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# Birthplace of Creation

A Captain Future Novelet by EDMOND HAMILTON

In their final adventure the Futuremen are called on to  
save the Universe itself from a madman's destructive whim!

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## CHAPTER I

### *Citadel of the Futuremen*

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GARRAND watched the face of the Moon grow larger in the forward port of his small cruiser. A white and terrible face, he thought. A death's-head with meteor-gnawed bones and gaping crater-wounds, bleak and cruel and very silent, watching him come and thinking secret boding thoughts about him. A feeling of sickness grew in him.

"I am a fool and soon I will probably be a dead fool," he said to himself.

He was not a brave man. He was very fond of living and he did not think of death at all as a thing to be dared and laughed at. The knowledge that he was likely to die there on the Moon gave him qualms of physical anguish that made him look as white and hollow as the stony face that watched him through the port. And yet he did not turn back. There was something in Garrand that was stronger than his fear. His hands trembled, but they held the cruiser grimly on its course.

The stark plains and mountain ranges took size and shape, the lonely mountains of the Moon that looked on nothing and the plains where nothing stirred, not even the smallest wind or whirl of dust. Men had

gone out to other worlds and other stars. They had ranged far across space, founding colonies on asteroids and cities on the shores of alien seas. But they left the deathly airless Moon alone. They had looked at it once and gone away. There were only four who made the Moon their home—and not all of those four were men.

Tycho Crater widened out below the little ship. Licking dry lips metallic with the taste of fear, Garrand consulted a map, drawn carefully to scale and showing in that desolation one intricate diagram of a man-made structure. There were ominous gaps in that diagram and Garrand was painfully aware of them. He made his calculations and set his ship down well beyond the outer periphery of defenses marked on the chart.

His landing was a clumsy nervous one. White pumice-dust burst upward around the hull and settled slowly back again. Garrand cut his jets and sat for a moment looking out across Tycho, all ringed around in the distance with cliffs and spires and pinnacles of blasted rock that glittered in the light. There was no sign of the structure indicated on the chart. It was all below ground. Even its observatory dome was set flush, reflecting the Sun's unsoftened glare no more than the surrounding plain.

**P**RESENTLY Garrard rose, moving with the stiff reluctance of a man going to the gallows. He checked over the bulky shapes of a considerable mass of equipment. His examination was minute and he made one or two readjustments. Then he struggled into a pressure-suit and opened the airlock. The air went out with a whistling rush and after that there was no sound, only the utter silence of a world that has heard nothing since it was made.

Working in that vacuum Garrard carried out a light hand-sledge and set it in the dust. Then he brought out the bulky pieces of equipment and loaded them onto it. He was able to do this alone because of the weak gravitation and when he was through he was able for the same reason to tow the sledge behind him.

He set off across the crater. The glare was intense. Sweat gathered on him and ran in slow trickles down his face. He suffered in the heavy armor, setting one weighted boot before the other, with the little puffs of dust rising and falling back at every step, hauling the sledge behind him. And fear grew steadily in him as he went on.

He knew—all the System knew—that the four who lived here were not here now, that they were far away on a distant troubled world. But their formidable name and presence seemed to haunt this lifeless sphere and he was walking now into the teeth of the deadly defenses they had left behind them.

“They can be beaten,” he told himself, sweating. “I’ve got to beat them.”

He studied his map again. He knew exactly how far he had come from the ship. Leaving himself a wide margin of safety he activated the detector-mechanism on the sledge. The helmet of his pressure-suit was fitted with ultra-sensitive hearing devices that had nothing to do with sonic waves but translated sub-electronic impulses from the detector into audible sound-signals.

He stood still, listening intently. But the detector said nothing and he went on, very slowly now and cautiously, across the dead

waste until his footsteps in the dust approached the line of that outer circle on the map. Then the detector spoke with a faint small clicking.

Garrard stopped. He bent over the panel of the mechanism, a jumble of dials, sorters, frequency-indicators and pattern-indicators. Above them a red pip burned in a ground-glass field. His heart hammered hard and he reached hastily for a black oblong bulk beside the detector.

He thought, “I’m still far enough away so that the blast won’t be lethal if this doesn’t work.”

The thought was comforting but unconvincing. He forced his hand to steady, to pick up the four-pronged plugs and insert them, one by one in the proper order, into the side of the detector. Then he dropped behind the sledge and waited.

The black oblong hummed. He could feel it humming where his shoulder touched the metal of the sledge. It was designed to pick up its readings from the detector, to formulate them, adjust itself automatically to the indicated pattern and frequency, to broadcast an electronic barrier that would blank out the impulse-receptivity of the hidden trap’s sensor-unit. That was its purpose. It should work. But if it did not . . .

He waited, the muscles of his belly knotted tight. There was no flash or tremor of a blast. After he had counted slowly to a hundred he got up again and looked. The red pip had faded from the ground-glass screen. There was a white one in place of it.

Garrard watched that white pip as though it were the face of his patron saint, hauling the sledge on slowly through that outer circle and through the ones beyond it that were only guessed at. Three times more the urgent clicking sounded in his ears and the dials and pointers changed—and three times the pip faded from red to white and Garrard was still alive when he reached the metal valve door set into the floor of the crater.

