gorr leading.

Captain Future's drenched furs were frozen stiff by the icy wind, and blinding salt spray dashed his face as he crouched with Grag and Tharb in the stern of the little boat. The scream of wind and roar of waves around them made speech impossible.

And yet Captain Future laughed softly. Danger was a wine of excitement in his veins, whether it be danger met in the vast starry vaults of space or on some weird world like this one. It was in such moments that Captain Future felt that he was living the most.

"Qulun harbor!" shouted Gorr in a stentorian voice. "Helms over, or we'll run past it!"

The copper boat threatened to capsize, but recovered and shot past the looming cape, into a small cove rimmed by an icy shore.

The other Plutonian boats followed. Presently their keels grated on ice. The hairy men leaped out and pulled the boats safely up beside others that lay beached along the frozen shore.

Captain Future glimpsed Tharb stumbling toward him through the screaming snow that now clogged the air.

"My city Qulun is near," Tharb shouted over the roar of storm. "Come with us."

Curt Newton and Grag accompanied the Plutonians along a narrow path that wound back through glistening ice-hills.

The darkness was intense but Gorr and his men seemed to know their way perfectly. Presently they entered a small enclosed valley, in which stood the city of the Plutonians.

It was a city of ice. Every one of its square one and two-storied buildings was a monolith of glittering ice, constructed by the simple process of setting up forms and pouting in fresh water which immediately froze, and remained frozen.

Gorr led them to a big, square ice-building that was larger than any of its neighbors.

"My house," the Plutonian chief shouted to Captain Future. "You shall be my guests."

Curt turned to Tharb. "But I want to see your grandfather, old Kiri," he reminded. "That's why I came here."

"He will be here, if he still lives," Tharb answered. The Plutonian added a little proudly, "Gorr, the chief, is of our family."

**T**HE big room was lit by flaming torches of bone soaked in oil, stuck into metal sockets. The bench-

es and chairs were of solid ice, monolithic with the floor, and covered with furs.

A dozen Plutonians of both sexes, all wearing simple leather garments, stared wonderingly with their phosphorescent eyes at the big, red-haired Earthman and his huge metal companion. The hairy Plutonians did not seem to feel cold, but to Curt the chill of this place was penetrating.

"Food and drink for my friends!" ordered the hulking Gorr in a lordly manner.

As some of the Plutonian women hurried out of the room to prepare a meal, Curt found Tharb tugging at his sleeve.

"Here is my grandfather," the Plutonian told him, leading him to a corner of the big room. "This is Kiri."

In the corner, wrapped in heavy bibur-furs, sat an ancient Plutonian whose thick hair had turned grayish white with age, and whose dimly shining eyes peered up weakly from a shriveled face.

"It is Tharb, your grandson," the younger Plutonian told the blinking old one. "I bring an Earthman who desires information. He wishes to know about the Magicians."

"The Magicians?" echoed old Kiri in a shrill, quavering voice. "The Magicians have not been seen here since long ago – since the Earthmen came."

"I know that," Curt said quickly to the old Plutonian. "But where did the Magicians dwell? Was it near here?"

"No, the Magicians never dwelt here," old Kiri replied. "They came here in strange flying ships. They were strange, white-furred people, who had great powers and wisdom. They could look like anything they wanted to – like us, or like an animal, or even like a lump of ice. That was a great witchcraft."

Captain Future's pulse quickened as he heard. Then, even long ago, these so-called Magicians had possessed the power of creating disguising illusions?

"Yet though their powers were great," old Kiri was continuing, "they came in peace. They traded with us, giving us fine metal tools in exchange for certain minerals which we dug out from below the ice. But all this stopped, after the Earthmen came to this world. The Magicians never came again – and I am almost the only man of my people who now remembers them."

"But where did they come from?" Curt asked the ancient Plutonian tensely,

"They came down from the moons!" Kiri answered. "Yes, in their flying-ships, they came from the moons, and went back to their homes there."

"From the moons?" Curt repeated amazedly. "Which of the three moons?"

"I do not know that," Kiri quavered. "I only know that their home was on one of the moons."

CURT was startled by the information. He saw at once how much it narrowed the field of his search.

The secret home of the Magicians, he reasoned, must be on either Cerberus or Charon. The third moon, Styx, was completely water-covered and so out of the question. But how was he to find out on which of the two other moons the Magicians dwelt?

"Do you remember anything more about the Magicians?" he asked the old Plutonian.

"Little more," old Kiri confessed. "I remember that they would not eat our food – they said it did not have enough cobalt in it to suit them."

"Cobalt?" Captain Future repeated. His eyes narrowed. "Then they must have come from a world whose soil or water was rich in cobalt salts."

And now Captain Future remembered something that had puzzled him when he had made scientific examination of the dead body of the white-furred creature, on the way out to Pluto.

That was the queer blue color of the creature's bones. He had not had time to analyze it then. But he realized now it was due to food or water with a high content of cobalt salts.

"If we can find which moon, Cerberus or Charon, has indigenous life with a high cobalt content in its skeleton, we'll know then on which moon the Magicians live – and where Doctor Zarro's base is!"

Grag stared puzzledly. "But the man, Victor Krim, said there was no such race on Charon, Master. And Rundall Lane, the warden of Cerberus prison, said the same about Cerberus."

"They said that, yes," Captain Future retorted meaningly. "But one of them could have been lying."

Captain Future already had reason to connect Victor Krim and Rundall Lane with Doctor Zarro. For they, and Cole Romer, had been the only ones besides the Police who had known that he was on his way to Pluto – the only ones, so it seemed, who could have given the information to the Legion of Doom in time for it to make its murderous surprise attack on him.

If Krim or Rundall Lane were connected with Doctor Zarro, the guilty one would naturally lie about the Magicians.

But Captain Future meant to use the cobalt clue to ascertain whether it was on Cerberus or Charon that the mysterious Magicians dwelt!

Gorr, the hulking chief, came up and interrupted Curt's rapid thoughts.

"Our feast is ready, Earthman," he announced.

Captain Future rose, thanking old Kiri for his information. But before following Gorr to the feast, he drew his pocket-televisor from his belt and pushed its button to call Otho.

In a moment came the answering buzz from Otho, in distant Tartarus.

"Come at once in the *Comet*," Captain Future ordered. "Our flier was destroyed and it's imperative that I get back to Tartarus as soon as possible. I'll leave the

call-wave on to guide you here."

"Coming at once, Chief!" Otho answered excitedly.

CURT frowned as he put the instrument back into his belt. "Otho sounded upset," he muttered. "Wonder what's happened?"

"I hope nothing has happened to Eek, Master," said Grag anxiously.

They approached the feast that had been prepared, around which Gorr and Tharb and the other Plutonians were waiting.

"You went to too much trouble to prepare all this for us," Captain Future told the hairy chief in polite protest.

"No, this is our usual style," the chief replied grandiloquently. "The house of Gorr does not starve, as you see."

They all seemed proud to have an Earthman as their guest, though they looked a little dubiously at great Grag, sitting beside Captain Future like a metal statue, and eating nothing.

As Captain Future ate and laughed with the Plutonians, and heard their tales of perilous exploits amid the Marching Mountains arid the icy oceans, his mind was feverishly anxious to follow up his new lead to Doctor Zarro. He was convinced now that the master-plotter's base was on Cerberus or Charon.

The meal over, Captain Future and Grag went out into the street, into the teeth of the ferocious blizzard, the Plutonians following.

Presently a thin, drumming drone reached their ears through the howl of the gale. Curt flashed his lamp in signal.

Down out of the blinding snow came the *Comet*, swooping fast to a landing in the street. Captain Future shouted farewell to Gorr and his companions, and hurried toward the open door of the little ship, with Grag and Tharb.

Otho sprang to meet them as they entered the tear-drop ship. The android's green slit-eyes blazed with emotion.

"The Brain;s gone, Chief!" he hissed. "The Legion of Doom has taken him!"

"Simon kidnapped?" Curt Newton's gray eyes flashed. Now he understood why Otho had sounded so upset. "When did it happen?"

"Just a little before you called," cried Otho. "I was in the observatory with Joan. while Simon and Kansu Kane were up at the telescopes. I heard a queer, gurgling sound – next moment I and the others dropped to the floor, unable to move a muscle.

"I wasn't unconscious – I could still see and hear – but I seemed to be frozen! I heard men come into the observatory. I was lying on my face and couldn't see them, but I heard one of them climb up to the telescope platform, and heard him speaking to Simon, though I couldn't make out what he said. Then soon, all these



men left. And after awhile I was able to move. We had been overcome by some heavy gas pumped into the building, and as it was dissipated through the door, we revived. But Simon was gone!"

"Back to Tartarus, full speed," ordered Captain Future, his tanned face dangerous.

The *Comet* rose through the blinding snow and roared southward across the nighted, storm-swept planet.

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## CHAPTER XII

### *Interplanetary Prison*

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THE domed city, Tartarus, shone through the blizzard like a magical bubble of light and warmth.

The *Comet* swooped down through the screaming snow, not toward the domed city but toward the small round Observatory outside it. The flight back had taken but minutes, yet to Captain Future it had seemed hours. He was obsessed by an overpowering anxiety for the Brain.

As he and Otho and Grag hastened to the door of the little ship, Captain Future turned for a moment to Tharb.

"You'd best go back into the city, Tharb," he told the wondering Plutonian. "You've helped me a lot."

Blinded by stinging snow, nearly swept from his feet by the wind, Captain Future plunged toward the Observatory entrance. The great domed interior blazed with light. Curt saw Joan Randall hastening toward him, with Ezra Gurney and Kansu Kane behind her. The girl's face was pallid.

"Was it Doctor Zarro himself who came here with the Legion and took Simon?" Captain Future asked swiftly.

"Yes, it was Doctor Zarro!" Kansu Kane babbled. "I was overcome by the gas, but I was not unconscious – I lay up there on the telescope platform, unable to move, but near enough to hear what went on."

And the little astronomer told of how Doctor Zarro had tortured the Brain by shutting off his perfusion-pump.

"But the Brain wouldn't tell anything," Kansu concluded, "and so Doctor Zarro and his Legionaries took the Brain with them. Roj and Kallak were among those Legion men."

"So Doctor Zarro tortured the Brain," Curt gritted. He was shaken by such anger as he had seldom felt. To Curt, the Brain was not the cold, austere, unhuman being he seemed to other people, but was his oldest comrade and tutor and guardian.

"Doctor Zarro's motives are clear enough," Curt declared. "He is afraid of my smashing his plot for power. So he ordered one of his Legion cruisers to ambush and

attack my flier. And he came with other Legionaries to snatch Simon away from his studies here."

Suddenly a startled expression crossed Captain Future's face.

"But why should Doctor Zarro go to such lengths to stop the Brain's study of the dark star? Can it be that he was afraid the Brain would –"

Curt stopped, but he filed away in a corner of his mind the astonishing idea that had come to him.

"I can't understand why Doctor Zarro didn't recapture me when he had the chance!" Kansu Kane was saying bewilderedly.

"He had no reason, now," Captain Future declared. "You see, the Legion originally captured you, Kansu, like the other scientists – to make it seem that you had disappeared, had fled out of the System to escape the coming catastrophe.

"But, after you disappeared once, you had appeared here on Pluto again. So the observatory officials and others here knew you had not fled out of the System at all. Recapture of you now would be too late to make it appear that you had fled. The plan was spoiled, but it isn't very harmful to them at this stage."

CAPTAIN FUTURE began an intent search of the Observatory. Nothing escaped his keen eyes. Yet he found nothing until he climbed to the eyepiece-platform of the great telescope.

There the red-haired wizard of science bent suddenly over a smear of crumbly white soil upon the platform. He scraped it up and examined it. It was a smear of soft white nitrate rock-soil.

"Is there any white nitrate soil like this around Tartarus?" he asked Ezra Gurney.

"Not that I know of, Captain Future."

"I'm going out to the *Comet* to analyze this," Curt said. "You'd better come along – there's nothing more here."

Inside the compact laboratory of the *Comet*, Curt began a painstaking analysis of the white nitrate. He prepared samples of it with deft, expert skill, subjecting those samples to mysterious chemical treatment and then studying them through the bulky electro-microscope.

All were silent as Captain Future worked. All knew that they were watching the most brilliant scientist in the System, though what he was doing was beyond their knowledge.

He finally straightened, finished with his inspection. His gray eyes were gleaming as he turned to them.

"As I thought!" he exclaimed. "This nitrate came, originally, not from any place on Pluto, but from one of the moons!"

"How can you tell?" Kansu Kane asked puzzledly.

"The soil contains nitrogen-fixing bacterial life," Curt replied. "It is too cold on Pluto for such bacterial

forms as this particular one to flourish. But on the moons, which are a little warmer than Pluto, such bacteria could readily exist. The only place this could come from is one of the moons."

Curt turned to the grizzled Planet Police marshal. "Ezra, will you go back into Tartarus and bring Rundall Lane and Victor Krim here – also that planetographer, Romer?"

"Sure – won't take but a few minutes," retorted the old marshal. Wrapping his furs around him, he plunged outside.

"Then you think Doctor Zarro's base is on one of the moons?" Joan exclaimed eagerly. "That he's taken the Brain there?"

"I know Doctor Zarro's headquarters are on one of the moons now." Curt affirmed. "The only question is – which one?"

Presently, Ezra Gurney returned. But there was only one man with him – Cole Romer, the scholarly planetographer.

"Where are Krim and Rundall Lane?" Curt demanded.

"Lane went back to Cerberus a short time ago," the grizzled marshal replied. "As for Victor Krim, none of my men could locate him. We don't know if he's returned to Charon, or what."

Cole Romer was obviously perplexed by the summons, and was looking wonderingly around the famous ship.

Captain Future showed him the smear of nitrate.

"Ever see soil of this peculiar sort on Cerberus or Charon?" he asked.

**R**OMER'S scholarly face furrowed in doubt as he examined the white nitrate.

"I think there's a soil of this type on Cerberus, near the Interplanetary Prison," he answered slowly. "I may be wrong, though – I've been on Cerberus but a few times, since Warden Lane objects to visitors."

"Why doesn't Rundall Lane want visitors?" Curt asked.

"I don't know. But he doesn't."

"That's true, Captain Future," confirmed Ezra Gurney. "Lane doesn't even like us Planet Police coming there. Of course, he's not a Policeman himself – he's a political appointee."

"Do you happen to know if Victor Krim is still in Tartarus?" Curt asked Romer.

"I think he is," the planetographer said uncertainly. "but I'm not sure. He may be in the fur-hunters' quarter."

Captain Future stood, his mind busily assessing the situation. He had come to certain definite conclusions.

He was quite sure that Doctor Zarro was some Earthman of Pluto, who had a secret base here, from which he was broadcasting his ominous warnings, and

from which he was sending forth his Legion on their nefarious errands.

Of course, Doctor Zarro did not look like any known Earthman. But Curt was now sure that the appearance of the gaunt, bulging-skulled, burning-eyed prophet was an illusion-disguise of the same nature as that which had made the white-furred Magician look like an Earthman!

And if Doctor Zarro was some Earthman here, he must be an Earthman connected somehow with one of the moons. For the white-furred Magicians had lived on one of the moons, according to old Kiri. Among that mysterious, hidden race must be the arch-plotter's headquarters. And since water-covered Styx was ruled out, the moon in question must be either Charon or Cerberus.

Thus, Doctor Zarro was an Earthman connected with either Charon or Cerberus. And this clue pointed to Cerberus –

"I'm going to Cerberus in the *Comet*," Curt announced. "I've some things to ask Rundall Lane. Grag and Otho will go with me. Joan, I want you to stay here and see if you and Ezra can find Victor Krim, if he's still in Tartarus."

"Isn't there anything I can do?" little Kansu Kane asked Curt earnestly. "The Brain is a great scientist – I'd do anything to save him."

"There's something you can do for me that's very important, Kansu," Curt told the little Venusian astronomer. "I want you to ascertain whether any of the fixed stars around the dark star have been displaced since the dark star appeared."

**K**ANSU stared. "I can do that all right in the Observatory here, though I don't see just how it will be of much help."

"It's an idea I have," Captain Future said briefly.

The four people left the *Comet* and plunged out into the whirling snow, wrapping their furs close around them – Kansu Kane heading toward the Observatory again, and Joan and Ezra Gurney and Cole Romer starting back to the domed city.

Captain Future held the throttles as the *Comet's* rocket-tubes spurted white fire, hurling the little tear-drop ship up through the blizzard. Otho and Grag crowded anxiously beside him in the control room, the robot holding his moon-pup pet, who was wriggling with pleasure at being reunited with its metal master.

In a space of seconds, the little ship had climbed out of the storm into clear space. The nighted, tempest-vague surface of Pluto lay beneath. In the starry void above shone the mottled white disk of Cerberus, while Charon and Styx were setting.