The controls of that door were plainly in sight but he did not touch them. Instead he hauled a portable scanner off the sledge and used it to examine the intimate molecular structure of the metal and all its control connections. By this means he found the particular bolt-head that was a switch and turned it, immobilizing a certain device set to catch an unknowing intruder as soon as he opened the valve.

Within minutes after that Garrand had the door open and was standing at the head of a steep flight of steps, going down. His heart was still thudding away and he felt weak in the knees—but he was filled with exultation and a great pride. Few other men, he thought, perhaps none, could have penetrated safely to the very threshold of this most impregnable of all places in the Solar System.

He did not relax his caution. A large mass of equipment went with him down the dark stairway, including the scanner. The valve closed automatically behind him and below in a small chamber he waited until pressure had build up and another door automatically opened. He found nothing more of menace except a system of alarm bells, which he put out of commission—not because there was anyone to hear them but because he knew there would be recorders and he wanted no signs, audible or visible, of his visit.

**T**HE recorders themselves were relatively easy to detect. With an instrument brought for the purpose he blanked off their relay systems and went on across the great circular central chamber with the glassite dome through which the sunlight poured. He peered with a scientist's fascinated wonder at the laboratory apparatus of various sorts in that and the smaller chambers which opened off it until he came to what of all things he was looking for—the heavy locked door of a vault, sunk deep in the lunar rock.

Garrand worked for a long time over that door. The silence was beginning to get to him and the uneasy knowledge that he

was where he had no right to be. He began to listen for the voices and the steps of those who might come in and find him.

They were far away and Garrand knew that he was safe.

But he was not a criminal by habit and now that the challenge to his skill was past he began to feel increasingly guilty and unclean. Personal belongings accused him, an open book, a pair of boots, beds and chests and clothing. If it had been merely a laboratory he would not have minded so much—but it was also a dwelling place and he felt like a common thief.

**T**HAT feeling was forgotten when he entered the vault. There were many things in that vast lunar cavern, but Garrand had no more than a passing glance for any of them except the massive file-racks where the recorded data which related to voyages were spooled and kept.

Under the clear light that had come on of itself with the opening of the door Garrand searched the racks, puzzling out the intricate filing system. He had taken off his helmet. His hands shook visibly and his breathing was loud and irregular but these were only secondary manifestations.

His mind, faced with a difficult problem to solve, slipped by long habit into calculating-machine efficiency and it was not long before he found what he wanted.

He took the spool in his two hands, as tenderly as though it were made of the delicate stuff of dreams and apt to shatter at a breath. He carried it to the large table that stood by the racks and fed the end of the tape into a reader. His face had grown pale and quite rigid except that his mouth twitched a little at the corners. He set up his last piece of equipment beside the reader, a photosonic recorder used to make copies of a master spool, synchronized them and then closed the switches.

The two spools unwound, one giving, the other receiving, and Garrand remained motionless over the viewer, seeing visions beyond price and listening to the voices that spoke of cosmic secrets. When the

spool was finished it was a long time before he moved. His eyes were still busy with their visions and they were strangely dull and shining all at once, shining and far away.

**A**T last he shook himself and laughed, small gasping sound that might well have been a sob. He replaced the original in the rack and put the second spool into a special pouch on his belt. In the vault he left everything exactly as he had found it and when he came out again onto the Moon's surface he reset the hidden trigger that guarded the outer door.

As he had penetrated the defences on the plain, so he went back through them again, in a double agony lest now, when he had the thing he had taken such incredible chances for, he should blunder and be killed. The shadows of the crater edge were crawling toward him, sharp and black. The last premonitory clicking of the detector, the last fading of the warning pip from red to white and he was safe, running toward the ship into the knife-edged darkness of the shadow.

Long before night came Garrand was gone, plunging across the narrow gulf to Earth. He did not know how to give vent to the wildness of his exultation, so he held it in but it burned in his face and eyes.

"Tomorrow," he said aloud to himself, over and over. "Tomorrow we'll be on our way." He laughed, addressing someone who was not present. "You said I couldn't do it, Herrick. You said I couldn't!"

Behind him the darkening face of the Moon looked after him.

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## CHAPTER II

### *Cosmic Secret*

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**F**OUR came home to the Moon after many days. Four, of whom only one was an ordinary man.

Curt Newton, the man—Otho, the android or artificial man who was human in everything but origin—Grag, the towering metal man or intelligent robot—and Simon Wright, he who had once been a man but whose brain only now lived on in a strange mechanical body.

Their ship came down like a thunderbolt of metal from the sky. The camouflaged doors of an underground hangar opened silently to receive it and closed as silently.

Into the great circular room beneath the observatory dome the four Futuremen came. Curt Newton paused by the wall to activate the recorder panel. It showed blank. It always showed blank.

He sat down slowly, a tall man with red hair and a bronzed face that looked now very tired.

"Do you think our work out there will stick, Simon?" he asked.

He addressed the small square metal case hovering on motor-beams before him, its strange "face" of lens-eyes turned toward him. The serum-case, in which Simon Wright's brain lived its life.

"I am confident," said Simon with his precise articulation of metallic artificial accents, "that there will be no more trouble between Uranus Mines and the natives."

Curt frowned and sighed. "I hope so. When will they learn how to deal with planetary primitives?"

Grag spoke up loudly. He was standing, a seven-foot giant of metal, with his head turned and his photoelectric eyes staring intently across the big room.

"Curt, someone's been here," his great voice boomed.

"No. I checked the recorders," Newton said without turning.

"I don't care," Grag persisted. "That chair by the vault door has been moved. I was the last one out when we left and I remember exactly where it stood. It's been moved a good three inches."

Otho burst into laughter. "Listen to Old Hawkeye. Three inches!" The android, so perfectly human in appearance that only

something bright and strange lurking in his green eyes betrayed an inner difference, went on mockingly, "Are you sure it's not two and a half inches?"

Grag began to protest angrily in his foghorn voice. Curt swung around irritably to silence them. But Simon Wright said gravely, "Wait, Curtis. You know that the constitution of Grag's metal brain makes his memory absolutely photographic. If he says the chair has been moved it has been moved."

"But the recorders?"

"They *could* have been blanked, you know. It's theoretically possible."

"Only theoretically—" Curt began and then he stopped and swore. "Blast you, Grag! Why did you have to raise a doubt in my mind? Now I'll have to take down the recorders to check them and that's the devil and all of a job."

Irritation riding him, he went out of the big room and came back with tools. He scowled at Grag. "You'd better be right!"

Simon and Otho helped him in the delicate work of disassembling the recorders. They examined both the microfilm and the interior relay circuits bit by bit.

Curt's irritation left him suddenly. He looked sharply at the others. He had found it—the minute blurred line where the film had started to roll and been arrested. The relay circuits were a fraction of a decimal out of synchronization now.

Otho whistled softly. "Blanked!" he said. "And so beautifully done—nothing fused or blown out, the derangement so small that you'd never notice it unless you were searching for it."

"So I was right?" Grag boomed triumphantly. "I knew I was right. When I see a thing that's changed I—"

"Shut up," Curt Newton told him. He looked, puzzled, at Simon. "No criminal did this—no ordinary criminal. The job of blanking these relays required tremendous scientific ability."

Simon brooded, hovering. "That's obvious. Only an expert in sub-electronics

would be capable. But that seems incongruous. Why would a top scientist come prowling in here like a common thief?"

Curt turned. "Grag, will you see if anything else has been moved or taken?"

The metal giant started stalking through the rooms. Curt remained silent and thoughtful, the frown on his tanned face deepening.

Grag came back. "No. Nothing else has been tampered with."

"Yet it was," Curt said slowly. He looked again at Simon. "I've been thinking. An expert in sub-electronics . . . Do you remember the nuclear physics man down at New York Tech whom we met at Government Center a few months ago?"

"Garris? Garrand—some name like that? I remember. A nice little man."

"Yes, I thought so too—very eager about his work. But I remember now he asked me a question—"

**C**URT broke off suddenly. He went rapidly across the big room, unlocked the vault door and inside the silent lunar cavern he went straight to the files.

Simon had followed him. And when Simon saw the spool that Curt drew from the file his lens-eyes turned to Curt's face with a startled swiftness.

"Curtis, *no!* You don't think—"

"It was what he asked me about," Curt said. "The Birthplace."

The word went echoing solemnly back and forth around the cold rock walls. And Curt stared at Simon, not really seeing him, seeing uncanny awesome things that lived in memory, and a strange look came into his face—a strange look indeed for the man Curt Newton. A look of fear.

Simon said, "How could he know of the Birthplace?"

That word had never been spoken to anyone. They hardly spoke it even among themselves. Such a secret was not for the knowledge nor the use of men and they had guarded it more carefully than the sum total of all other knowledge they

possessed. Now the very sound of that name brought Grag and Otho to the door and wrought a sudden tension that filled the cavern with a waiting stillness.

Curt said heavily, "He connected the theoretical possibility with the work we did on Mercury. He's a brilliant man, Simon—too brilliant."

"Perhaps," said Grag, "he only looked for the secret and couldn't find it. After all, our filing system . . ."

Curt shook his head. "If he could get in here he could find what he wanted." He examined the spool. "He could make a copy of this and there would be no way of telling that it had been done."

He stood motionless for a moment longer and no one spoke. Otho studied his face and shot one quick bright glance at Simon. Simon moved uneasily on his gliding force-beams.

Curt replaced the spool and turned. "We've got to find out about this man. We'll go to New York, at once."

Very soon thereafter the *Comet* rose from the dark gap of the hangar-mouth and shot away toward the great green globe of Earth.

Not much later, at headquarters of the Planet Police in New York, old marshal Ezra Gurney stared at Curt Newton in blank amazement.

"Garrand?" he said. "But he's a reputable man, a scientist!"

"Nevertheless," said Curt grimly, "I want all the information you can get and fast."

Simon spoke. "This is urgent, Ezra. We cannot afford delay."

The grizzled old spaceman glanced from one to the other, and then to Otho. "Something really bad, eh? All right, I'll do what I can."

He went out of the office. Otho leaned against the wall and remained motionless, watching Curt. Simon hovered near the desk. Neither one of them was afflicted with nerves. Curt moved restlessly about, brooding, his hands touching things and putting them down again in wire-taut

gestures. The intricate multichron on the wall whirred softly and the minutes slid away, on Earth, on Mars, on the far-flung worlds of the System. No one spoke and Ezra did not come back.

Simon said at last, "It would take time, even for Ezra."

"*Time!*" said Curt. "If Garrand has the secret we have no time."