The ship roared straight up through space toward Cerberus, flashing out on wings of fire.

"You think either Rundall Lane or Krim is Doctor

Zarro, Chief?" Otho was asking excitedly. "It must be Lane, if that clue in the observatory really came from Cerberus."

Grag's great metal form was ominous with menace as the robot's photo-electric eyes stared up at the largening moon.

"If the man Lane tortured and kidnapped the Brain, he will answer to me," vowed the metal man.

"Only after I get through with him, Grag," corrected Otho.

"You? It is your fault Simon is in trouble," boomed the robot. "You are bad luck to have near. For master went with you on Mars and master was captured, and we left you there on Pluto with the Brain, and the Brain was kidnapped. It keeps me busy all the time undoing the harm you do."

Otho was for a moment speechless with sheer rage at this booming indictment.

"This is too much!" choked the android. "It's bad enough I to have to knock around the System with a loud-mouthed, dim-witted machine, but when that machine starts lecturing me –"

"Come off it, you two!" Captain Future ordered sharply. "Simon is in deadly danger – the whole System is in danger – and all you two can think of is to call each other names!"

"You're right, Chief," Otho said loudly. "After all, there's no sense in arguing with a hunk of metal."

Grag was about to make furious retort, when his attention was distracted by Eek. The little gray moon-pup had sunk his amazing teeth into a burnished control-lever, had found the taste of the metal good, and was diligently trying to eat the whole handle.

"If we don't get rid of that beast, there won't be much left of the *Comet*," Otho declared savagely.

"Eek must be hungry – you did not feed him enough while I was gone," Grag defended.

"I gave him a chunk of copper big enough to choke him. The little pest doesn't know when he's full."

Grag silently projected a telepathic command at Eek, and the moon-pup quit chewing the handle and curled up on the robot's broad metal shoulder.

Now Cerberus was broadening in the starry vault ahead. The famous prison moon, only a scant two hundred thousand miles from its parent planet, loomed as a dull saffron disk.

Captain Future stared broodingly as he drove the little tear-drop ship into the thin, cold atmosphere of the big moon. He had been here before. And he had sent scores of other men here, for life – interplanetary criminals he had brought to justice, who had been sentenced to the dreaded System penitentiary here.

Now he sent the ship swooping downward in a long glide. He landed the *Comet* on the rock plain a half mile from the prison. Now he and Grag and Otho stepped out of it into the chill wind that sighed and screamed

across the moon.

"Remain here. Grag, and guard the *Comet*," Curt told the robot in a low voice.

"But Otho –" Grag began to object.

CURT cut him off. "I'll be sending Otho back too. I think, with something to do. But I don't want the ship unguarded for a minute."

Curt and Otho set off then toward the massive black stronghold, all having set their gravitation equalizers before emerging.

As he walked, Curt's eyes searched the rocky plain over which they moved. Presently, as they neared the great gates of the prison he saw what he was looking for an outcrop of soft white rock. He picked up a fragment – it was crumbly nitrate.

"The same kind of rare nitrate as that smear that Doctor Zarro left in Tartarus Observatory," he muttered.

Then he looked around. The only living things in sight were some of the swift little moon-lizards native to small, hostile Cerberus.

"Otho, I want you catch one of those lizards and take it back to the *Comet* and wait for me," Captain Future ordered.

"Devils of space; did I come here only for a lizard-hunt?" Otho cried astoundedly. "I don't understand –"

"You will," Curt chuckled. "And you won't find those things easy to catch."

He left the android to the task, and strode on toward the great gates of Interplanetary Prison.

As he approached the gates, he impinged on an invisible zone of force that set a bell ringing in the guard-tower beside the gate, and flashed brilliant searchlights onto him.

"Stand where you are!" ordered a guard's voice. "Who are you and what are you doing here? Visitors are forbidden."

Curt's tall, lithe figure and tanned, forceful face were bathed in the glare as he calmly held up his left hand.

"Captain Future, to see Rundall Lane, the warden," he clipped.

"Captain Future?" exclaimed the unseen guard, in a changed voice, staring at the ring on Curt's band, whose nine "planet" jewels slowly revolved around the glowing "sun" jewel.

That ring, and that name, could open any door in the Solar System, by official command. Yet this guard hesitated.

"I'll tell the warden you're here," he said.

"You'll admit me at once!" snapped Curt. "Open these gates!"

The tremendous prestige and authority embodied in this tall, red-haired young man overcame the guard's reluctance.

The great gates, moved by humming atomic motors, swung slowly open, and then closed again as Captain Future entered.

"Take me to the warden's office," he ordered crisply.

"Yes, Captain Future – this way," faltered the man.

Rundall Lane, the thin, elderly warden of Interplanetary Prison, sprang nervously to his feet as Curt entered.

"Captain Future!" he exclaimed startledly. Dismay was plain on his face. "What are you doing here? We have a rule against visitors –"

"Forget your rules," Curt said sharply. "I'm here on the trail of Doctor Zarro."

"Doctor Zarro?" echoed Lane in apparent amazement. "But you don't think that his base is on Cerberus?"

"I don't know yet," Curt declared. "But some things point that way."

**H**E was watching Rundall Lane closely. The uneasiness of this man, an Earth politician who had schemed himself into appointment as warden here, seemed suspicious to Curt. Why did Lane seem so afraid of him?

"I've reason to believe," Curt said, choosing his words, "that the white-furred creatures like the dead one I showed you in Tartarus, the Magicians, inhabit either this moon or Charon."

"It must be Charon, then!" Rundall Lane exclaimed. "There's nothing on Cerberus except this prison."

"How can you know?" Curt demanded. "You told me before that you didn't know what was on the rest of this moon."

"I don't, but my guards do know most of it," Lane explained quickly. "Some of them have been here for years. They've never seen any such race as you showed me."

"I want to talk to your guards," Captain Future said coldly. "But first, there's another matter – the two former prisoners here, Roj and Kallak, who are now leaders of Doctor Zarro's Legion. How did they escape from here?"

"I told you we don't know. We just found them gone one morning."

Curt's eyes narrowed. "Let me see the records on those two," he demanded.

Reluctantly, Rundall Lane went to a big cabinet. Inside it were several thousand little flat metal filing-cases, on the edge of each of which glowed a lighted number.

Curt knew the system. Each number corresponded to the glowing badge-number worn by a prisoner, badge and file being in radio-rapport with each other while the prisoner was serving time in the prison.

Lane took out two files whose numbers were dark.

Here are the files on Roj and Kallak, but you'll find

that we've no real information about their escape," he said.

Curt, riffling through the records in the two files, soon discovered that that was true. Then as he looked up, he saw that there were scores of files in the cabinet whose numbers were dark.

"Do all those dark numbers represent prisoners who have escaped?" he demanded.

"Yes," answered Rundall Lane uneasily. "As soon as they get outside the force-zone of the prison, it breaks the radio-rapport between their badges and our telltales here, to warn us."

"How did they all get away?" Curt asked. "It's unheard of for even one man to escape here, let alone so many as that."

"We haven't any idea of how they're getting away!" Lane affirmed. "It's an unfathomable mystery."

"Have all these escapes been reported to the System Government?"

Lane twisted uncomfortably. "No, we haven't reported them," he said desperately. "It would mean losing my job. So I've kept it quiet, hoping to recapture the escaped prisoners. You won't report me, will you, Captain Future?" he begged.

"I certainly will!" blazed Curt Newton. "You have let scores of the most vicious criminals loose on the System, either by carelessness or deliberate design. You're not the man for this place."

**S**USPICION was strong in Curt's mind, now – suspicion of this political jobholder he had already proved derelict to his duty.

"Call in your guards," he ordered harshly. "I've some things to ask them."

"I'll have to get them," Lane replied unhappily. "I'll only be a moment."

The warden went out of the little office building and Captain Future bent to examine more of the records in the cabinet.

The more he examined, the more he became convinced of Lane's wrong-doing. The scores of prisoners who had escaped had apparently done so through complicity. Nothing else was possible.

Curt was suddenly drawn from his investigation by a shrill cry from outside. He leaped to a window. A guard was running out of the great main cellhouse, shouting wildly.

"Mutiny!" he was yelling. "The prisoners are mutinying!"

On his heels, out of the cellhouse poured a mob of wild prisoners, shouting and brandishing atom-guns they had apparently snatched from guards they overpowered.

Guards up in the wall-towers opened fire but were shot down by the blazing atom-guns of the convicts, instantly.

"The office building!" yelled the leader of the convicts, a fat, gross-looking Earthman. "That's where Captain Future is, men!"

"Get Captain Future!" went up the fierce cry from the outrushing prisoners. They rushed toward the office structure.

Curt heard, and understood. There were hundreds of interplanetary criminals in here whom he had sent here and who hated him more than any other man alive. Now they were surging around the office building, Martians, Saturnians, Earthmen and others — cutting off all possible escape. And from every throat went up the same raging cry.

"Death to Captain Future!"

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### CHAPTER XIII

#### *Street of Hunters*

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JOAN RANDALL stood in the raging blizzard, watching the *Comet* roar up into the storm on its way to Cerberus. The girl secret agent would have given much to have been inside it with Captain Future and Grag and Otho.

"Come along, Joan," shouted Ezra Gurney as the *Comet* vanished above. "This storm will blow us off our feet."

"It's pretty bad now," agreed Cole Romer, a muffled figure in his furs, "but it'll let up before long."

The old police marshal and the planetographer hastened back with the girl toward the big domed city.

Once inside the transparent dome of Tartarus, they seemed in another world. Outside, the ferocious blizzard might scourge the night, but in here the air was balmy and warm in the lighted streets, the great atomic air-conditioners functioning perfectly.

"We'll get to headquarters and get every man I've got out looking for Victor Krim." Ezra Gurney was saying.

"While you're doing that, I'll look for Krim myself," Cole Romer said, his scholarly face thoughtful. "I've an idea where he may be, if he's not returned to Charon."

"If you find him, call us," asked the old marshal as the planetographer parted from them.

As Ezra and Joan went through the lighted streets and parks of exotic interplanetary vegetation, they saw little knots of Earthmen colonists talking anxiously on every corner. And one name came to their ears. over and over again.

"Doctor Zarro!"

Ezra's weatherbeaten face tightened.

"People here are gettin' more and more scared about that dark star, same as all over the System," he muttered. "And Doctor Zarro's broadcasts ain't calmin' their fears any."

Joan Randall's pretty face flashed with vivid indig-

nation.

"They must be crazy! While Captain Future is fighting to smash Doctor Zarro's plot, they're helping the plotter!"

The old marshal glanced at her. "You think quite a bit of Captain Future, don't you?" he asked shrewdly.

Joan flushed, "Yes, I do."

"Well, so do I," smiled the old interplanetary veteran.

They reached the two-story cement structure that was division headquarters of the Planet Police. Ezra Gurney snapped orders to the trim-uniformed officers.

"I want to know if Victor Krim's gone back to Charon," the old man crackled, "and if he hasn't, I want him brought in here. Get goin'!"

When the officers had gone, the old marshal settled back into a chair with a sigh.

"Not as young as I used to be," he complained. "Get tired a lot easier. Time was, forty years ago, when I was a young man and the interplanetary frontiers were new, that nothin' tired me. Now I'm just a poor, weak old man ready for the retirement list."

Joan Randall forgot her anxiety long enough to laugh at him.

"You're just looking for sympathy," she accused. "Twenty years from now, you'll be laying down the law in some planetary boom-town, and enjoying it."

"You're a hard, unfeelin' young woman," grunted Ezra. "And you haven't got the proper respect for your elders."

IN a quarter-hour, the televisior on the desk buzzed suddenly.

"One of the boys may have located Krim," Ezra said hopefully, quickly switching on the instrument.

But it was Cole Romer's serious, scholarly face, highly excited now, that showed in the televisior-screen.

"Marshal, I've found out where Victor Krim is!" the planetographer cried. "You won't believe it, but —"

A flash of fire crossed the screen, and then it went black. The connection had been broken.

Ezra leaped to his feet with a swiftness that belied his recent complaints of age. His faded blue eyes were wide.

"Something's happened to Romer!" he exclaimed. "You saw that flash? It looked like the flash of an atom-gun!"

The old marshal sprang toward the door. "You stay here, Joan. I'm goin' out and get the men organized into a dragnet. First we'll post guards at the doors of the city-dome, so Krim can't get out of Tartarus if he's still here."

Left alone in the office, a sudden memory came to Joan. Cole Romer had said, in answer to a question of Curt Newton's that Victor Krim, if he were in the city, might be in the fur-hunters' quarter.

That quarter must be where Romer had gone in search of Krim, then. She was sure of it. And that must be where Romer had met with disaster in his search.

Joan wasted no further time in speculation. Time might be all-important. She would search in that part of the city herself.

She hurried out of the Planet Police building and started through the streets and parks toward the western part of the city. There lay the noisy, brightly lighted streets that Curt Newton had told here was the hunters' quarter.

She stopped an Earthman coming along the street.

"Is this the way to the Street of the Hunters?" she asked.

He stared at her. "Yes, it is. But that's a pretty rough neighborhood for a girl, miss."

Joan hurried on unmindfully. An uproar came vaguely to her ears from ahead. She passed dark fur and mineral warehouses, and turned suddenly into the blazing Street of the Hunters.

It was an uproarious place. The rest of the city, the rest of the whole System, might be obsessed by growing dread of colossal catastrophe, but dark stars and warnings of doom meant little to the wild hunters who made this place their mecca, and squandered here the money earned by weeks of toil and hardship.

The street was lined thickly with blazingly illuminated drinking shops, taverns and gambling halls, typical of all planetary frontier towns. Two hunters, one a big, bearded Earthman and the other a red, solemn-faced Martian, stopped in front of Joan. A strong fragrance of some potent planetary liquor came from them.

"You're the prettiest girl I ever saw in the Street of Hunters," declared the big Earthman. "Want to go dancin'?"

"No, no," Joan said hurriedly. "I'm looking for someone."

**T**HE half-drunk Earthman stared at her. Then he removed his fur cap with a hasty gesture.

"Sorry, ma'am – I didn't know I was speakin' to a lady," he apologized. "Don't see many of 'em down here – and it's not a very good place for one to be, if you'll let me say so."

"I'm looking for Victor Krim, the fur-magnate," she said eagerly, "Are you one of his hunters?"

"Victor Krim's hunter?" echoed the big Earthman, "No, ma'am! I may be a little crazy, but I'm not crazy enough to sign up to hunt on that devil's moon of Krim's!"

"Nor me either," declared the Martian. "It's bad enough on Pluto here, with the ice-bears and the ice-cats and the Biburs, but Charon – why, those hellish korlats on Charon – will kill a hunter before he can see them."

"Are any of Krim's hunters here now?" Joan asked them, looking anxiously along the crowded street.

The bearded Earthman shook his head. "Krim's men never come to Pluto, except a few that come with him to bring his shiploads of furs. Matter of fact, the rest of us boys can't figure what kind of men he's got, that are crazy enough to stay out there on Charon."

Joan felt a hand tugging her sleeve. She recoiled with a little cry as she saw that it was one of the hairy, phosphorescent-eyed Plutonians who stood at her side.

"Let the lady alone. you monkey, or I'll boot you clear through the wall of Tartarus!" threatened the Earthman.

"This Earthgirl knows me!" claimed the Plutonian in broken Earth speech. He asked Joan anxiously, "You remember me – I Tharb, the guide – I take red-haired man out to my grandfather."

"Of course, I remember you now!" Joan exclaimed. She told the two hunters: "It's all right – I know this Plutonian."

"Well, if you need any help, you just yell, lady," drawled the big hunter.

And with a grandiloquent, drunken bow, the brawny hunter and his Martian companion passed on down the street.

Tharb the Plutonian was eyeing Joan with an eager expression.

"Is red-haired Earthman here?" he asked. "He is great man – he save Tharb's life when Marching Mountains nearly kill us."

Joan perceived that Captain Future had inspired in this Plutonian the same hero-worship that the indomitable red-haired adventurer had aroused in many others.

"He is not here," she told Tharb, "but he and I need help, Perhaps you can help us, Tharb."

"I do anything to help red-haired man," Tharb vowed.

"You know Victor Krim?" Joan asked quickly. "Have you seen him down here tonight?"

"No see Krim," Tharb replied. "Maybe he go back to Charon. Bad place, Charon – many korlats and other terrible beasts."

Joan began to feel utterly baffled. But a new line of search occurred to her.

"Have you seen Cole Romer, the planetographer?" she asked. "I know he found Krim down here tonight. Do you know him?"

Tharb bobbed his strange hairy head. "Tharb knows Romer – guide some exploring expeditions for him, long time ago. And I see Romer here, little time ago."

"Where did you see him?" Joan asked eagerly.