He paced the small neat room, a man oppressed with heavy thoughts. The sound of the door opening brought him whirling around to face Ezra almost as though he were facing his executioner.

"Well?"

"Garrand took off from Earth on the twenty-first," said Ezra. "He flew a ship of his own, apparently an experimental model on which he has been working for some time in company with a man named Herrick, who is also listed as chief pilot. Destination, none. Purpose, cosmic ray research beyond the System. Because of Garrand's reputation and standing there was no difficulty about the clearance. That was all I could get."

"That's enough," said Curt. "More than enough." His face was bleak and the color had gone out of it under the tan. He looked very tired and in a way so strange that Ezra came up to him and demanded, "What is it, Curt? What did Garrand take from the laboratory?"

Curt answered, "He took the secret of the Birthplace of Matter."

Ezra stared, uncomprehending. "Is that a secret you can tell me?"

**C**URT said hopelessly, "I can tell you now. For it's known now to Garrand and this other man."

"What is it, then?"

"Ezra, it is the secret of creation."

There was a long silence. It was obvious from Gurney's face that the term was too large for him to understand. Yet Curt Newton did not continue as yet. He looked beyond them and his face was drawn and haggard.

"We'll have to go back there," he said, his voice low. "We'll have to. And I hoped never to go back."

Simon's expressionless eyes were fixed on him. Otho said loudly, "What's there to be afraid of? We ran the whirls before. And as for Garrand and the other one—"

"I am not afraid of *them*," Curt Newton said.

"I know," said Simon. "I was the only one who was with you in the shrine of the Watchers there. I know what you are afraid of—yourself."

"I still don't get it," Ezra said. "The secret of creation? Creation of what?"

"Of the universe, Ezra. Of all the matter in the universe."

A strange wonder came on Gurney's timeworn face. He said nothing. He waited.

"You remember," Curt told him, "when we came back from our first deep-space voyage? You remember that right after that we designed the electron-assembly plants that they've used ever since to replenish Mercury's thinning atmosphere? Where do you think we got the knowledge to do that, to juggle electrons into desired types of matter on a big scale?"

Gurney's voice was a whisper now. "You got that knowledge out in deep space?"

"In deep, deep space, Ezra. Near the center of our galaxy, amid the thick star-clusters and nebulae beyond Sagittarius. There lies the beating heart of our universe."

He made a gesture. "Back in the Twentieth Century the scientist Millikan first guessed the truth. The matter of the universe constantly melts away into radiation. Millikan believed that somewhere in the universe was a place where radiation was somehow built back into matter and that the so-called cosmic rays were the 'birth-cry' of the newborn matter. The fount of our material universe, the birthplace of material creation."

Awe was in Ezra's faded old eyes. "And you found that? And never told—never let anyone guess—"

"Garrand guessed," Curt said bitterly. "He connected our work at Mercury with our mysterious voyage. He tried to learn what I knew and when I would tell him nothing he came to the Moon and risked death to steal our records. And now he's gone to find it for himself."

Simon Wright said somberly, "He will only reap disaster if he tries to take it. I saw what almost happened there to *you*, Curtis."

"It's my fault," Curt said harshly. "We should have left no record. But I could not quite destroy it." He paused, then went on rapidly. "We've got to overtake him. What the other man, Herrick, may have in mind we can't tell. But Garrand is a fanatical researcher, who will tamper with the instruments of the Watchers as I did. He won't stop where I stopped!"

Ezra jumped to his feet. "I can have cruisers after him in an hour."

"They couldn't catch him now, Ezra. The *Comet* might. We'll have to make certain preparations and they'll take time. But even so we may catch him."

He turned, moving swiftly toward the door as though physical action were a relief from overpowering tension. Ezra stopped him. "Curt, wait! Let me go with you. I should, you know, if it's a case of catching a lawbreaker."

Newton looked at him. "No, Ezra. You're only trapped by the lure of this thing as I was. As I was . . . No."

Simon's metallic voice intervened. "Let him go with us, Curtis. I think we might need him—that *you* might need him."

A look passed between them. Then, silently, Curt nodded.

Back to the Moon, with five instead of four, went the *Comet* on wings of flame. In the hours that followed, the closed hangar-doors in silent Tycho gave no hint of the desperate rushed activity beneath.

But less than twenty-four hours after its return from Uranus the ship left the Moon



a second time. It went out through the planetary orbits like a flying prisoner breaking out through bars, poised for a moment beyond Pluto to shift into a new kind of motion, then was gone into the outer darkness.

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### CHAPTER III

#### *The Birthplace*

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THE *Comet* was a fleck, a mote, a tiny gleam of man-made light falling into infinity. Behind it, lost somewhere along the farthest shores of a lightless sea, lay Earth and Sol and the outposts of familiar stars. Ahead was the great wilderness of Sagittarius, the teeming star-jungle that to the eye seemed crowded thick with burning Suns and nebulae.

The five within the ship were silent. Four were busy with the memories they had of the time they had come this way before, with the knowledge of what was still to be encountered. One, Ezra Gurney, could find no words to speak. He was a veteran spaceman. He had been a veteran when Curt Newton was born. He knew the Solar System from Pluto to Mercury and back again and he knew how the naked undimmed stars could shine.

But this was different—this voyaging of deepest space, this pursuing of the fleets and navies of the stars to their own harbor, this going in among them. In a way Ezra Gurney was afraid. No man, not even Curt Newton, could look at that flaming sky ahead and not be a little afraid.

The *Comet* had come into the region of the great clusters. Mighty hives of gathered Suns blazed and swarmed, rolling across space and time, carrying after them sweeping trains of scattered stars. Between and beyond the clusters and their trailing star-streams shone the glowing clouds of nebulae, banners of light flung out for a million miles across the firmament, ablaze

with the glow of drowned and captured Suns. And beyond them all—the nebulae, the clusters and the stars—there showed the black brooding lightless immensity of a cloud of cosmic dust.

The soul of Ezra Gurney shook within him. Men had no business here in this battleground of angry gods. Men? But was he here with men?

“One-point-four degrees zenith,” came the metallic voice of Simon Wright from where he hovered above a bulky instrument.

“Check,” Curt Newton said and moved controls slightly. Then he asked, “Dust?”

“Definitely higher than average interstellar density now,” Otho reported, from his own place at the wide instrument panel. “It’ll thicken fast as we approach the main cloud.”

Ezra looked at them—at the square, hovering metal case of the living brain, at the lithe eager android peering forward into the abyss with burning green eyes, at the giant imperturbable metal bulk of the robot.

Not men, no! He was out here in the great deeps, rushing toward the mightiest secret of infinity, with creatures unhuman, with—

Curt turned, and smiled briefly and wearily at him. And the clamoring panic in Ezra was suddenly gone. Why, these were his oldest staunchest friends, unshakably loyal and true.

He drew a long breath. “I don’t mind telling you that it’s nearly got me down.”

“You’ve got worse coming,” Curt said uncomfortably. “We’ll hit the main cloud soon.”

“The cloud?”

“The great cloud of cosmic dust that surrounds the Birthplace. That dust is born from the Birthplace—and flows out in mighty tides through our hole universe.”

“To be born into new worlds?”

“Yes. Wezsacker fathomed that part of the cycle, long ago in the nineteen forties when he formulated his theory of the

gathering of the cosmic dust into new planets.”

Before them now rose a wall of Suns, glaring like cyclopean furnaces as the *Comet* seemingly crawled toward them. Almost it seemed that they could hear the clang and thunder of cosmic forges as their tiny craft approached and went between the flaming giants.

White and wild flared a far-flung nebula to the left beyond that rampart of stars. But ahead there gloomed farther still the black cloud that now seemed eating up the universe with jaws of darkness as they steadily approached it.

“No sign of any other ship outside the cloud,” Otho reported coolly. “Our detectors won’t range inside it, of course.”

“They had too big a start,” Curt said broodingly. “Two many days. Garrand and the other must already have been on the world of the Watchers for some time.”

“Unless the whirls wrecked them,” Otho suggested.

“Wishful thinking,” Curt said. “We ran the whirls and so could they.”

Simon said, “Curtis, you will not go into the shrine of the Watchers again?”

Curt Newton did not look at him. “I’ll have to if that’s where Garrand is.”

“You don’t have to, Curtis. We three could go.”

**N**OW, Curt looked at Simon, his tanned face set and unreadable. “You don’t trust me with the power of the Watchers?”

“You know what that power almost did to you before. It is for you to say.”

Curt looked ahead and said doggedly, “I am not afraid and I will go in there after him.”

Ezra Gurney, puzzled by the tension between them, asked, “Who are the Watchers?”

“They have been dead for ages,” Curt said slowly. “But long ago they penetrated the Birthplace and conquered its secret and set up instruments to wield its powers. It’s

why we have come. Garrand must not use those instruments.”

“Nobody must use them,” said Simon.

Curt said nothing to that.

Gurney, looking ahead, saw the black cloud widening out across the starry universe like a great tide of doom, steadily blotting out the stars. A fitting cosmic shroud for the greatest of cosmic secrets, he thought. Its fringes engulfed bright stars that shone wanly through the dimness like dying eyes.

“This dust,” said Simon, “is newborn matter, spawned by the Birthplace and pumped outward by pressure of radiation to flow out to the whole universe.”

“And the—the secret itself—is inside?”

“Yes.”

There was no moment when the *Comet* plunged suddenly within the cloud. Rather the dust thickened steadily until all about the flying ship was a deepening haze, deepest and darkest ahead but drawing more and more veils behind them so that the stars back there shone like smothered witch-fires.

The ship began to tremble as it encountered flowing spatial currents of denser dust. Struts and girders protested with slight creakings and then more loudly. They strapped into the recoil-chairs at Curt’s orders.

“Here it comes,” said Grag in loud complaint. “I remember last time almost every bone in my body was broken.”

Otho laughed. He started a caustic retort but had no time to voice it.

To Gurney the *Comet* seemed suddenly to have crashed. The tell-tales on the panel went crazy and the recoil-chairs screamed in outrage as the ship was batted through the haze by unseen giant hands.

There was nothing they could do but hang on. There was nothing even for Curt to do. The automatic pilot and stabilizers had to do it all now or they were finished.

The mechanisms functioned staunchly. Again and again they snatched the buffeted little ship out of raging eddies of dust-currents and hurled it forward again. Now

the whole hull was creaking and groaning from constantly changing stresses and the hiss of dust against its plates became a rising and falling roar.