Tharb pointed a black, hairy arm down the street.

"He going to door of old warehouse down in next street."

"Take me there," the girl begged immediately, and

Tharb at once led the way.

Many in the rowdy throng looked curiously at the pretty Earthgirl and the hulking, hairy Plutonian as they passed.

Joan felt a little encouraged. Cole Romer had found Krim, she knew, from Romer's interrupted television can. And if she could follow the planetographer's trail – "Will red-haired man need Tharb for guide again?" the big Plutonian was asking hopefully.

"Perhaps he will." Joan answered.

"I go anywhere with him," Tharb declared. "I like him much – all my people like him much."

Tharb pointed at a tall, dark cement structure.

"I see Cole Romer going to door of that place," he asserted.

Joan looked at the place doubtfully. There seemed no sign of life about, and there was no sign over the door.

But a few doors down the street was a warehouse that bore the sign: "Charon Fur Company – Victor Krim, President."

"I'm going to have a look inside," she said, starting toward the door of the dark, silent place opposite her.

Tharb followed her wonderingly. She tried the big door – to her surprise, it was unlocked. She and the Plutonian stepped inside, into a dark, musty-smelling interior.

Joan flashed a tiny beam from her ring-lamp. It showed a huge cement room, with nothing in it but some molded bales of old bibur-furs. There was no sign of recent occupancy.

"I'm afraid you were wrong, Tharb, when –" she started to say. The Plutonian abruptly interrupted.

"Listen! Something alive inhere!" he exclaimed.

Then Joan heard it, a queer, rustling, sliding, sound that was vaguely familiar, and that chilled her blood.

She recoiled a few steps, then uttered a cry of terror. A cold, snake-like thing had suddenly whipped around her ankles. At the same moment, Tharb uttered a yell.

Joan frantically flashed her light downward. A dozen pink snaky shapes were wriggling toward them from behind one of the moldering piles of furs. Two of them had already coiled quickly around her legs and others were leaping up at her upper body.

"Rope-snakes!" she cried. "Doctor Zarro's men are here – get away, Tharb!"

The Plutonian, tearing away the living bonds that had partly whipped around him, started toward the door.

A blast of atomic fire crackled down the dark room from behind the piles of furs, and hit Tharb's back. The Plutonian collapsed, a big hole burned between his hairy shoulders.

**O**UT from behind the piled furs men came running. Earthmen who wore the black disk of the Legion

of Doom. The seamed-faced dwarf, Roj, and the giant Kallak, were at their head. Joan recognized the two as she fell to the floor, hopelessly pinioned by the rope-snakes.

"Quick, take her below!" snapped Roj to the stupid giant. "The Plutonian is done for."

"You killed him – he second you've killed!" accused one of the Legion men. "There was to be no killing, Roj!"

"I had to do it – he'd have got out and given the alarm!" retorted the dwarf viciously. "Come on – down below with her."

Joan, half dazed by the suddenness and unexpectedness of her capture, felt herself carried behind the bales of furs toward a concealed trapdoor.

She glimpsed, in a corner, a human body charred to a horrible, unrecognizable mass by atom-guns. Remembering Cole Romer's interrupted television can for help, she shuddered.

Beneath the trapdoor was a lighted room hollowed out of the rock. Joan's eyes flew to a tall, gaunt black figure with bulging, hairless skull and burning black eyes – Doctor Zarro.

On a table beside the arch-plotter rested the transparent serum-case of the Brain. Joan was tossed to the floor nearby.

"It's that girl Police agent!" Roj cried to the black prophet. "She and a Plutonian were snooping above."

Joan, held by the repulsive living bonds, cried to the Brain nearby, while Roj was making report to his master.

"Simon, how long have you been here?" she cried.

"Since Doctor Zarro and his men kidnapped me from the observatory," answered the Brain. "They brought me in here through a tunnel under the city wall. The Legionaries held me here, while Doctor Zarro left for a time – the Doctor only came back here a short time ago."

"Cole Romer must have tracked down this place," she cried. She told of the planetographer's interrupted call, "And there's a horrible dead body above –"

"It must be Romer's, then," the Brain rasped. "I heard the voices of Romer and Victor Krim shouting in the upper room, and then atom-guns firing, just before Doctor Zarro came back down here."

"That must have been when Romer was killed!" cried Joan. "He said in his call that he'd found Victor Krim – then there was an atom-gun flash and his television went dead."

Joan told the Brain of the attempt made to kill Captain Future by attacking and forcing down his rocket flier.

"I understand," rasped Simon. "This is Doctor Zarro's secret Tartarus hideout. He sent out Roj and Kallak alone in a cruiser to ambush Curt's flier. And the Doctor himself and some of his Legionaries went out

through the secret tunnel to raid the observatory."

While Joan and the Brain talked, one of the Legionaries was complaining loudly to Doctor Zarro.

"Roj killed the Plutonian," the Legionary was accusing. "You said there would be no killing, but two have been killed."

"I had to do it," the dwarf muttered venomously.

"There will be no more such deaths," Doctor Zarro assured the Legionaries, almost placatingly. Then the dark leader continued quickly. "It is time for us to get out of here, before others discover us. There is no more reason for staying. Go out through the tunnel and see if the way to the ship is all clear."

WHEN they had gone, Doctor Zarro turned toward Roj and Kallak with an air of suppressed fury in his bearing.

"Why did you kill that Plutonian?" he demanded harshly of the dwarf. "You know my orders."

"He was going to get away – I had to blast him down," retorted Roj sullenly.

"You are a clumsy bungler!" stormed the Doctor. "You bungled the abduction of Kansu Kane and Gatola, and let Captain Future save them both. When I sent you and Kallak in the ship to kill Future without the Legion knowing, you bungled that too."

"I was sure we'd succeeded, when I saw Captain Future's flier crash in front of the Marching Mountains," defended the dwarf. "How was I to know that the red-headed devil would escape?"

"You should have made sure! Now we're going to get out of here and get back to headquarters. It's time for the last broadcast – the one that will finish the business."

Roj's seamed face lighted up with evil eagerness.

"You're going to make the last broadcast? Then in less than two days, you'll be master of the System! You've got the people of all nine worlds shouting for you now."

"They'll not only shout – they'll force the System Government to yield authority to me, when they've heard me again!"

A Legionary came hurrying back out of the tunnel.

"Way's clear to the ship," he reported.

"Come on, then," Doctor Zarro snapped. "Kallak, you carry the girl, and you take the Brain, Roj. We've got to get back to the moon, at once."

"The moon?" whispered Joan to the Brain. "Then their base is on one of the moons. And it must be –"

She was picked up suddenly by the heavy-faced, vacant-eyed giant, Kallak. Roj had snatched the handle of the Brain's serum-case. They followed Doctor Doom's tall, gaunt figure into the rock tunnel, the Legionary lighting their way with a small atom-lamp.

The tunnel was so cramped and narrow that Kallak had to bend his head. It had been blasted out of the sol-

id rock under the city by atomic blasts, apparently a long time ago.

"Fur-thieves opened this secret tunnel, years ago, in case you're interested, my dear Brain," Roj was saying gibingly. "The Doctor found it, and kept quiet about it. It serves us well."

The tunnel ended in a flight of steps upward. They emerged into the freezing, bitter night, on the rock plain far out beyond the wall of domed Tartarus. The blizzard was over. The stars shone brilliantly.

A dark cruiser with the black disk of the Legion of Doom on its bows was waiting here. The brain and the pinioned girl were carried inside and flung into a corner of the main cabin. A moment after the door slammed, they felt the cruiser lift skyward with a roar of rocket-tubes.

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## CHAPTER XIV

### *Cobalt Clue*

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CAPTAIN FUTURE, when he heard the cry of "Death to Captain Future" ring out, realized in a flash that it was not mere chance that had unleashed this mutiny at this time. Someone had released the convicts, someone had told them he was here in the offices.

"Rundall Lane!" he gritted.

He dashed to the door and locked it, slammed shut the heavy metal shutters inside the windows.

Hardly had he done so when the mob of prisoners reached the door and began hammering furiously upon it.

"You might as well come out and take your medicine, Captain Future!" yelled the hoarse voice of a leader.

Curt snatched out his pocket television and pressed its call-button. Otho and Grag could get here in a few moments in the *Comet*, and scatter this mob with the ship's proton-guns.

But there was no answer to his call. Then he realized it was not getting through. All prisons were constructed with a rayproof layer inside all walls. He couldn't call Grag and Otho.

Coolly, the red-haired adventurer considered the possibilities of getting out of this murderous trap, paying no attention to the bloodthirsty mob hammering at the door.

Curt thought of using his invisibility device, and then rejected it. Invisible or not, he couldn't get out through that solid, murderous throng without being discovered.

He could hear them blasting at the door now with their atom-guns. They'd be inside in a few minutes. He had to act quickly. Yet how?

His keen eyes, running around the interior of three



rooms that comprised the warden's offices, lit upon a low, heavy metal door in one wall. It was marked "Arsenal."

A desperate expedient came to Captain Future's racing mind. Down in that arsenal of the prison would be stored many cases of atom-shells, guns and atomic bombs. If he could get to them –

He sprang to the door. It was locked, of course. And it was of impregnable "inert" metal that would defy any atom-blast.

Curt examined the lock. It was a "permutation lock" – one especially devised by mathematicians to defy picking. There were twenty little buttons, in four color-groups. They had to be pressed in a certain numerical and color-order, to open the lock. There were millions of possible permutations, only one of which was right.

Yet Captain Future did not despair. He had delved deeper into mathematical knowledge than any of the scientists who had made this lock. If he had time to get necessary data, he might be able to solve the secret of the lock.

He snatched a piece of thin metal from his belt, a tiny steelite saw blade. Bending it double, he tapped it against the lock. It acted as an improvised tuning-fork, sending steady waves of sound into the lock, which were reflected back again.

Curt listened, shutting resolutely from his ears the distant howling of the bloodthirsty mob outside. He jotted down a few figures. Then he tapped a different part of the lock with his tuning fork, listened, and again jotted down figures.

In a few moments he had fathomed the construction of part of the intricate lock. He must discover the rest of the lock-secret by mathematical extrapolation from his scant data. It was a problem that would have daunted the most brilliant mathematician. Could he solve it in time?

**R**OARING atom-guns outside were blasting away at the door. It might give way at any moment. Yet Captain Future, hunched by the arsenal door, computed with icy coolness.

The door gave way partly. There was a hoarse howl from the leader of the mutinous convicts.

"All together, boys – it'll go down now!"

Curt sprang to his feet, his gray eyes flashing. At last he had found the permutation he sought.

He pressed the twenty buttons swiftly, in a complicated series. He waited, with utter faith in his result. In a second, the lock clicked.

He tore open the arsenal door. Cement steps led down from it into an underground chamber in which were stacked cases of atom-shells and atomic bombs, and racks of guns.

Crash! The outer door went down. And the blood-mad convicts, led by the fat, gross-faced Earthman,

rushed in.

They stopped short, frozen momentarily by the unexpected sight that met their eyes. Captain Future stood, his tall, lithe form lounging at the open arsenal door, his curly red head cocked back as he surveyed them with a cool, scornful smile.

His proton-pistol hung in his hand, not pointing at them but aimed down the stairs into the arsenal.

The fat Earthman who led the convicts uttered a hoarse, exultant shout.

"That's him, boys – that's Captain Future! And nobody kills him but me, you hear!"

"Go ahead, Lucas!" cried the vicious throng behind him. "Blast him down!"

The fat Earthman advanced a step. His atom-gun was ready in his hand. Yet Curt did not raise his own pistol.

"Do you remember me, Captain Future?" hissed the obese convict.

"Of course I remember you." Curt Newton's drawl was cold as the winds of Pluto. "You're Lucas Brewer, who was mixed up in the Space Emperor case on Jupiter. You were given a sentence here for running atom-guns to the Jovians."

"You were the one that had me sent here, Captain Future!" hissed Brewer. "Have you got any last words before we finish you?"

Curt's voice cut like a whiplash as he answered.

"I've got my pistol aimed down into the arsenal. If I fire, it will set off a ton of atomic bombs and shells down there. It will blow this building and the whole Interplanetary Prison clear off of Cerberus!"

Brewer and the other convicts, staring beyond Captain Future down into the arsenal, suddenly gasped.

"We'll all go up together," Curt mocked. "What do you say to that, Brewer?"

"You wouldn't do it!" gasped the fat criminal.

"I would, and you know it," Curt flashed. "I'd do anything rather than see a bunch of wolves like you turned loose upon the System again. Unless you drop your weapons in ten seconds, I'll fire that shot."

There was silence, a tense, frozen silence. The cold gray eyes of Captain Future clashed the dazed ones of the convicts.

**I**T was a test of nerve. And Curt won. For every man there knew, as all the System knew, that Captain Future never broke his word. He had said he would fire, and they knew he would.

The weapons of the mutineers clattered to the floor. A tight band seemed to relax from across Curt's breast. He had known that he was taking desperate chances, but he had resolved not to let these enemies of society escape.

"Call the guards!" he ordered. "Shout to them that you surrender!"

The cowed prisoners made no resistance as the guards herded them back into the main cellhouse. Only then did Curt Newton relax his tension.

"A cursed ticklish ten minutes, that," he muttered to himself. Then his tanned face hardened. "Now for Mr. Lane."

He went out searching, and found Rundall Lane lurking in a dark corner in one of the corridors of the big cellhouse.

"Come on out, Lane," Captain Future said stingingly. "Your little plot to stop me by letting the prisoners out on me has failed."

Lane babbled protestations of innocence, but Curt cut him off.

"You're relieved of office here – I'll call Planet Police headquarters to send a temporary warden out. Unless you want to draw a long stay here as a prisoner, you'd better talk truthfully."

Rundall Lane seemed broken in nerve. "What – what do you want to know?"

"I want to know what really happened to the prisoners you said escaped," Curt rapped.

"I released them," Lane confessed. "I did it at night, secretly – there was a ship waiting to take them to Charon."

"To Charon? To Victor Krim?" Curt pressed.

Lane nodded shakily. "Yes, Krim had made an arrangement with me. You see, Krim needed hunters but couldn't get any men, because Charon is so dangerous, no ordinary hunter would sign on for there. So Krim offered to pay me a big sum if I'd let out a bunch of prisoners who would rather hunt for him than stay confined."

"There didn't seem any danger of discovery," Lane added, "for the men wouldn't dare leave Charon or show themselves in Tartarus or elsewhere, lest they be caught. They would have to stay on Charon and hunt for Krim, and he wouldn't even have to pay them."

Captain Future stood a moment in deep thought. So that was how Roj and Kallak and the other prisoners had escaped.

He called in the guards, who had the prisoners locked up now, and addressed their chief officer crisply.

"Hold Rundall Lane under arrest – you're in charge until the Government sends out a new warden," he ordered.

Then Curt asked them: "You men know all Cerberus. Have you ever encountered a queer, furred race living secretly here?"

He described the Magician, but the guards shook their heads wonderingly. None seemed ever to have heard of them.

"There's no race like that here, sir," they vowed.

Curt accepted their assertion with reservations. He meant to find out for himself – by the cobalt clue!

HE hastened back out into the chill, windy night and strode rapidly across the rock plain to the distant *Comet*. When Grag and Otho heard of his experience, the android's green eyes blazed, and the big robot clenched his metal fist.

"I ought to go back there and kill Lane for his attempt on you, Master!"

"No time for that, Grag," said the red-haired adventurer. "Otho, did you catch one of those moon-lizards?"

"I did, and the devil of a job it was," Otho declared disgustedly. "To think of me chasing lizards while you were in there having a rousing time –"

"Why do you want the lizard, Master?" Grag asked puzzledly.

Captain Future had put the wriggling little thing under a spectroscopic X-ray instrument of his own invention.

"I want to find out if it has high cobalt content in its bones," he answered, bending to the eyepieces.

"The cobalt clue – I understand, Chief!" Otho exclaimed. "If the Magicians have so much cobalt in their skeletons, all life on the world they inhabit would have cobalt in its bones too!"

"Yes, but this lizard doesn't," Curt said frowningly, straightening from his examination. "That means the guards told the truth – that there's no such race as the Magicians on Cerberus!"

The android was staggered.

"But Rundall Lane is Doctor Zarro, isn't he? Doesn't the smear of nitrate that came from here prove that?"

Curt shook his head. "It proves that Lane is not Doctor Zarro. I had guessed that before we came here."

"I don't understand!" Otho exclaimed.

"That smear in the observatory was left purposely by Doctor Zarro, to mislead us into thinking he came from Cerberus," Curt explained. "Remember that Doctor Zarro was wearing a space suit when he entered the observatory, to protect him from the drugging gas. It was the shoe of his space suit that left the smear, then. But how could he have got that smear on his shoe here? He wouldn't have been wearing his space suit here on Cerberus, which has an atmosphere."