Ezra Gurney felt a quaking dread. He had already seen too much, had come too far. Now he felt that a universe become sentient and hostile was wrathfully repelling them from its hidden heart, from its supreme secret.

The *Comet* fought forward, relentlessly impelled by its own mechanical brains, until the dust began to thin. It tore onward, still buffeted by swirling currents and drenched by radiation. And now, ahead, Ezra saw a vast hazy space inside the denser blackness of the cloud. And far away in this inner space, looming in vague gigantic splendor . . .

“Good God!” said Ezra Gurney and it was a prayer. “Then that—that . . .” Curt Newton’s eyes were alight with a strange glow. “Yes—the Birthplace.”

The hazy space within the denser cloud was vast. And at its center bulked and gleamed and shifted an enigmatic glory—a colossal spinning spiral of white radiance. Its whirling arms spanned millions of miles and it uttered cosmic lightnings of radiation that lanced out through the haze.

Beating heart of the universe, fiery womb that spawned the stuff of worlds, awesome epicenter of cosmos! Cloaked and shrouded by the dense black cloud of its own making, safe behind its ramparts of terrible whirlpools and the wild tide-runs of untamed matter fresh from creation, it flamed across its millions of miles of space, shaped like a spiral nebula, spinning, whirling, sending forth its seed to the farthest corners of the galaxy.

And to Ezra Gurney, cowering in his seat and staring at that far-off misty glory, it seemed that the eyes of men were not meant to see nor their minds to comprehend this shining Birthplace. “Surely,” he whispered, “surely we’re not going into *that*!”

Curt Newton nodded. He had still that strange look in his eyes, a look almost

mystic, as though he could see beyond the wonder and the glory of the Birthplace to its innermost secret heart and glimpse there the hidden laws by which it worked and carried out its destiny.

“Yes,” said Curt, “we’re going in.” He leaned forward over the controls, his face bathed in the misty radiance so that it seemed not his familiar face at all but the countenance of a being half godlike with the strange light flickering in his eyes.

“You see how it is, Ezra?” he asked. “How it spins like a great centrifuge, sucking in the spent energy of Suns and whirling it in currents of incalculable strength until, in some utterly undreamable way, the energy coagulates into electrons and protons which are thrown off in never-ending streams from the rim of the vortex.

“They form the shining haze that fills this hollow around the Birthplace. Then, farther out, they unite to form the atoms of cosmic dust. The pressure of radiation forces them on across the galaxy. And out of them new worlds are made.”

Ezra Gurney shivered. He did not speak.

“Curtis!” Simon’s voice was loud with a kind of warning and Curt Newton started, leaning back in his seat and turning again to the controls of the *Comet*. His face had tightened and his eyes were veiled.

**A**ND the ship sped on across that vast hollow in the heart of the dark cloud. And swift as its flight was it seemed only to creep slowly, slowly, toward the misty wheel of radiance. Pale witch-fires danced along its hull, growing brighter until the metal was enwrapped in veils of flame, tenuous, cold and having about them an eerie quality of life. The *Comet* was double-shielded against the radiation but even so Ezra Gurney could feel the echoes of that terrible force in his own flesh.

The flaming arms of the Birthplace reached wider and wider across space. The radiance deepened, became a supernal brilliance that seared the flinching eyeballs. The ship began to be shaken now and again by subtle tremors as the farthest

edges of out-thrown currents touched it and passed by.

Ezra shut his teeth hard to keep from screaming. He had been driven once too close to the Sun and he had looked hard into the depths of the atomic furnace that was about to swallow him. He had not then known one tenth of the fear that he knew now.

Slitting his eyes against the glare he could make out the central sphere from which the spiral arms curved out, a gigantic vortex of flaming force, the wheel-hub of the galaxy. The *Comet* was plunging straight toward it and there was nothing he could do to stop it, nothing . . .

Curt sent the ship driving in between two of the sweeping arms. Tidal-waves, torrents of energy picked them up and flung them, a leaf in the cosmic millrace, toward the grip of a curving arm that burned and seethed with all the ultimate fires of hell. And Curt fought the controls and tore away again, heading in, heading in. . .

The central sphere of force loomed up like a wall of flame higher than all the skies of space, and then they were in it.

It was as though a million Suns had exploded. The force and fire took the *Comet* and whirled it tumbling away through a blind and terrible violence. Ezra sagged half-conscious in his seat and he thought that he had come a long, long way to die. No ship, no body, could live for long in this.

The forces of the cosmic centrifuge would tear their substance, powder it to atoms and then still down into the fine raw stuff of atoms, send it out to join with the black dust, to begin the timeless pilgrimage across the empty spaces, to be built at last into the foundations of some new world to circle an alien Sun. Human, robot and android, they would all be one in the end.

The *Comet* crashed suddenly clear of that hellish tempest of light and force into quiet space. Into a space enclosed by the spinning central sphere of the Birthplace

itself, a calm at the very center of cosmic storm.

Dazzled, half-stunned, Ezra heard Simon saying, "In here at the center is only one world—the world of the Watchers, where—"

Curt Newton, leaning forward, interrupted with a strange low cry.

"Simon, look! *Look!* There are other worlds here now—worlds and Suns and—" His voice seemed strangled by a surprise and terror too great for utterance.

Ezra strained desperately to regain use of his dazzled eyes. As they began to clear he too peered tautly forward. At first what he saw did not seem so terrifying. Here, in the wide calm space at the heart of the Birthplace, there was a cluster of Suns and planets.