"Of course, I see now it was a plant!" Otho exclaimed dumfoundedly. "But if the cobalt clue shows that the Magicians don't live on Cerberus, their home must be on Charon!"

"That's the way it looks now," Curt replied.

"And if Lane turned Roj and Kallak over to Victor Krim, it's Krim who is Doctor Zarro!" the android continued.

"We're going back to Pluto at once," clipped Captain Future. "Gurney and Joan may have found Krim there by now."

A scant hour later the flashing *Comet* tore down through the cold atmosphere of Pluto, and landed in the dusky dawn beside the domed city Tartarus. The bliz-

zard had blown itself out.

Curt led first to the observatory. "I want to see Kansu Kane a moment before we go into the city," he told them.

**K**ANSU KANE came hurrying to meet them. "You checked the positions of the fixed stars around the dark star as I asked?" Curt asked the little Venusian.

The answer of the waspish astronomer was astounding.

"Yes, I did. There hasn't been any displacement of those stars whatever!"

"There hasn't!" Curt's tanned face took on a queer expression. "Then that settles one thing about this business beyond all dispute."

"Settles what, Master?" Grag asked puzzledly.

"Something tremendously important," Curt snapped, and led the two Futuremen out.

In Tartarus city, he hastened with his comrades to the Planet Police building.

Ezra Gurney jumped to his feet as Curt entered. The old marshal's weatherbeaten face was drawn and worn.

"Did you locate Victor Krim yet?" Curt shot at him.

"My men have combed the whole city and haven't found him – he must have gone back to Charon," Ezra declared. "And, Captain Future, Joan's gone – I think she went lookin' for Krim. And Cole Romer's been seized and probably killed."

"Romer killed?" Curt's eyes flashed. "How did that happen?"

Ezra Gurney explained. He was just finishing the explanation when excited Planet Policemen crowded into the room, carrying with them a limp, hairy Plutonian in whose back was a scorched, gaping wound.

"We found this Plutonian crawling in the street down off the Street of Hunters!" one officer cried. "It's Tharb, one of our own guides."

"Tharb?" Captain Future sprang to the side of the Plutonian. It was evident that the hairy man was dying. Yet at the sound of Curt's voice, he opened fading phosphorescent eyes.

"Who did this, Tharb?" cried Curt, the wild anger he felt throbbing in his voice.

"Doctor Zarro's – men." whispered the Plutonian. "They – seize Earthgirl and blast me down – in warehouse. They think me – dead – but I crawl out to street –"

"Then Doctor Zarro's got Joan, as well as the Brain!" cried Ezra. "We're going down and search those warehouses!"

"Look after Tharb, Grag!" Curt ordered the robot as he followed the old marshal hastily out to a waiting rocket-car.

The car hummed through the dusky dawn of the streets, almost deserted at this hour. The Police driver drew up in front of the warehouse near which Tharb

had been found.

"Victor Krim's company leased this old place not long ago, sir," the officer reported.

They hastened inside. In a moment they found the charred thing in the corner that had once been a living Earthman.

Curt inspected the horribly blasted body closely. He was looking for something, but could not find what he sought.

"All that's left of Cole Romer!" gritted Ezra. "Poor devil – he was looking for Krim, and he found him."

Captain Future's eyes roved, then spied the trapdoor. In a moment he was down through it to the rock room below.

**H**E came back, his tanned face grim. "There's a tunnel leading out under the whole city. But there's no one there now."

"Doctor Zarro has taken Joan and the Brain to his base, then!" Ezra cried. "And if Krim's the Doctor, then at Charon –"

They hastened back to the Police building. Grag was there, bending over Tharb. The robot said solemnly: "He is dying."

Tharb's fading, grotesque eyes clung to the face of Captain Future.

"I – liked you – Earthman," the Plutonian whispered.

Then his eyes dimmed as death relaxed his body. Captain Future felt a deep, moving emotion as he looked down at him.

He turned to Ezra Gurney. "Where can I get full data about the moons?"

"In the Pluto Survey office, I suppose," Ezra answered. "Of course with Romer, the chief planetographer, gone –"

A startled cry came from one of the Police officers who had been making a televisor call.

"I was calling Elysia headquarters when they were crowded off the ether," the man cried. "It's another broadcast by Doctor Zarro!"

Captain Future sprang to the televisor. In its screen had appeared once more the tall, black figure of the prophet of disaster, his hollow, burning eyes blazing out at all in the System as his powerful wave crowded onto their televisors.

"People of the Solar System, this is your last chance to save yourselves!" thundered Doctor Zarro. "Look up at the Milky Way and see for yourselves how catastrophe is rushing upon you. The fateful sands of destiny are running out fast – the monstrous dark star approaching us from outer space is now so close to the System that it will require herculean efforts for even my knowledge and power to project the forces that will turn it aside.

"That catastrophic visitant can still be turned aside

by the forces I can bring to bear upon it, if the resources of the whole System are placed at once at my disposal. But there is only just time. A day or two more will be too late! Not even I can then save the nine worlds from cosmic wreck!

"So you must act at once, to save your lives. The scientists who claimed there was no danger have fled from the System to save their lives. The Government, which claims there is no danger, is doing nothing to avert it. Unless you rise and force that Government to give me the authority that will save us in this fateful hour, you and your families, and your peoples, and perhaps all of your worlds, are doomed!"

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## CHAPTER XV

### *Monster Trap*

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**D**OCTOR ZARRO disappeared from the televisor as suddenly as he had appeared. Ezra Gurney uttered a cry.

"Doctor Doom's done it this time! That warning, on top of all that's gone before, will set the System peoples crazy! The Government won't stand for twenty-four hours now!"

"Grag! Otho! Come on!" Captain Future crackled. "I'm going to the Pluto Survey office to get the data about the moons which I want. And then we're blasting off – for Charon."

In the Pluto Survey offices, in files and cabinets, was assembled all the planetographic and scientific information which Cole Romer and his men had gathered in ten years of exploring expeditions. Curt hauled out the material on Charon, the second moon. Cole Romer, the record showed, had made two exploring trips there alone – in the second trip, in the preceding year, the planetographer had spent three months exploring that wild world.

Krim had leased the whole moon Charon from the System Government some few years back. There were records that showed that Krim had shipped a fairly large amount of valuable korlat furs in those two years, and also a number of living korlats to the zoos of other planets. But there was little more that Curt could learn.

"What are we poking around here for?" Otho was demanding, restlessly pacing the office. "Why don't we head right for Charon and seize Krim, if he's Doctor Zarro?"

"Yes, there's no telling what may have happened to the Brain," said Grag anxiously.

Captain Future's thoughts reflected the anxiety of the robot. His worry about the safety of Simon Wright was as overwhelming as that of the two Futuremen.

"We're going now," Curt rapped. Then as he turned from putting away the files, he asked hastily: "What's

that uproar?"

"There's a big crowd gathering over there in the park in front of the Colonial Government building," Otho reported from the window.

Curt stopped for a moment, looking at the amazing scene. as he and the two Futuremen left the building.

The park, in the distance, was crowded by a great throng. Most were men and women colonists from Earth, but there was a scattering of hairy Plutonians and other planetary natives.

The crowd was surging heedlessly over the green lawns and exotic interplanetary vegetation of the park. Its focus of attention was the big Colonial Government building.

"We call on the System Government to abdicate at once to Doctor Zarro!" a big Earthman leader was shouting.

A roar of approval went up from the milling throng, a shout that had in it the quality of hysteria.

"Give power to Doctor Zarro before it's too late!" men and women cried. And others yelled, "Where's the Governor? He's got to petition the President to yield power to the Doctor!"

"Doctor Zarro's last broadcast is working," Curt said between his teeth. "Crowds like this will be swarming in every world and city in the System, right now!"

**H**E saw Ezra Gurney and a half dozen Planet Police hasten from the nearby Police building, and run to hold back the crowd. The old marshal stepped up on the terrace and held up his clawlike hand to quiet the crowd.

"There's not a bit of use in your yellin' for the Governor, for he's in Elysia, a thousand miles away," coolly drawled the grizzled interplanetary veteran.

"Then we'll take over the government here ourselves, and tender authority to Doctor Zarro!" yelled the crowd leader.

"You won't do it while I am here," crackled Ezra, his piercing blue eyes sweeping them, his gnarled hand dropping to the butt of his atom-gun. "You're acting like children, letting yourselves be scared by Doctor Zarro's fake warnings."

"They're not fakes!" yelled the crowd. "We can see that dark star coming on! The Doctor's the only one who can turn it aside!"

Yet the crowd did not yet dare to advance against the threatening guns of Ezra and his officers.

"Shall we help Ezra scatter that mob?" Otho hissed to Captain Future.

"No! We've got work to do, and Ezra can keep them under control a little longer," Curt replied. "To the *Comet!*"

As he and the two Futuremen hurried out through the streets of Tartarus, which had been emptied by the converging of the panicky population toward the cen-

tral park, Curt looked up through the great dome at the dusky, starry daylight sky.

There, low on the horizon, swung the glittering constellation Sagittarius, and amid its star-clouds the little black disk of the dark star was perceptibly larger. So fatefully large it looked that Curt wondered if his idea was not wrong.

"No — it must be the answer to the riddle!" he told himself fiercely. "Crazy as it seems, the non-displacement of the stars around that dark star is clinching proof!"

They emerged from the balmy warmth of Tartarus into the icy chill of the Plutonian day, and hurried to the *Comet*.

Little Eek woke from the sleep in which the moon-pup had been curled, and joyously scrambled up to his usual perch on Grag's shoulder as they entered. Otho jumped to the controls.

"Straight for Charon!" Captain Future ordered.

"Now we're getting somewhere!" exulted the fiercely eager android as he started the cyclotrons.

After more than an hour's flight, Charon filled an space ahead, a great gray globe into whose thin atmosphere the little ship was now tearing.

They rushed down on a long slant through the dusk of the moon's daylight side. Then Otho checked the *Comet's* descent a thousand yards from the surface.

"It's a wild-looking little world, all right," the android declared.

"It reminds me of the great plains of Saturn," Grag boomed, bis photo-electric eye staring. "Except it looks colder."

**Y**ET there was life here. Herds of grazing Charonian deer galloped off wildly as the ship passed above them. They were big, gray animals, with the usual six legs — it was the unique characteristic of Charonian fauna that it was almost wholly sextupedal. Beside the deer were smaller sextupedal, tusked beasts.

"Moon-hogs," muttered Otho, "I don't see any korlats, though."

"Bear northwestward," Curt Newton ordered the android. "According to the maps in Cole Romer's office, Krim's fur-post is located a few hundred miles south of the north pole."

Otho sent the *Comet* racing low across the gray tundras of the cold, forbidding moon. More of the Charonian deer, terrified by the speeding ship, darted wildly away below.

"There's a korlat!" Grag exclaimed. All three of them peered down at the great animal, as they sped above it.

The korlat, ferocious beast as renowned throughout the System as the Jovian "crawler" or the Uranian cave-tiger, looked not unlike the grizzlies of Earth, except that it was much larger, had long gray fur, and pos-

sessed the six legs characteristic of Charonian life. The front pair of limbs were used to grip and tear.

The beast raised its enormous head and snarled at the passing *Comet*, showing great fangs.

"No wonder Victor Krim had to get his hunters from Interplanetary Prison!" Otho exclaimed. "No ordinary hunter would want to trifle with beasts like that."

A little later Curt saw a low structure on the tundra far ahead.

"That's Krim's post! Land just outside it, Otho."

"I don't see any ships here," Otho muttered as he swept the *Comet* to a landing. "Yet Krim must be here somewhere."

Curt gave the android orders when they landed.

"While Grag and I are in there, Otho, I want you to hunt down a moon-hog for me, so that I can give it the cobalt test."

"First I'm a lizard-chaser and now I'm a hog-hunter!" complained Otho loudly. "Why not have Grag do it?"

"Master and I have more important work to do," the big robot retorted patronizingly.

Curt exploded. "Will you two prima-donnas drop it? Do as I say, Otho, and instantly."

"All right," grumbled Otho. "But be careful in there Chief. Remember, Krim's hunters are all escaped prisoners."

Curt and the robot strode toward the gate of the walled post, Eek clinging to Grag's shoulder and staring about this new scene with bright, curious eyes.

The air was thin and cold, but not so cold as on Pluto. For Charon, like the other two moons, possessed a greater store of interior radioactive heat than its parent planet.

The gate in the wall was open. Curt and the robot went, through, and then unceremoniously entered the main cement building, walking into a big room littered with piles of furs.

A half-dozen men — a Jovian, two Martians and three Earthmen — leaped up startledly and grabbed for their atom-guns as the big, red-haired young man and the huge robot entered.

"Hands off those guns!" Curt rapped, his own proton-pistol in his hand. "Grag, break those weapons."

The robot instantly obeyed, grasping the heavy hunting atom-guns and breaking them with one motion of bis metal hands.

"Now," Curt Newton said harshly, "where is Victor Krim?"

**T**HE green, flipper-handed Jovian had been staring at the big "planet" ring on Curt's hand. Now the man looked up at the red-haired adventurer's tanned, hard face in sudden fear.

"Captain Future!" he exclaimed.

"You've guessed right," Curt retorted, his gray eyes

boring the Jovian's scared green face. "Where is Krim?"

"He's – he's in his office," answered the Jovian. "This way."

The Jovian led Curt and Grag to a door. Without opening the door, he called through it.

"Mr. Krim, here's Captain Future to see you!"

Curt and Grag strode through the door. They were amazed to find themselves, not in an office, but in a cement-walled court or pen whose roof was a grating of heavy metal bars.

Curt whirled instantly. But too late. The door had slammed shut behind them, its lock clicking.

"A trap, and I walked right into it!" Captain Future exclaimed disgustedly. "But this won't do those fools any good. Break that door down, Grag."

Grag put his little moon-pup pet aside and put his shoulder against the door. Little Eek, set down on the floor, began to scramble fearfully to his master again, his eyes panicky.

"Eek senses danger telepathically," Curt rapped, his bronzed face tightening. "I wonder – Grag!"

Curt's yell of warning came as a section of wall at the other side of the court suddenly slid upward.

Out of the cage or room beyond that opening a huge, furry gray bulk was shambling forth into the court – a towering six-limbed monster.

"Devils of space, a korlat!" Curt shouted. "So that's their game –"

He realized instantly the nature of the trap. This beast was one of the korlats captured alive by Krim's men, to be shipped to some planetary zoo for a great price. Now it had been let loose in here to destroy them.

The korlat's great head stiffened as its big, pupil-less eyes glimpsed the man and robot. With an appalling roar that shook the building, the beast charged them.

Curt's proton-gun spat a thin, pale beam of highest power. He saw the ray bum deep into the huge beast's side. But it was not enough – no weapon in the System was enough – to knock down a charging korlat.

The furry monster came on, with incredible speed. Its two great front limbs grasped Curt and its jaws darted toward him, its hot breath and blazing eyes right in his face.

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## CHAPTER XVI

### *World of Illusion*

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CAPTAIN FUTURE ducked out of the korlat's grasping limbs by a movement of incredible agility, the monster's claws tearing the sleeve of his gray zipper suit. As he recoiled from the furry beast, Curt fired at it again with his pistol.

Again the thin proton-beam burned into the huge body, seeking a vital center. But the korlat, not fatally

injured, reared up with an enraged roar to leap again at Captain Future's tense, crouching figure.

Then Grag acted! The big robot sprang upon the furry back of the beast and grasped its neck from behind, encircling that massive neck with his metal arms, and straining it backward.

There followed an unbelievable scene. Big as was the great robot, he looked small in comparison to the mighty beast on whose back he clung. The korlat threshed and rolled and roared, seeking to dislodge its attacker. But Grag held on, exerting all his tremendous strength to jerk the beast's head backward.

Captain Future dared not fire at the struggling pair, lest he hit Grag and disablingly damage his mechanism. Eek was cowering nearby, his teeth chattering with fear. Then came the climax to the weird struggle.

Grag's metal body tensed as he put all his strength into one mighty effort. His arms jerked back the korlat's head still farther. There was an audible snap. And the great furry beast went limp, its neck broken.

Grag stood swaying over his dead conquest, his photo-electric eyes blazing, a booming roar of victory breaking from him.

Nothing else was said. But as the strange eyes of the robot and the brilliant gray eyes of the red-haired Earthman met, another link was forged in the chain that bound Captain Future to the Futuremen – the chain which had begun on that long-dead day on Earth's moon when Curtis Newton, an orphaned infant, had looked up with trustful baby eyes at the robot and android and Brain who were to rear him to splendid manhood.

Curt sprang to the locked door of the trap into which they had come and which had so nearly proved deadly.

"See if you can get this open, Grag," he asked. "Use your chisels."

The robot obeyed, taking from a little locker in his metal torso several sharp chisels. He removed several of his detachable fingers and inserted the chisels in their place.

Then Grag, with his chisel-armed hands, attacked the cement around the door frame. In a few moments he had chipped an opening through it, and could reach through and unhook the lock.

Captain Future dashed out into the big room of Victor Krim's post. The half-dozen hunters there were now fleeing in dismay as they saw their trap had failed.

"Stop! Come back here!" Curt ordered, firing his beam over their heads.

FEARFULLY, the men obeyed. Captain Future's gray eyes bored into the face of the Jovian who had led them into the trap.

"You had: a neat little idea to murder me, but it failed," Curt said bitingly. "Now talk fast. Is Victor Krim on Charon?"

"No, he isn't," answered the scared Jovian. "He hasn't come back yet from Pluto."

"Who ordered you to try to kill me?" Curt lashed.

"Nobody ordered me," answered the cowed Jovian sullenly. "When I saw you were Captain Future, I thought you had come here to re-arrest me and the other hunters."

"Shut up!" one of the Martian hunters told the Jovian harshly. "He doesn't know about us."

"On the contrary, I know all about you," Curt answered stingingly. "You're escaped convicts from Interplanetary Prison – Rundall Lane, the warden there, let you go on condition you become Krim's hunters here. Where are all the others who escaped?"

Appalled by Captain Future's knowledge, the Jovian answered. "The rest are out hunting. We were to guard the post."

"The prisoners Roj and Kallak escaped at the same time as you other convicts, didn't they?" Curt pressed.

"They did, but Roj and Kallak disappeared soon after we reached this moon."

"How did you escape being detected as escaped prisoners by Cole Romer when he explored Charon last year?" Curt asked.

"Krim kept us out of the way during the week or so that Romer was here," the Jovian criminal replied.

Curt Newton considered the information, his face thoughtful. The pieces of the puzzle were beginning to take shape!

"I'm leaving here," he rapped, "but you convicts aren't going to get away. I see there's no ship here, so you'll be safe till Planet Police can come to return you an to Cerberus prison."

And Curt led the way out of the post, with Grag following in great strides, Eek perched again on his shoulder.

Otho was waiting in the *Comet*, and an unconscious moon-hog, stunned by a proton-beam, showed that the android had been busy.

"There's the moon-hog you wanted – what did you find out in there?" the synthetic man demanded.

"We nearly found out what it's like to be dead!" Captain Future said ruefully. "I was so busy thinking things out that I walked right into a trap like an absent-minded fool."

Otho swore when he heard their story. "And while I've been chasing moon-hogs, you were fighting a korlat!"

"Yes, and Grag killed it with his bare hands," Curt told him. The red-haired adventurer grinned at Otho. "No human could have done that. Remember that when you're taunting Grag about not being human."

Then, in the compact laboratory of the *Comet*, Curt began X-ray spectroscopic inspection of the stunned moon-hog.

"If the Magicians really do dwell in some secret part

of Charon," he muttered as he worked, "this animal and all native life here will have bones of high cobalt-content, the same as they."

"It will have – there's no doubt the Magicians are somewhere here on Charon," Otho declared confidently. "For we know it's on one of the moons their home is, and we ruled out Cerberus."

They turned to the machine.

**B**UT a shock awaited them. When Captain Future finished his X-ray inspection, he looked up with an exclamation.

"There's not a trace of cobalt in this animal! The Magicians can't have come from Charon, either!"

Otho was staggered. "But they must have! We know from what old Kiri the Plutonian said that they came from one of the moons. And if it wasn't Cerberus, it must be Charon –"

Curt Newton was not listening. The seeming failure of his cobalt clue had detonated a bombshell of knowledge in his brain.

Everything tied up together. And it all pointed to a fantastic but inescapable conclusion.

"We know that the Magicians live on one of the moons," he said slowly. "And the cobalt clue has proved that they don't live on Cerberus or Charon. But Pluto has three moons."

"You don't mean Styx?" Otho gasped. "But they couldn't live on Styx – nothing could! It's completely water-covered."

"Nevertheless, start the *Comet* up and head for Styx," Curt ordered.

"But it's crazy –" Otho started to protest further, when Grag interrupted with a stern command.

"Do as master says, Otho!"

With incredulity still strong in his eyes, Otho obeyed. Soon they were out in clear space again. Pluto bulked huge and white on their left. Straight ahead gleamed the bright third moon, Styx.

Curt felt vibrant excitement rising to a high pitch in him as they hurtled toward the third moon. He knew his reasoning was logical, yet it pointed to a conclusion that was unbelievable. He combed his mind for some way of testing his fantastic theory.

Then, remembering something, he took from a locker the crushed, shattered remnants of a small mechanism. It was the mechanism worn by the white-furred Magician who had been killed in the fall on Mars – the instrument which had enabled that strange being to masquerade somehow as an Earthman.

Curt had closely studied the shattered thing during the voyage out to Pluto. It was too badly shattered to be re-constructed even by the scientific wizard. But he had fathomed that it operated by projecting a field of force. How such a force-field could make the furred Magician look like an Earthman, he still could not see.

But now, studying the shattered remnants, of the thing in the compact laboratory of the flying *Comet*, Captain Future bent all his attention to discover just what frequencies of radiant force the mechanism had been designed to emit. With delicate electrical and magnetic instruments, with microscopic examination of the fragments, and most of all with his unparalleled mental powers, the young master of science labored on the problem.

The *Comet* hurtled on toward Styx, whose gleaming disk expanded slowly. Grag sat petting the moon-pup and looking ahead. Otho, at the throttles, was looking more and more skeptical as they neared the third moon. And back in the laboratory, Captain Future worked on, rapidly and deftly.

**A**T last Captain Future finished. He had constructed a small instrument designed to detect radiated force such as the shattered mechanism had emitted. His detector was so small he could thrust it into a pocket of his gray zipper suit.

"This ought to test my theory about Styx," he muttered. "If it's true, it explains everything."

"It's sheer waste of time to go to Styx," Otho declared as Curt came to his side. "We can't land there – no ship ever has landed on that moon, covered as it is by ocean from pole to pole."

"We'll see," Captain Future replied tightly, his nervous tension rising as they approached the third moon.

Styx, smaller than either Charon or Cerberus, expanded in the starry void ahead. It was known to have an atmosphere. The air whistled around the *Comet* as it cautiously descended.

A few hundred feet below them rolled the shoreless green sea that covered the whole surface of Styx. The big, dark waves of that unbroken ocean heaved skyward and bared teeth of white foam at the hovering little ship.

"Now what?" Otho demanded disgustedly. "We can't land here when there is no land. We've just wasted our time."

"We'll soon see if we have," Curt muttered.

He had taken from his pocket the little detector instrument which he had built. He turned on the watch-like thing.

Instantly a tiny red light flashed out on the detector. A signal that it was near a powerful force-field of a certain frequency.

"I knew it!" Captain Future declared, his gray eyes shining. "By heaven, I've solved it – an age old planetary mystery – the riddle of Doctor Zarro's secret base!"

"What are you talking about, Chief?" Otho demanded.

Captain Future was silent, trying to make up his mind. He knew he had penetrated the heart of the great plot against the System.

He felt that he could smash that plot, now and at once. But also, he felt that first his duty was to find and rescue the Brain. Tensely weighing alternatives, Curt came to a decision.

"Take the *Comet* down into that ocean, Otho," he directed.

"Down into the water?" cried Otho unbelievably. "But that's death! The currents and waves of that sea will hurl the *Comet* to destruction against some rock or shoal!"

"Oh, so you've lost faith in me, have you?" Captain Future grinned at the android.

Otho's green eyes flashed.

"You know I haven't, Chief! I'd steer into the Sun if you told me to, and you know it!"

And Otho determinedly opened the throttles and sent the little ship gliding down toward the seething, shoreless sea.

The android braced his rubbery body for the shock as the *Comet* dropped toward the raging waves. And Grag, looking inquiringly at Curt but saying nothing, also seemed a little uneasy.

The *Comet* plunged in a moment beneath the surface of the sea.

*And instantly that sea vanished from around them!* That great ocean abruptly disappeared, and they found themselves hovering in air a few hundred feet above solid land!

**T**HE transition was staggering. There was no water in sight now. Far away to the horizons in the dusky daylight, stretched a rolling landscape, blanketed by a thick forest of giant white club-mosses – a weird, unearthly jungle.

"Devils of space – what's happened?" yelled Otho. "We ought to be under water, and the water's all vanished!"

"What has become of the ocean into which we plunged, Master?" Grag asked wonderingly.

"There was no ocean," Captain Future declared.

"But we saw it!" Otho cried.

"What we saw was an illusion," Curt told him. "An illusion similar to that by which the Magician made himself look like an Earthman – an illusion somehow projected as a field of force."

And Curt explained quickly. "When I found that the Magicians didn't live on either Cerberus or Charon, that left only one place where they could live – Styx! Yet Styx had always been known to be completely sea-covered. I couldn't understand it.

"Then it occurred to me that the sea-covered appearance of Styx might be an illusion. I knew, from your experience on Mars, and from what old Kiri had told me, that these white-furred Magicians were masters of illusion. Suppose that they really dwelt on Styx and that the appearance of this moon as sea-covered was only an



illusion maintained by them – a super-camouflage of their world? I built the detector to see if that was so, and it showed me it was."

"But Styx has always looked ocean-covered, ever since the first exploring Earthmen reached Pluto!" Otho objected.

Curt nodded gravely. "Yes, and I have an idea that the coming of the Earthmen had something to do with the way the Magicians camouflaged their world. Remember what old Kiri said – after the Earthmen came, the Magicians were no longer seen on Pluto?"

They looked up. In the sky above them seemed stretched a wavering, semi-opaque curtain – the mysterious field of force that maintained the planetary illusion.

Then they looked down again, across the weird, silent forces of giant white mosses and grass that stretched far away in an unearthly vista.

"And to think that every Earth explorer, and space-traveler has been frightened away from this moon by a mere illusion!" burst Otho.

"Not every one," Captain Future declared meaningfully. "At least one Earthman penetrated this illusion."

"Victor Krim!" burst the android excitedly. "By all the gods of space, I see it now! Krim must be Doctor Zarro, but his base isn't on Charon at all – it's right here on Styx!"

Curt Newton was studying his ingenious detector, as the *Comet* throbbed low over the white jungle of mosses. He was taking successive directional readings, and then he rapidly computed.

"Head a little west of southward, Otho," he directed. "The force-field that maintains the illusion centers somewhere there, so there must be the Magicians' city – and the base of Doctor Zarro."

"And the Brain will be there too, then, Master?" asked Grag eagerly.

Curt nodded, his handsome face stern.

"That's my first objective here – to find and rescue Simon."

**T**HE *Comet* hummed southward above the weird white forest, while a common excitement and hope gripped the young scientific wizard and the two Futuremen.

"Stay very low, and keep the speed down," Curt ordered the android.

They had flown almost a half-hour when Captain Future's keen eyes descried a cluster of pale stone towers rising above the forest far ahead. The vague towers clustered around a lofty, slender metal column crowned by a large glowing globe.

"Down!" rapped Curt instantly. "We'll land here – we daren't go closer in the *Comet*."

Immediately Otho brought the little ship to rest among the towering mosses. Oppressive silence encom-

passed them.

"We'll reconnoiter that city on foot," Captain Future said rapidly, loosening his proton-pistol in its sheath. "I think it's safe to leave the *Comet* in this hidden spot without guard."

He was opening the door as he spoke. Cold, pungent air rushed in upon them.

Otho followed the tan red-haired adventurer out into the cold, dusky daylight. Grag followed, with Eek clinging to his shoulder.

"You're not going to take that moon-pup with us on a dangerous mission like this?" Otho demanded of the robot. "Leave him locked up in the ship."

"Eek is too frightened to be left alone – he has been scared ever since he saw that korlat on Charon," defended Grag.

Otho raved. "It isn't enough that the chief and I have to be hampered by a ton of walking machinery – we also have to drag along a moon-pup that gets staggering drunk every time it finds any precious metal, and that's scared of its own shadow!"

"Eek is as brave as anyone!" replied Grag indignantly. "He's just nervous when he's on these strange worlds."

"Nervous? I'll say that he's nervous!" Otho retorted. "He's so nervous that his teeth clatter together every time anything bigger than a Martian sand-flea comes near him!"

"Let Grag bring him, Otho," Captain Future said hastily. "If we left him in the ship, the little devil might try to eat his way out."

Curt and the two Futuremen started through the white forest toward the distant towers.

It was a ghostly forest. The enormous, pallid club-mosses around them loomed a dozen feet above their heads. A cold, sluggish wind whispered in their ears. A small, hairy white rodent darted across their path. There were no other sounds. Overhead stretched the semi-opaque curtain across the whole starred, dusky sky.

Eek, clinging to Grag's shoulder, craned his head down and bit off a branch of one of the bluish shrubs, which the moon-pup chewed with evident relish as they moved on.

"I never saw Eek eat any plants before," Grag said surprisedly in a low voice. "I thought he ate only metal or rock."

"That plant has a high cobalt-content," Captain Future pointed out. "See how the broken end of it glistens. The soil of this world Styx must be heavy with cobalt, and that proves that we've found the home of the Magicians at last – remember my cobalt-clue?"

**T**HEY went more slowly and carefully as they came nearer the pale stone towers. Curt Newton eyed the slender metal column, that was crowned by a glowing globe, with keen interest.

"Unless my guess is wrong, that's the broadcaster of the force-field that creates the whole planetary illusion," he muttered, his scientific curiosity mounting.

"Someone coming!" Otho hissed suddenly.

"Into the grass!" Curt ordered, flinging himself down into the tall, concealing white grasses.

Grag and Otho instantly followed his example. Raising his head a little, Captain Future looked toward the city, from which direction was coming an increasing sound of muffled thudding.

Then he saw who came. They were a dozen of the so-called Magicians — semi-human creatures with bodies covered by short, thick white fur, two-toed feet and two-fingered hands, and flattened, unhuman heads out of which stared huge, black, pupil-less eyes.

The Magicians were riding white, hairy beasts that reminded Curt of the ancient Earth kangaroo — beasts of burden that hopped along in giant leaps on two powerful legs, their heads held erect by reins running back to their strange riders.

"Stygians — natives of Styx!" muttered Captain Future as he stared from hiding. "That's what the so-called Magicians really are — a race whose existence the System has never suspected."

He noticed the folded nets of metal-mesh that each Stygian rider carried on his saddle.

"They're going hunting," he guessed. "Probably they hunt and trap those hopping creatures they ride, and then tame them."

The Stygian hunters passed at a short distance from the crouching trio, and the sound of their passage died away.

Curt and the two Futuremen crept on, more cautiously now. Presently they peered from behind a looming clump of white moss at the city of the Stygians.

It was not large, but had an indescribably ancient look. They could see many of the white-furred Stygians abroad in the stone metropolis. Some few of them rode the hopping beasts of burden. Others were engaged in cultivation of a narrow zone of carefully-tended vegetation which belted the city.

"Doctor Zarro's somewhere in there — and Simon too," Curt muttered. He reached toward his belt. "I'm going in there — invisibly. You two wait."

"You can't!" Otho objected. "Your invisibility will expire before you get halfway into the place!"

"I have a plan —"

He stopped suddenly. Little Eek, looking fearfully back from Grag's shoulder, was squirming terrifiedly. Sensing peril in the telepathic moon-pup's actions, Captain Future whirled around.

The dozen Stygian riders they had seen shortly before were silently coming up on them from the rear!

"Those hunters!" Curt yelled. "They ran across our trail in the grass and tracked us!"

HE was drawing his proton-pistol as he shouted, and in the same moment, with loud cries, the Stygians urged their mounts upon the three comrades. And the white-furred riders were swinging their hunting-nets over their heads as they charged.

Curt's proton-beam, set at stunning force, toppled two of the charging Stygians from their saddles in the split-second of blurring action. But the heavy metal-mesh nets were now flying through the air.

Cast with unerring accuracy, the heavy nets settled around Curt and the two Futuremen in prisoning, pinning folds.

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## CHAPTER XVII

### *Hall of Enemies*

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JOAN RANDALL and the Brain were helpless to move from the corner of the Legion of Doom cruiser, into which they had been flung. The Brain, of course, had no powers of movement at any time, and the girl police agent was tightly bound by the repulsive rope-snakes which held their grip upon her, and would hold it until they received the twanging signal of release.

"Doctor Zarro must be taking us to his base," the Brain reflected aloud in his rasping metallic voice. "At least, we'll find out for certain where that is."

"It can't be to Cerberus, can it?" the girl asked. "If Victor Krim is really Doctor Zarro, they must be taking us to Charon."

Her eyes flashed. "And Captain Future will soon learn where we are and follow!"