Ruby Suns, flaring like new blood, green and white and somber smoky-gold Suns! Planets and moons that circled the changing Suns in sweeping trains, themselves ever changing! Comets that shot in living light between the worlds, meteor swarms rushing and wheeling, an astronomical phantasmagoria enclosed within this comparatively little space!

"You said there were no worlds but one here," Ezra began, bewildered.

"There *were* none." Curt's face was deathly, and something in it struck at Ezra's heart. "There were none but that little blue world—that alone."

Ezra glimpsed it at the center of the strange, close-packed cluster—a little blue planet that was a geometrically perfect sphere.

"The powers of the Watchers are there—the instruments by which they could tap the Birthplace itself," Curt was saying hoarsely. "And Garrand has been there with those instruments for days."

A comprehension so monstrous that his mind recoiled from it came to Ezra Gurney. "You mean that Garrand . . ."

He could not finish, could not say it. It was not a thing that could be said in any sane universe.

Curt Newton said it. "Garrand by tapping the Birthplace, has *created* the Suns and worlds and comets and meteors of that cluster. He has fallen victim to the old allurements, the strongest in the universe."

"As you almost fell victim once!" Simon Wright warned.

"Can a man make worlds?" Ezra felt shaken and sick inside. "Curt, no—this thing—"

"One who can harness the Birthplace can create at will!" Curt exclaimed. "And the instruments of the Watchers *do* harness it!"

A kind of madness had come over him. Under his hands the *Comet* leaped forward at terrible speed. Ezra heard him talking, whether to the others or himself he never knew.

"There is a balance of forces—always a balance! It cannot be tampered with too much. The Watchers left a warning, a plain and dreadful warning."

The ship rushed forward toward the distant small blue world, careening wildly through the unholy stars and worlds and comets whose creation had blasphemed against the natural universe.

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## CHAPTER IV

### *Power of the Watchers*

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THE blue world shimmered in the light of the monstrous aurora, a perfect jewel, with no height of mountain nor roughness of natural growth to mar its symmetry. Its surface showed a gloss that made Ezra think of porcelain or the deep gleam of polished lapis.

"The Watchers made it long ago," said Curt. "They made it out of the forces of the Birthplace and it was their outpost in this universe, where they studied the secrets of creation. There exists a city . . ."

The *Comet* sped low across the curving plain. For a time there was nothing but the blank expanse of blue—what was it, glass or rock or jewel-stone or some substance new in the universe? Above them the little suns with their planets wheeled and shone, laced about with the fire of comets, and above those again was the golden sky of the Birthplace. Curt's face, bent forward toward the blue horizon, was intense and pale and somehow alien.

"There it is!" cried Otho, and Curt nodded. Ahead there were the tips of slender spires flashing in the light and a gleam and glow of faceted surfaces that made a web of radiance like the aura sometimes seen in dreams. The spires lifted into graceful height, shaped themselves into the form of a city.

Walls of the same translucent blue enclosed the towers and in the center, rising high above them all, there was a citadel, a cathedral-form as massive and as delicate as the castles that sometimes stand upon the tops of clouds on Earth. And it was dead, the blue and graceful city. The walls, the streets, the flying arches that spanned the upper levels of the towers, all were silent and deserted.

"Garrand's ship," said Curt and Ezra saw it on the plain before the city, an ugly dark intruder on this world that had not been made for men.

Curt set the *Comet* down beside it. There was air on this planet, for the Watchers had been oxygen-breathers even though they were not human. The lock of Garrand's ship stood open but there was no life nor movement that Curt could see.

"It seems deserted," he said, "but we'd better make sure."

Ezra roused himself. He went out with the others and somehow the mere act of moving and the possibility of facing a human and comprehensible danger was a relief, almost a pleasure. He walked beside Curt with Otho beyond him. Their boots slipped and rang on the glassy surface. Apart from that there was no sound. The city brooded and was still.

They went through the open airlock into the other ship. There did not seem to be anything to fear, but they moved with the caution of long habit. Ezra found that he was waiting, hoping for action, for attack. He needed some escape valve for the terrors that had grown within him during this flight into the heart of the universe. But the narrow corridors were empty and nothing stirred behind the bulkhead doors.

Then, in the main cabin, they found a man.

He was sitting on the padded bench formed by the tops of the lockers along one wall. He did not move when they came in except to lift his head and look at them. He was a big man, of a breed that Ezra Gurney knew very well, having fought them all his life across the Solar System. But the hardness had gone out of him now. The strong lines of his face had sagged and softened and his eyes held only hopelessness and fear. He had been drinking but he was not drunk.

"You're too late," he said. "Way too late."

Curt went and stood before him. "You're Herrick," he said. "Are you alone?"

"Oh, yes," said Herrick. "I'm alone. There were Sperry and Forbin but they're dead now." Herrick had not shaved for some time. The black stubble on his jaw was flecked with white. He ran his hand across it and his fingers trembled. "I wouldn't be here now," he said, "but I couldn't run the whirls alone. I couldn't take this ship clear back to Earth alone. I couldn't do anything but sit and wait."

Curt said, "Where's Garrand?"