Joan tried to loosen the cold grip of the rope-snakes but could not. Nothing but the release-signal which they were trained to obey could do that. But she managed to work her bound figure into a sitting position from which she could look out through one of the small round space-windows of the compartment.

She uttered a startled cry.

"We're not going toward Charon, or Cerberus either! They're both over on the right!"

"Then we must be heading toward Styx," said the Brain instantly.

"Styx?" Joan's face expressed her incredulity. "But that moon's completely sea-covered. No one has ever gone there — we can't be going there."

"Nevertheless, that is where we are going," said a deep, harsh voice.

The eyes of both Joan and Simon Wright turned toward the speaker. It was Doctor Zarro.

The tall, burning-eyed prophet had entered the compartment, followed by the dwarf Roj, and three of the Earthmen members of the Legion of Doom.

"Yes, we are going to Styx," Doctor Zarro repeated

harshly. "You are about to see things unsuspected by the whole System – though you will never return to tell about them."

Roj chuckled evilly. "The girl will make a nice addition to the Hall of Enemies, Doctor."

Joan's blood chilled at the sinister, mysterious menace in the dwarfed criminal's mirth. But she faced them bravely.

Doctor Zarro had turned and was speaking to the Earthmen Legionaries. "You can discard disguise, now," he told them.

The three Legionaries put their hands to their belts, and touched something.

At once the three changed magically from ordinary-looking Earthmen into white-furred, queer, semi-human creatures, whose great hollow black eyes stared solemnly. At the belt of each of them was a small cylindrical mechanism.

"My Stygian friends are always glad to shed the illusion that disguises them as Earthmen," Doctor Zarro was saying.

"Why do you not shed *your* disguise, Doctor?" asked the Brain coldly. "We know that your impressive appearance is only a similar illusion – that you are an Earthman. And we think we know just what Earthman you are."

**D**OCTOR ZARRO laughed harshly. "What you think does not matter any longer, Brain. The peoples of the System think that this is my true appearance, that I am some super-scientist from mysterious realms outside the System, who alone can save them."

The dark prophet turned brusquely to the little dwarf.

"Roj, watch these two until we reach Styx. The girl is clever, and I won't feel sure of her till she's in the Hall of Enemies."

"She won't get away again, be sure of that," chuckled the dwarf. "There's no chance of Captain Future finding her where she's going."

The dwarf seated himself in a chair farther down the compartment, his atom-gun on his knee and his beady eyes constantly watching the helpless girl and Brain. Doctor Zarro went aft.

Joan felt a wave of hopeless despair sweep her.

"They can't really be taking us to Styx, can they?" she asked the Brain desperately.

"I don't know, but I'm afraid so," muttered the Brain. "There's some great mystery here."

That mystery was soon explained. The cruiser slowed down, and through the window Joan and Simon saw that they were dropping toward the raging waves of the sea covering Styx.

Then, to their utter amazement, the cruiser plunged down into the waves – and the waves vanished. They glimpsed a solid landscape of white mosses and grass,

and a pale stone city toward which they were descending.

"The sea wasn't real!" Joan cried amazedly. "It was just –"

"An illusion," the Brain finished for her. And Simon's lens-eyes glittered. The cruiser landed. Its door opened and chilly air, with a pungent sharpness to it, rushed in upon them. Roj picked up the Brain. The big, slow-moving, silent giant, Kallak, took the bound girl.

They followed Doctor Zarro and the furry crew outside. Joan and the Brain, as they were carried along, had their first glimpse of the secret city to which they had been brought.

Octagonal towers of pallid stone rose all around them, bordering paved streets in which were many of the furred Stygians. Some of the creatures were afoot, others riding hopping beasts. All of them wore only a leather harness, seeming not to feel the cold.

The Stygians crowded forward, staring with their great, solemn black eyes at Doctor Zarro and his followers. There was a strange quality of disapproval in the attitude of the crowd.

The Brain heard Roj mutter to Doctor Zarro in a low voice.

"They don't like us bringing more prisoners to the Hall of Enemies. And they'll be angrier still when they hear that we had to kill two people on Pluto."

"I can handle the Stygians all right," replied Doctor Zarro's harsh voice confidently.

Simon and Joan Randall saw that they were being carried toward a squat stone structure from which arose a slender metal column topped by a glowing sphere.

The prisoners were carried into the squat structure, through corridors and ante-chambers into a circular room of great size that blazed with light.

**A**T one side of this room was a massive cylinder from whose interior came a drone of electrical machinery, never ceasing. Cables from it led into the slender, hollow metal column that rose up through the roof and far above it.

Near this, Joan and the Brain saw a powerful television transmitter of a design unfamiliar to both of them.

The rest of the room was filled by a weird and appalling collection.

"My Hall of Enemies," stated Doctor Zarro grimly, with a gesture of his black arm. "It should interest you two, for you are about to join it."

The collection was one of several dozens of glassite cases, several feet high. A few were empty. But most of them were occupied – by men, women and even children, who sat utterly motionless as though in death, each in one of the transparent, airtight cases.

Joan's eyes ran appalledly over the unmoving faces. There were men of all planets in this strange collection, many Earthmen and also Martians, Mercurians and oth-

ers.

"I know those men!" she cried to the Brain. "There's Robert Jons, the Mercurian astronomer, and Henry Gellimer, the Earth astrophysicist, and their families too! These are the missing abducted scientists!"

"That is correct," stated Doctor Zarro grimly. "My Legion, composed of disguised Stygians led by Roj and Kallak, brought these men here. And the System peoples thought that the scientists had fled out of the System to escape the oncoming dark star catastrophe. Which is what I wanted the peoples to think."

"To further your plot, you killed all these men!" Joan accused, loathing in her brown eyes.

"Not killed – they are not dead," Doctor Zarro corrected harshly. "I would much prefer to have killed them, for that would have been far less trouble. But my Stygian followers have certain prejudices against killing anyone, as you have doubtless noticed. It would have turned the Stygians against me to have killed all these scientists, so instead I have consigned them to a living death in which they are safe as though they were dead."

"They are in suspended animation, in those cases. The cases are filled with a gas of Stygian invention which paralyzes absolutely the vital processes of a living body. Even the smallest cell, even the metabolism process, is paralyzed by the gas. So those men cannot move a muscle, cannot breathe – and yet they are entirely conscious and can see and hear us at this moment."

Joan was shaken by a shuddering horror. "And you've kept them in that awful state for weeks!"

The Brain's strong scientific curiosity, even in this desperate moment, had been aroused.

"It is the same gas, I suppose. that you pumped into the observatory at Tartarus?" he rasped to Doctor Zarro. "I would be interested in learning its formula."

"I am afraid there is no time to gratify your curiosity," Doctor Zarro replied grimly. Then the black prophet turned to the dwarf. "Put the girl in one of the empty cases"

"And the Brain?" inquired Roj.

"He doesn't breathe, so the gas wouldn't affect him. Besides he can't move. so he's powerless to escape. Just put him down by the cases – but disconnect his speech-apparatus so he can't bother us by his talking."

Roj approached the girl, whom Kallak was still holding. The dwarf produced a small instrument, which he used to sound the twanging note that was signal for the rope-snakes to release their hold.

The pink living ropes scuttled into the bag Roj held for them. Joan struggled with cramped limbs, but the giant Kallak silently held her in inescapable grip.

**K**ALLAK, at an order from the dwarf, carried the weakly struggling girl to one of the glassite cases.

whose door swung open. She was tossed inside. As she tried to sit up, the door was shut and locked, imprisoning her in the air-tight case.

Joan glimpsed Roj turning a valve at the side of the case. A cold, invisible vapor with a faintly pungent scent was rapidly pumped into the case. from a source somewhere below.

Joan tried frantically not to breathe, as she struggled to a sitting position. But her lungs, starved for air, opened against her will, and the gas rushed into them.

Instantly the girl felt a sensation of freezing cold, and at the same time all power of muscular movement left her. She could not stir from the seated position into which her helpless body had sagged. She could not wink an eyelid, or stir a finger.

And yet her mind was as clear as ever. She could see out through the glassite wall of her case, though she could not turn her gaze even a fraction of an inch.

She saw them place the Brain beside her case, and saw the glass lens-eyes of Simon Wright look up at her as though trying to convey a message. But Joan could not move a muscle in return.

Then she saw, across the room, Doctor Zarro advancing to the powerful, unfamiliar television transmitter. Roj had started the transmitter throbbing – she could hear it quite plainly. And then the screen broke into light, as Doctor Zarro stood facing it.

Joan knew that the black prophet's image was crowding onto every television in operation in the System. She heard Doctor Zarro thunder forth his warning.

"People of the Solar System, this is your last chance to save yourselves!"

Joan heard him go on, warning the System peoples that dark star doom was close at hand, that they must force the Government to yield authority to him if they wished to escape disaster.

When Doctor Zarro finished and turned off the transmitter, she saw him turn to the dwarf.

"That ought to do it, Roj! If that warning, and the appearance of the dark star as it is now, doesn't scare them into yielding power to me, nothing will!"

"It will work, Doctor!" grinned the dwarf across all his ugly face. "They'll pitch out the Government and beg you to take the rule before another day has passed."

Doctor Zarro and the dwarf left the great circular hall, and Joan saw that they had left no guards. No guards were needed in this Hall of Enemies whose prisoners could not even move an eyelash!

The girl valiantly fought to keep the horror of her position from crushing her. She knew that in this living death, it would be easy to go mad. And the thought of going mad and still not being able to move was a terrible one.

Time passed – time that to Joan was utterly unmeasurable, frozen as she was. She thought it must have been at least a few hours, yet it might have been years,

centuries, eternities, so far as she could tell.

She heard a tumult and babel of voices outside the Hall.

Doctor Zarro and Roj came striding in. Excitement of the highest pitch was visible in the dwarf's face.

"Your friend Captain Future has come with the other two Futuremen, to visit you!" Roj shouted to the Brain.

**J**OAN'S heart bounded with wild hope. But next moment, that hope crashed into blacker despair than ever before.

For into the Hall of Enemies came a mass of the furred Stygians, bearing three captives helplessly pinned in strong metal nets.

And the three new prisoners were Captain Future and Grag and Otho!

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## CHAPTER XVIII

### *Dark Star Secret*

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**W**HEN the hunting-nets of the Stygians had fallen on Captain Future and his two comrades, Curt had made a violent effort to tear away the clinging mesh folds, but could not. The flexible metal nets had been designed to hold great animals.

Near him. Otho was struggling and swearing, the lithe android exerting all his strength to win free of the meshes and failing. Big Grag, by dint of his tremendous strength, started to tear away the net around him. But hastily the Stygians cast two more nets over the robot, which held even him powerless.

Little Eek had disappeared at the moment the Stygians charged. The moon-pup, which had telepathically sensed the nearness of the trailers before the others realized, had bolted into the giant grasses and vanished.

"Curse these furry devils!" Otho was hissing in foaming rage. "Trap me in a net like Neptunian fishermen, will they? I'll show them what kind of fish they've caught if I get loose!"

"Take it easy, Otho," Captain Future called. "We can't break these nets. Wait till our chance comes."

Despite his encouragement to the android, Curt's heart was like a stone. He felt a bitter humiliation and self-reproach. He, Captain Future, surprised and captured in this simple fashion!

Curt could hear Grag's booming, anxious voice, as he was borne along.

"Are you all right, Master? And did you see where Eek fled? He was terribly frightened."

"That's right, worry about that cursed moon-pup," hissed Otho's voice furiously from the head of this strange procession. "We three are captives, the Brain is in danger somewhere, and Doctor Zarro's plot is destroying the system Government right now, but all that

doesn't matter! All that matters is that little Eek may be frightened!"

Curt Newton, despite the gravity of the situation, could not help chuckling at the furious indignation of Otho.

"Eek is free and he'll take care of himself and be all right," Curt reassured Grag, and added ruefully: "Which is more than we can say for ourselves, I'm afraid."

Their Stygian captors carried them into the big, circular room inside the squat building. And there, three persons, evidently apprised of their capture, stood waiting.

The three were Doctor Zarro and Roj and Kallak. Curt Newton and the two Futuremen were dumped down in front of them.

"You have done well to capture these three!" Doctor Zarro commended the Stygians. "They are the deadliest enemies of your race. Now you may go."

As the Stygians departed, Curt was glancing swiftly around the interior of the great room.

He saw the great machines, and then his eyes fell on the collection of glassite cases in each of which one of the missing scientists sat frozen motionless.

Curt's lips tightened as he saw Joan Randall sitting in one those cases, rigid, unmoving, her eyes staring fixedly toward him. And beside her case rested the Brain.

"Simon!" cried Otho as from his prone position he too glimpsed the Brain. "What have they done to you?"

The Brain did not answer, but his lens-eyes twisted on their stalks to glance down significantly at his speech-resonator.

"So we meet face to face at last, Captain Future!" said the black doctor in harsh, loud tones.

**C**URT looked up coolly into the burning black eyes. "We have met face to face before," he told Doctor Zarro biting, "but you were not then wearing that illusion-disguise and using a disguised voice."

Roj and Kallak, and the two helpless Futuremen, were watching tensely. For there was drama in this moment.

Here in this secret city of a hidden race, the two great antagonists at last faced each other in the open.

**D**OCTOR ZARRO, the mysterious figure whose power and cunning had cast the whole Solar System into panic, and whose vaulting ambitions toward dictatorship stood on the brink of success!

And Captain Future, legendary adventurer of the flying fists and reckless smile and scientific wizardry, who had bestrode the System like a championing colossus for years!

"I will admit, now," Doctor Zarro was saying harshly, "that I have been a little afraid of you, Captain Fu-

ture. I know what you have done in the past. I have not felt safe until this moment"

"We're not safe while Captain Future *lives!*" burst out Roj, the dwarf. "More than one man has thought he had this red-headed devil in his power, and thought wrong. I say, kill him now!"

"No! We dare not do that yet!" the Doctor declared. "The Stygians are already uneasy about the two we killed – we daren't kill any more at present. Don't worry – Captain Future will be safe enough with the others, here in my Hall of Enemies."

"So that is what you call your pitiful collection of prisoners?" Captain Future said scathingly. "You keep them frozen in the same gas you used when you raided the observatory, do you? It's a thing worthy of your criminal mind."

The bitter contempt in his voice seemed to sting the arch-plotter.

"My mind is great enough to win lordship of the System for me, against all your efforts!" Doctor Zarro declared. "Yes, even now on every one of the nine worlds, terrorized people are rioting and forcing the Government to yield all its powers to me! To me, to the only person in the system who can turn aside the approaching dark star!"

"You needn't keep up your boasting with me," Captain Future said cuttingly, "I know the core of your plot. I know the secret of the dark star."

"You know?" exclaimed Doctor Zarro, seeming startled.

"Yes, I know," Curt said grimly. "*I know that the dark star does not really exist at all – that it too, is only a gigantic illusion!*"

**D**OCTOR ZARRO stared amazedly down at him. Roj uttered a cry.

"Didn't I tell you this redhead was the devil? He's ferreted the whole secret out!"

"Is it true, Chief?" cried Otho from his helpless trussed position nearby.

"It's true – that dark star which looks so huge in the heavens doesn't exist," Curt answered. "Out there in space is some kind of ship or craft which for weeks has been approaching the System, and which carries apparatus that creates a great illusion similar to the illusion which camouflages this world – a huge, real-looking *image* of a dark star.

"That huge image is unreal and immaterial, except to the eye. Therefore it has no mass. When the System astronomers could not measure any mass of the dark star, they could hardly believe their measurements. It seemed so incredible such a huge body would be without mass. That fact cast doubt on all their measurements.

"But the check I had Kansu Kane make of the fixed stars around the dark star settled the matter in my

mind," Curt concluded, "If the dark star had any mass, it would have deflected the rays from those stars by the Einstein effect of gravitation on light, and the stars would have seemed displaced. But they were not displaced, hence the dark star was wholly without mass. That meant it could only be an image of some sort – an illusion deliberately created to terrorize the System!"

Doctor Zarro replied to this softly.

"You are clever, Future – cleverer even than I had thought. If you guessed all that, why did you not go out and destroy the dark star illusion?"

"The Brain was in deadly peril here, and I meant to rescue him first."

Doctor Zarro laughed harshly. "Your loyalty to your comrade will cost you dear. For the ship which produces the dark-star image is rushing on toward the System, and the terrified System peoples who see the monster dead sun coming ever closer are at this moment overturning their Government."

The dark prophet chuckled. "And when that Government has been overturned and power has been yielded to me, I will only need to turn that image-ship away from the System, and then tell the System peoples that I saved them by turning aside the dead sun that would have destroyed them. And I can use my powers of illusion to keep myself in power indefinitely, by again terrifying the System with illusory perils should there be any future revolt against me!"

"*Your* powers of illusion?" Curt Newton repeated contemptuously. "You never invented this secret of illusion. These Stygians developed it, long ago. You are an Earthman who somehow persuaded these people to become your allies and give you the illusion-secret for your own use."

"Perhaps, since you know so much, you know the secret of how the illusions are produced?" Doctor Zarro said mockingly.

"**I** THINK I do," Curt answered coolly. "They are created by a force-field that tampers with the reflection of light. A man looks like a man to my eyes because the light-rays which strike him are reflected off him according to the simple laws of reflection, and bring my eye-retinas the picture of a man. But if the light-rays striking that man are warpedly reflected from a force-field around him, as they would be from a rock instead of a man, that man will look to my eyes like a rock instead of a man.

"That's the secret, isn't it? The illusion-machines worn by the Stygians which make them look like Earthmen, the machine you wear yourself to disguise yourself, the great machine here that camouflages Styx, and the one out on that ship that creates the dark star illusion, all work on that principle, don't they? They all project a force-field which warps the reflection of light according to pre-controlled patterns, and so creates an

entirely unreal illusion?"

"Your reputation has not been exaggerated, Captain Future," said Doctor Zarro, with a ring of genuine admiration in his voice. "You've fathomed the illusion secret from scanty data, correctly."

"One thing I would like to know," Curt said calmly, "is how you managed to induce the Stygians to become your allies and give you their secret – if you don't mind telling."

Curt was playing for time. He had heard Doctor Zarro say that the Stygians were displeased with his methods. He was hoping for a chance to appeal to the Stygian rulers against this plotter who was using their science to terrorize the System.

Doctor Zarro laughed. "I don't mind telling you that, since the game is in my hands now. I came to this world, drawn by old Plutonian legends of a time when a great race dwelt on one of the moons – a time when Styx was not water-covered. I penetrated the camouflage-illusion and landed here and was captured by the Stygians.

"They treated me well enough, for they are a peaceful race who hate war and killing. I learned why they had camouflaged their world. They were afraid of the Earthmen. They had seen the pioneering, colonizing Earthmen streaming out through the System toward Pluto, and feared these newcomers would invade and conquer their ancient moon-home. So, for safety, they used their secret of illusion to make Styx look like a water-covered world, and so Earthmen never came here.

"When I learned this, Captain Future, I saw my chance for power – a chance such as no man had ever had before. I played upon the fears of the Stygians. I told them that sooner or later the Earthmen would penetrate their camouflage and would invade Styx, and conquer them and enslave them. I told them their only chance for safety was to help me gain power over the whole System – then they, my friends, would always be safe. They were convinced by my arguments, and gave me the illusion-secret, and helped me build ships. One ship, containing a great illusion-generator, we sent out into outer space to create the dark-star image that would terrify the System. The other ships, manned by Stygians who had learned my language and who were disguised by illusion as Earthmen, formed my Legion of Doom. The Stygians built this great television broadcaster for me, and I –"

Captain Future, pretending to listen closely to the boasting of Doctor Zarro, had in reality been listening for something else. Now he heard it – Stygians approaching from outside the building.

**H**IS hopes bounded. If he could appeal to the Stygian rulers, make them see their folly in aiding the dark doctor –

But Roj had heard too. The dwarf ran to the door, then came flying back, his vicious face livid.

"That red-haired devil has kept you talking on purpose to delay!" Roj yelled to Doctor Zarro. "And now Limor is coming!"

"The Stygian king?" Doctor Zarro was apparently instantly alarmed. "Captain Future mustn't have a chance to speak to him. Quick, into the cases with them!"

Curt's hopes sank. The dwarf and the giant Kallak were already snatching up his trussed form and dumping him into one of the empty glassite cases.

As the door of the case slammed upon him, Curt scrambled furiously to free himself of the net. It had been a little loosened by the movement and he was beginning to free himself, when there was a hissing of gas into the case as Roj turned a valve.

Captain Future felt the pungent gas enter his nostrils – and then freezing cold gripped him and all powers of movement left him. He could not stir a muscle. He was still conscious, still able to see and hear, but he might as well have been a frozen statue.

Otho, squirming, swearing and fighting, was tossed into a neighboring case. The android froze motionless too as the deadly gas filled his case.

"What about this robot?" Roj cried, pointing to the great metal figure of Grag, lying bound in many metal nets. "He doesn't breathe, so the gas won't affect him!"

"I think I can put him out of commission," muttered Doctor Zarro, bending over the helpless, giant metal figure with an atom-pistol. "He must have an electrical nervous system –"

The gun in Doctor Zarro's hand spat a blast of atomic fire that the dark prophet aimed at the joint in Grag's metal neck.

The scorching blast of force penetrated the joint. Grag's wild struggles suddenly ceased, his photo-electric eyes went dark. Curt realized that the robot's electric nerve-wires had been cut.

"That does for him," panted Doctor Zarro, straightening.

"Here's Limor," warned Roj.

A tall Stygian, his leather harness encrusted with jewels, was entering the room, followed by a small retinue.

The hollow eyes of the Stygian king, Limor, surveyed the lifeless robot and then Captain Future and Otho in their cases.

"More prisoners?" the Stygian ruler exclaimed to Doctor Zarro, in stumbling, slurred Earth-speech. "I do not like this. It is wrong to hold all these people in that terrible living death. My people only used that secret gas for therapeutic purposes."

"It is necessary, Limor," Doctor Zarro told the king earnestly. "These people would destroy my great plan if they were free. Once the plan has succeeded, once I

rule the whole System as I soon shall, then all these prisoners will be released."

**C**APTAIN FUTURE, hearing that, felt bitter disbelief. He knew well how little the plotter ever meant to free them.

"It is not only the prisoners – you have killed two men, an Earthman and a Plutonian;" Limor said troubledly. "We are a civilized race, we Stygians, who abhor bloodshed. I am almost sorry that ever I acceded to your plan, since it has brought murder with it,"

"The killings were an accident," Doctor Zarro said smoothly. "There will be no more, for I hate bloodshed as much as you do. But remember, Limor, that unless my plan succeeds, there will be much bloodshed on this moon when the Earthmen invade it and conquer your people. Yes, they will destroy all of you except those they keep as slaves!"

"I know – it must be true, since you, an Earthman yourself, say so," admitted Limor. He sighed heavily. "The necessity compels us. But I wish that it were all done."

"It will be done soon. Within hours, the System peoples will acknowledge my rule," Doctor Zarro replied eagerly. "Then, as head of the System Government, I shall be able to prevent the Earthmen from ever coming to this moon."

Limor and his retinue, with a last troubled glance at the frozen prisoners in the Hall of Enemies, departed.

Doctor Zarro stepped up to the case in which Curt was imprisoned, and laughed harshly at him.

"You were clever to stall for time, Captain Future – but not quite clever enough," he mocked.

Curt could make no answer, could not wink an eyelash even. He could only stare stonily back.

But his mind was seething. If he had had a chance to talk to Limor, he might have won over the Stygian king!

"Doctor, look here!" Roj called excitedly from the television. "I've picked up a newscaster – listen!"

In the television screen appeared a Martian newscaster, shouting excited bulletins.

"– whole System is in a mad turmoil of panic as the dark star comes closer, for all can look up and see it now. Mobs are reported storming Government Tower on Earth, demanding that Doctor Zarro be voted full powers by the Council.

"James Carthew, the President, has issued a last-minute plea to the System. He says: 'I beg the people of the nine worlds not to give way to terror. Doctor Zarro cannot turn a dark star aside – no man can. I plead with the System peoples to refrain from giving away their liberty to this would-be dictator, and to rely on Captain Future, who even now is working to solve this mystery.'

"But even the name of Captain Future can't quiet the terror of the peoples now!" the newscaster continued.

"Here's a flash – Venus and Mercury have just instructed their Council members to vote full power to Doctor Zarro! Another flash – Uranus is reported to have instructed its Council members also to cast their vote for Doctor Zarro, alleging that he is the last hope of saving the System. When the Council meets in fateful session a few hours from now –"

**D**OCTOR ZARRO switched off the television and straightened, his tall, disguised figure trembling with exultation.

"We've won, Roj!" he cried. "The Council is going to yield me full power when it meets. I – I – the master of every world from Mercury to Pluto!"

Then Curt saw the plotter get a grip on himself, and heard him address the dwarf sharply.

"We'll take a ship and speed out to the illusion-ship in outer space at once! Then as soon as the Council votes me power, we'll start turning the 'dark star' aside a little to show the System peoples that I will be able to avert the danger."

"Shall we leave Kallak here to guard the Hall of Enemies?" Roj cried, glancing at Captain Future's case.

"There's no need – there's not a single way in which any of them can escape from those cases," Doctor Zarro declared. "And the Stygians are around the building anyway. Come on!"

Captain Future, sitting frozenly, saw the tall black prophet and his two followers hasten out of the building. A few moments later he heard the roar of a space cruiser taking off outside.

Captain Future felt an agony of spirit. He had failed the System peoples when they needed him most. The plot of Doctor Zarro was succeeding, and he was powerless to prevent it as though he had been dead.

For he was dead, to all purposes, he and Joan and Otho and the Brain, and even Grag. All of them, unable to move or speak or do anything at all but think, imprisoned here in the inescapable living death.

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## CHAPTER XIX

### *In Outer Space*

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**H**OW many hours had passed? Captain Future could not be sure. Time had become almost meaningless to him as he sat frozen here in his case.

He knew that at least several hours had elapsed, for night had come. His field of vision took in the door, and outside it he could see a dark sky.

He had heard a ship land outside, before night came. And he had known that it was the return of the ship which had taken Doctor Zarro and Roj and Kallak out to the "dark star."

Nothing else had happened. No one had come into



this brightly lighted Hall of Enemies where he and Joan and Otho and the Brain sat on in dreadful stillness and silence, along with all the other frozen prisoners.

Captain Future had been in terrible situations in the past. But never one so terrible as this. Never had he been so utterly helpless. He could not stir a muscle, could not even speak. The only thing that he could do was think. And his thoughts were torture!

Curt could picture James Carthew, the President, frantically trying to delay that fatal vote that would set up a dictatorship in the System. He knew that Carthew would be wondering wildly why Captain Future had failed him.

He would not fail the President! The old indomitable resolution that had brought him through a thousand ordeals rose in Captain Future's soul. He made a terrific mental effort to force his frozen body to stir, to shake off the drugging influence of the freezing gas that filled his case.

The effort was useless. His body, gripped by cold paralysis of the freezing gas, could not obey his mind. There was absolutely no way in which he could move while he sat in this ghastly, indestructible, gas-filled case.

Fiercely, he fought back despair. There must be some way out of this hideous captivity. But what?

He could think of nothing. He and the Futuremen and Joan and all the others were helpless as though in their graves.

Captain Future became suddenly aware of movement at the door, of some small thing peeping hesitantly into this room.

A sharp, inquisitive little snout poked around the edge of the door, and two bright, fearful eyes peered in.

It was Eek, the moon-pup!

Curt had not thought of the little pet of Grag since their capture, when the moon-pup had frightenedly escaped. Now he realized that Eek had trailed them through the city to this room.

Shivering with fright, Eek peered until his bright black eyes rested on Grag's prone, motionless metal form. Then the little gray beast scampered gladly toward the lifeless robot.

It nuzzled Grag's head, seeking to arouse him. And when the robot did not stir, Eek pawed his metal face distressedly.

And Captain Future, watching, saw the thousand-to-one chance of escape for which he had been praying!

Fantastic, impossible – yes! But still the only slender chance left of getting out of this terrible captivity.

Curt concentrated all his mind on one strong thought, a thought projected at the moon-pup.

"Eek, come to me!" he ordered telepathically. "Come to me!"

HE knew that the moon-pup's method of communication was by telepathy – Grag talked to his pet in that way, and Curt had sometimes given the little beast telepathic orders.

Could he do that now? Could he get Eek to do the thing that would give them a fighting chance for freedom? "Eek, come toward me at once!" he thought fiercely.

The gray moon-pup stopped its dismayed pawing of Grag's face and looked up sharply. It turned its eyes toward Curt.

It had got his thought, Captain Future exulted! He repeated that thought-command with redoubled force. "Come toward me, Eek!"

Slowly, doubtfully, the moon-pup started toward the glassite case in which Curt sat imprisoned. The little animal stopped in front of the case and looked up at Curt puzzledly.

"Eek, you must chew out a piece of the glassite at the bottom of this case!" Curt thought. "It is very good to eat – it contains much precious metals such as you love."

Eek's whole appearance brightened as he got that thought. Temporarily forgetting its dismay over its lifeless master, the moon-pup approached the bottom of the glassite case.

It nosed a corner of the glassite, as though sniffing it with its own strange senses. Then it looked doubtful.

"It is very good to eat," Curt repeated his telepathic blandishments. "It contains much metal." he lied.

Persuaded by Captain Future's telepathic assurance, Eek fastened his jaws on the glassite corner of the case. His chisel-like teeth bit into the glassite as easily as into metal or rock.

Eek had almost bitten through the glassite – but not quite. The moon-pup chewed the bite and then looked up at Curt with visible indignation.

Eek seemed almost to be saying: "You told me that stuff was good but it has no flavor at all".

"It is better further in – it is rich in silver that you love. Eek." Curt thought urgently. "One more bite!"

Doubtfully, as though persuaded against his better judgment, Eek took another bite of the glassite. He chewed it, then looked up with an injured, crestfallen expression as he found it no more flavorsome than his first sample.

But the moon-pup had bitten through the glassite this time! And Curt could hear the heavy freezing gas in his case hissing, leaking away.

Swiftly as the gas poured out, powers of movement came back to Captain Future. The blessedness of being able to move again, he thought, as he tried to stagger up.

He found himself still tangled in the hunting-net that had been used to capture him. It took minutes to wriggle free of it. Then, Captain Future burst open the glas-

site door of his case with a heave.

He sprang out onto the floor, his heart pounding. He dashed to the case in which Otho sat frozen, and tore the door open. As the freezing gas rushed out and dispersed, the rubbery android came back to life. Curt freed him of the net that held him.

"Devils of space. I thought I was going to sit like that forever!" swore Otho wildly. "I'll kill that cursed Doctor by torture for doing that to us!"

CURT was freeing Joan Randall. The girl staggered, weeping, as she revived and left her glassite prison.

"Curt, I knew you would get us out somehow!" she sobbed. "I couldn't see how anyone could, but I knew you would."

"Steady, Joan," the big red-haired young adventurer told her urgently. "Help Otho release all those other prisoners while I see to Simon and Grag."

Curt bent over the Brain first. Simon's speech-apparatus had been disconnected – a moment's work set that aright.

"Good work, Lad," rasped the Brain then. "But I fear it's too late, maybe."

"Not too late if we can get to the *Comet*," rapped Captain Future. "But Grag has been disabled –"

He tore away the nets around the robot and examined him. Then Curt rapidly removed two of the metal plates of Grag's neck, exposing the robot's electrical nerves.

Three of Grag's vital nerve-wires had been severed. Curt worked tensely with tools from his belt, resplicing those wires and then replacing the neck-plates.

Grag's photo-electric eyes shone with revived life, and the great robot stirred and rose clankingly to his feet, none the worse for his experience.

"What has happened, Master?" he boomed bewilderedly. "How did you get out of the case?"

"Eek got me out – I gave him a thought-command to chew into the case," Curt told him as he turned quickly to the others.

Little Eek had sprung onto Grag's shoulder and was clawing the robot's neck, in a frenzy of joy at seeing its metal master revived.

"Eek did that?" Grag cried. "For that, Eek, you shall have all the silver you can eat!"

Otho and Joan had released all the other prisoners in the Hall of Enemies. And those men and women of all planets, dazed by sudden deliverance from their weeks of horrible captivity, were stumbling to crowd around Captain Future, babbling incoherently.

"Lad, what's your plan?" cried the Brain. "If you broadcast to the System that the dark star is only an illusion, you can maybe stop the Council's action –"

"It wouldn't work, Simon – the peoples of the System are too panic-stricken now to believe it," Captain

Future exclaimed. "There's only one way to end their panic, and that's to destroy the dark-star illusion that's terrifying them –"

"Stygians are coming!" yelled Otho urgently. "They must have heard this uproar!"

Captain Future himself could now detect a chorus of alarmed cries and sound of running feet in the darkness outside the building.

"We're going through them to the *Comet*!" he cried. "We've got to make it!"

He swung to the bewildered, newly-released mob of Doctor Zarro's captives.

"You stay here – the Stygians won't harm you and I'll be back for you if I succeed."

A STYGIAN appeared in the door, his hollow eyes goggling out of his white-furred face at the crowd inside.

"The Doctor's prisoners are escaping!" the creature yelled back out into the night.

Curt's proton-pistol shot a thin, pale beam of stunning force that dropped the creature unconscious in his tracks.

"Grag – Otho – come on!" Curt yelled. "Joan, you bring Simon!"

The girl snatched up the handle of the Brain's case. Curt and the other two Futuremen were in front of her as they all plunged out into the cold, windy night.

In the dark Stygian city, lights were bobbing and voices yelling as a crowd of the white-furred beams swarmed toward the building in answer to the alarm.

"Through them!" Captain Future shouted. "It's now or never – but use your pistol only to stun them, Otho!"

Triggering the pale knockout beams in all directions. Curt and Otho ran at the head of the little group. Joan followed closely with the Brain, and Grag brought up the rear with the moon-pup clinging terrifiedly to his shoulder.

They forced their way, fighting through streets into which more and more Stygians were pouring. But the beams knocked down those in their way, and those who sought to snatch them from the rear were swept back by Grag's mighty, flailing metal arms.

They fought thus to the edge of the city, beyond which stretched the dark, grotesque forest of giant club-mosses.

"They're following us!" Otho hissed as they plunged running through the towering mosses. "Name of a thousand sun-imps, how did we get out of the city?"

"Those Stygians are an unwarlike people, unaccustomed to fighting, or we couldn't have done it," Curt panted. Then his voice flared exultant. "There's the *Comet* ahead!"

The little ship had not been disturbed. But two Stygian guards had been posted over it, who emerged wildly now.

Curt's beam knocked them flat. Then he and his comrades tumbled into the ship.

A horde of Stygians, bewildered by unaccustomed violence and conflict, were still pouring after them from the city.

"Up, in the name of all that's holy!" yelled Otho as Captain Future leaped to the controls.

Curt laughed recklessly as he slammed the cyclotron switch and then opened the throttles.

The *Comet* roared up into the dark sky like a living, leaping thing, pluming a great tail of white fire.

Curt drove it out at dizzying acceleration, through the semi-opaque curtain of the illusion-camouflage. Glancing back, Styx again seemed covered by rolling ocean.

They were out in open space now. Pluto bulked vast and white on their right, Cerberus and Charon setting beyond it.

Out in the brilliant stars of outer space, amid the star-clouds of Sagittarius, bulked a black disk incredibly big. And Curt headed the little ship straight toward it.

"We've got to end the dark-star illusion," he cried. "Only that will convince the System peoples there's no danger."

**T**HE tear-drop ship, fastest craft in space, picked up velocity at an appalling rate. Out of the System itself they were rushing, out into the shoreless sea of interstellar nothingness to meet the colossal, illusory dead sun that was coming toward the System.

The speed was the highest Curt had ever called forth from the *Comet*. So great was it that Pluto was diminishing visibly to a small white disk behind them, and the illusory dark star was expanding across the heavens at an incredibly swift rate.

"It can't be just an illusion!" Joan exclaimed wildly staring. "It looks too utterly real!"

"Are you sure that it is not real, Master?" asked Grag uneasily.

The appearance of the unreal dark star was formidable enough to daunt the bravest. Utterly solid and real it seemed, a colossal, jagged black dead sun turning in ponderous majesty on its axis as it thundered toward them.

"You'll soon see that it's not real," Curt told them with a flashing smile. "I'm going to drive right into it."

The *Comet* hurtled toward the oncoming dead sun with what would have seemed suicidal intent to any observer.

The huge black mass filled all space before them. Its black, jagged, cindery surface rushed headlong to meet them. Joan closed her eyes with a little scream.

The ship hit the jagged black surface, and plunged on through it unchecked. They had felt no slightest shock or check. That black, jagged surface was no more

real than a shadow.

The *Comet* was inside the vast dark-star illusion, now. All around them, enclosing them, stretched the semi-opaque curtain of force that maintained the illusion.

Curt Newton pointed ahead to a gleaming metal speck at the center of the great illusory image.

"That's the illusion-ship that maintains the image!" he cried. "That's where Doctor Zarro is."

He sent the *Comet* zooming upward, and then dived down toward the illusion-ship in a dizzy swoop.

"Stand by the proton-guns, Otho!" he yelled. "I'll blast them out of space!" hissed the android, catlike eyes gleaming brilliant.

"No, just disable them!" Captain Future ordered. "There are Stygians in that ship – poor, scared devils who were tricked into this plan by Doctor Zarro. Ready!"

Otho was at the breach of the *Comet's* heavy proton-guns. As the little tear-drop ship dived headlong, the guns spat pale, lacing beams at the tail of the other ship.

Curt saw the beams blast the tail rocket-tubes of the illusion-ship into a fusing wreck. The progress of the other craft faltered – it drifted on through space, still maintaining the vast curtain of the illusion.

"On space suit!" Curt cried to the android. "We're going to try and board it."

He had brought the *Comet* up behind the other craft, setting its throttles so that it clung beside the enemy ship. Now, struggling into his space-suit, he led Grag and Otho to the air-lock.

"Stay here with Simon, Joan!" he ordered the pale girl. "There'll be fighting on that ship."

Then Captain Future and Otho, in their suits, and Grag, passed out through the air-lock and leaped across the narrow gulf of space to the side of the drifting illusion-ship.

They reached the metal wall of the craft and clung there, floating with it.

"Get this air-lock door open, Grag!" Curt cried.

**T**HE big metal robot had replaced two of his fingers with drills. In a few seconds he had drilled holes into the metal. Then, hooking his fingers into them, he tore open the door.

They tumbled into the air-lock, shutting the outer door after them. Curt pressed the switch that opened the inner door. Proton-pistol in his hand, he plunged ahead of Grag and Otho into the interior of the illusion-ship.

Two blasts of atomic fire thundered down the main fore corridor at him the instant he entered. Doctor Zarro and Roj stood with Kallak a few feet down the corridor, firing at him.

Beyond those three huddled a half-dozen terrified Stygians, beside a big, throbbing cylindrical mechanism.

Grag's great arm knocked Captain Future aside as the deadly gun-blasts thundered. The streams of atomic force hit the robot instead of the scientific wizard. They splashed harmlessly off the broad metal breast of Grag.

"Get them!" Curt yelled, plunging down the corridor, his proton-gun spitting its beam.

His beam grazed past Doctor Zarro as the arch-plotter, with a fierce, raging shout, lunged to meet him.

The black prophet's empty atom-gun was raised to club Curt's skull. The lightning swerve of Captain Future saved him from the blow but it struck his wrist, knocking away his pistol.

Savagely Curt's hands sought the throat of Doctor Zarro. His fingers penetrated the immaterial illusion-disguise of the plotter and closed around the real man's neck.

Doctor Zarro was hammering fiercely at him with the clubbed atom-gun. But Curt Newton, half-dazed by the shower of blows, hung to his grip.

He was aware of Otho and Roj standing and shooting, crackling atom-blast against hissing proton-beam. And he heard as from a great distance the booming battle-yell of Grag as the robot locked in titanic struggle with Kallak, the giant.

Then Doctor Zarro's mad blows weakened, and finally ceased. The plotter went limp in Curt's deadly grip. And Captain Future knew that the murderous would-be dictator was dead.

He dropped his dead enemy and staggered around. Roj had been cut almost in half by Otho's beam, while Otho himself was holding his hand to a great blast-burn on one rubbery arm.

And Grag had smashed in the skull of the giant criminal Kallak with a tremendous blow of his metal fist.

"Gods of space, what a fight!" panted Otho, his green eyes blazing. "Is the Doctor dead?"

"Yes," answered Curt shakenly. "I had to kill him – or be killed myself."

He looked up at the terrified Stygians clustered around the throbbing cylindrical mechanism. It was that mechanism, Curt knew, that was generating the constant force-field which maintained, by subtle warping of reflection, the illusion of the dark star.

The Stygians shrank fearfully as the tall, red-haired young Earthman strode toward them. But he made a reassuring gesture.

"You are not going to be harmed", he told them. "But turn that thing off – at once!"

**H**ASTILY, the Stygians slammed levers and switches on the front of the big machine. And Captain Future, looking out, saw the vast semi-opaque curtain of the illusion suddenly disappear.

The dark-star illusion – the illusion that had almost changed the history of the System – was gone!

A worn smile lit Captain Future's face. "I'll bet the peoples of the System can't believe their eyes when they see the dark star suddenly gone entirely."

"Here are Joan and Simon!" Grag announced.

The girl, in space suit and carrying the Brain, had entered the ship. She looked sickly around the scene of battle, and then her eyes fastened on the prone figure of Doctor Zarro, still shrouded by his illusion-disguise.

"Doctor Zarro – Krim – is dead?" she faltered to Captain Future.

"He's dead, yes," Curt nodded grimly. "But it's not Victor Krim."

"What?" yelled Otho. "You mean that Krim wasn't Doctor Zarro?"

"Who else could it be?" cried Joan dazedly. "You said it wasn't Rundall Lane, and Romer is dead, and that leaves only Krim –"

For answer Captain Future reached down and fumbled till he found the little cylinder at Doctor Zarro's belt which had maintained the arch-plotter's illusion-disguise. He found a switch, touched it.

The illusion that Doctor Zarro's forbidding appearance had been, suddenly vanished. A different-looking man lay there, a dead, middle-aged Earthman with a fine, scholarly face.

"Cole Romer!" hissed Otho wildly. "But it's impossible – Romer was killed –"

"Romer was not killed." Curt denied somberly. "That charred body in the Tartarus warehouse was not Romer's – it was Victor Krim's!"

"Then Romer was Doctor Zarro!" Otho gasped.

Captain Future nodded.

"When I inspected that charred body that was supposed to be Romer's, I had already suspected three men of being Doctor Zarro – Rundall Lane, Victor Krim and Romer. But the nitrate clue which the Doctor planted to implicate Lane proved that Lane was not the Doctor.

"That left Krim and Romer. But Romer had supposedly been killed when he was calling Police office by televisors. He was supposed to have been blasted down by atom-guns as he was making the televisor call. But there was no sign of his pocket-televisor around his body – if he *had* been suddenly blasted, it would have been blasted too! I guessed then it was not his body, that the call was faked. Whose body was it? Who but Victor Krim's? Krim had leased that old warehouse lately. I believed that Krim had stumbled on the secret hideout and tunnel which Romer, as Doctor Zarro, was using, and had been murdered by Romer who knew that Krim's body would be thought his body. That's why Romer made that televisor call and pretended he was killed while making it – so that the body would be found, he would be thought dead, and nobody would wonder about his absence when he took up the identity of Doctor Zarro *permanently!*

"Romer knew the fur-hunters' quarter would be

searched for him sooner or later, since he'd let it be known that he was going there to hunt for Krim. When the quarter was searched, the burned body would be found, his interrupted call would be remembered, and everyone would think that body was his – Romer's.

"ONE more fact clinched my suspicion of Romer," Curt continued. "I found in his offices of the Pluto Survey, samples of minerals from every moon of Pluto. He would have had easy access to a sample of Cerberus nitrate such as Doctor Zarro had used to point suspicion at Lane. No one else would be likely to have such a sample!"

"But Doctor Zarro – Romer – told you that he'd been on Styx for weeks," objected Otho. "Why wasn't he missed?"

"Because he said that he'd been exploring Charon," Captain Future replied. "Actually, as I learned, he'd been on Charon only a short time – long enough to enlist Roj and Kallak in his scheme."

And Curt Newton added, looking down broodingly at the dead plotter:

"It was a vast scheme, surely. He even maintained his identity as Romer. to avoid suspicion being caused by his sudden disappearance. A vast, cunning scheme – and he almost succeeded."

"He couldn't succeed with you against him, Captain Future!" cried Joan.

Curt Newton shook his head, looking soberly out into the vast, awesome gulf of the eternal void.

"I think that it was not us alone who defeated Doctor Zarro, but the workings of some mathematics of fate that bring justice to all such as he," he said.

"Aye, lad," rasped the Brain. "And the workings of that mathematics are beyond even our science – and always will be."

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## CHAPTER XX

### *Trail in the Stars*

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THE wan, dusky day of Pluto, cold world of eternal twilight, was drawing to an end. The stars were shining forth more brightly, and the big transparent dome of the city, Tartarus, shimmered like a brilliant bubble as the night closed in around it.

Freezing winds swept over the darkening rock plain outside the city. Here at an edge of the spaceport lay a small, tear-drop shaped craft that was poised for a leap into space. Captain Future and the Futuremen were about to start home.

Captain Future and his comrades faced three fur-clad figures – Ezra Gurney, Joan, and little Kansu Kane.

"I can give you a lift back to Venus easily, Kansu,"

Curt was saying. "It won't be much out of our way."

"Aye, and on the way I can prove to you the absurdity of your double-spectra theory," the Brain added to the little astronomer.

Kansu Kane declined the invitation uneasily.

"I'd rather take the regular liner back," he told Captain Future. "Too many things happen when a person travels with you, I've found."

Curt Newton chuckled. "Well, maybe you're right. What about you, Joan? Sure you don't want to have us take you back to Earth?"

"I wish I could go with you," Joan said, her brown eyes wistful. "But I have to obey the orders of the Planet Police headquarters. They want me to stay here a little longer."

"Yes, there's plenty work going to be piled on us, arranging things with this new world Styx and its people," drawled old Ezra Gurney.

Curt nodded understandingly.

"You'll find the Stygians only too anxious to be friends with the rest of the System, now that their fear of the Earthmen has gone."

Days had passed since Captain Future and his comrades had destroyed Doctor Zarro and his vast plot. Days in which the Solar System peoples had dazedly awakened to the fact that they had been victims of a gigantic hoax which had nearly robbed them of their liberty, and which Captain Future had barely frustrated.

Curt had spent part of those days on Styx. He had found the Stygians terrified, believing that now the Earthmen would take terrible vengeance upon them. But Captain Future, always most skillful of men in dealing with native planetary races, had finally convinced the Stygians that the Earthmen would be friends, not enemies, and that their long dread was without reason.

Gladly, the Stygians had accepted the proffer of friendship. They had ended the planetary camouflage which made their moon appear sea-covered. An ancient, hidden race was about to take its place in the System's friendly family of peoples.

"The whole System is ringing with your name again, Captain Future!" Joan was saying warmly. "Billions of people bless you and your comrades."

Curt shifted uncomfortably.

"There's no reason for them to. Hang it, it's only the fun of the thing that leads me off on these adventures."

"You're not foolin' anybody when you say that," Ezra Gurney drawled. "But it's what I'd expect you to say."

Otho broke into the conversation. The android had been staring suspiciously at a big bundle under Grag's arm, a bundle at which Eek, the moon-pup, was eagerly sniffing.

"What have you got there – another nuisance pet of some kind?" the android demanded of Grag.

Grag, for answer, unwrapped the thing. It was a huge chunk of pure silver.

"I got it in Tartarus for Eek," the big robot said proudly. "I promised it to him for what he did."

"You're going to feed him all that silver?" cried Otho. "Why, he'll be staggering drunk all the way home! That much silver will give him a hang-over for a year to come!"

"It will not," Grag defended indignantly. "And I do not want to hear you speak ill of Eek again, Otho. Remember, you owe your life to him."

"I owe my life to that pest?" Otho repeated furiously.

"Yes, you do," Grag said severely. And then the big robot spoke to the moon-pup, voicing the thought he was projecting. "It's all right now, Eek. Uncle Otho will be your friend."

"Uncle Otho – uncle to that nuisance?" Otho choked, and for once could say no more.

Curt Newton was laughing. He held out his hand to Ezra Gurney and Joan, in goodbye.

"We'd better be blasting off," he grinned. "It's back to Earth's Moon for us, where Simon and I have some interesting experiments to resume if we can keep these two quiet."

The Futuremen were already entering the *Comet*. Curt turned at the door, waving his arm.

"See you in space sometime!" he called.

"We're sure to be seein' you if there's trouble afoot!" called back Ezra Gurney.

Joan said nothing. But as the *Comet* lifted skyward with a roar and flash of rocket-fire, her eyes clung to it.

She watched the little tear-drop ship zooming up into the dusky sky, leaving a shining rocket trail across the stars as Captain Future and his band headed Earthward, Moonward, homeward.

Then the fading, shining trail amid the stars seemed to blur as her eyes filled. She felt Ezra's hand patting her shoulder and the old marshal's drawling voice was understanding.

"He's got to go, Joan – he's got a job to do, the biggest one any man ever had, watchin' over the whole System," drawled the old veteran. "But we'll be seein' him again, like he said. Sooner or later, we'll be needin' him again – and he'll come."

"Yes, I know that," she said, her voice a little unsteady.

It was the truth, she knew. The future of the System, of an expanding, space-pioneering race, bulked big with threatening dangers.

When those dangers came, the great signallight on Earth's northern pole would flare its summons again to the wizard of science and his comrades, calling Captain Future.

And then – and always – Captain Future would answer that call.