Herrick laughed. It was not pleasant laughter. "*You* know where he is. Go in and get him. Make him come out. That's how Sperry and Forbin died, trying to make him. I don't know why I'm alive myself. I don't know if I want to be alive after what I've seen."

**H**E GOT up. It was hard for him to rise, hard to stand. It was as though fear had eaten the bones away inside him, dissolved the strength from his muscles, leaving him only a hulk, a receptacle for terror. His eyes burned at them.

"You know me," he said. "You know my kind. You can guess why I came with Garrand to get the secret of the Birthplace, what I was going to do with it afterward. I didn't figure Garrand would get in my way. I needed his brains, all right, but there would come a time when I wouldn't need them anymore." He made a gesture, as of brushing away an insect with his hand. "As easy as that." He began to laugh again and it was more weeping than laughter.

"Stop it!" said Curt and Herrick stopped quite obediently. He looked at Curt as though a thought had just come to him, creeping through the fear-webs that shrouded his brain.

"*You* can get me out of here," he said. There was no threat in his voice, only pleading, the voice of a man caught in quicksand and crying for release. "It's no use going after Garrand. He'll die in there anyway. He won't eat or sleep, he's gone beyond those things, but whatever he thinks he is he's human and he'll die. Just go! Take me aboard your ship and go!"

"No," said Curt.

Herrick sat down again on the bench. "No," he whispered. "You wouldn't. You're as mad as he is."

Simon said, "Curtis . . ."

He had remained in the shadowy background, listening, but now he came forward and spoke and Curt turned on him.

"No!" he said again. "I can't go away and leave a madman there to play with the forces of the Birthplace till he dies!"

Simon was silent for a time and then he said slowly, "There is truth in what you say but only part of it. And I am sorry, Curtis—for I am no more proof against this madness than you. Even less, perhaps, than you.

"I shall stay out here with Grag to guard the ships and Herrick." His lens-like eyes

turned upon Ezra Gurney. "I think that you, of all of us, will resist the lure most strongly. You are like Herrick, a man of your hands—and Herrick, who came to steal the secret, felt only terror when he found it."

He said no more but Ezra knew what he meant. Simon was giving Curt Newton into his hands to save him from some destruction which Ezra did not understand. There was a coldness around Ezra's heart and a sickness in his belly and in his mind a great wish that he had never left Earth.

Curt said to Herrick, "Go to my ship and wait. When we leave you'll go with us."

Herrick shook his head. His eyes lifted slowly to Curt Newton's and dropped again. He said, "You'll never leave."

Ezra left the ship with Curt and Otho and he was sorry that Herrick had said those last three words.

They walked again across the ringing glassy plain, this time toward the city wall and the tall gateway that was in it. The leaves of the portal stood open and there was a look about them as though they had not been touched or closed for more ages than Ezra could think about. He and Otho passed through them, following Curt. Beyond, at a little distance, were two dark statues facing each other across the way. Ezra looked at them and caught his breath in sharply.

"The Watchers?" he whispered. "Where they like that? But what were they then?"

Otho said, "They came from another universe. Simon thought they must have been liquescent from the formless structure of their bodies."

Out of each amorphous figure stared two round yellow eyes, full of light from the glowing sky and uncannily lifelike. Ezra shuddered and hurried by, glancing as he did so at the strangely inscribed letters upon the bases of the statues. He assumed that that was the warning Curt had referred to and he did not want to enquire too closely into it.

"Go quietly," Curt said. "Two men have already died here. We want to get as close

to Garrand as we can before he knows we're here."

"Where is he?" demanded Ezra for the city was utterly dead and still. Curt pointed to the citadel.

"In there."

They made their way as silently as they could along the blue translucent street. High above them the slender spires made soft bell-notes where the wind touched them and the crystal spans thrummed like muted harps. And the shimmering castle loomed close before them and the strange stars sparkled in the golden sky. Ezra Gurney was afraid.

There was a portal, tall and simply made, with an unknown symbol cut above it. They passed it, treading softly, and stood within a vast cathedral vault that soared upward until the tops of the walls were lost in a golden haze and Ezra realized that it was open to the sky.

The floor was of the same blue substance as the city and in the center of it, under the open vault, was a massive oblong block almost like a gigantic altar except that its top was set with hundreds of little, shining keys. Beside this block stood Garrand. He was not looking at it nor at the two men and the android who had entered. He was looking upward into that distant sky and through the opening Ezra could see the glittering of stars. Garrand was smiling.

Curt Newton walked out across the floor.

"Don't come any closer," said Garrand mildly. "Just where you are—that's close enough."

Curt stopped. Otho had begun to edge away along the curve of the wall very slowly, like a drifting shadow. Ezra stood a little behind Curt and to one side.

**G**ARRAND turned toward them and for the first time Ezra saw his face quite clearly. Unshaven and deathly white, its cheeks and temples sunken with hunger and exhaustion, its eyes dark and burning, there was a beauty about it that had never

been there before, something sublime and glorious and calm, as a sea is calm or a frozen river, with the potentials of destruction sleeping in it. And Ezra understood the danger that Simon had spoken of in regard to Curt. He understood now what the power that was here could do to a man.

“So, after all, you followed me,” Garrand said. “Well, it doesn't matter now.” He stepped behind the block that was like an altar, so that it was between him and Curt.

Curt said quietly, “You must leave here, Garrand. You'll have to leave some time, you know. You're only human.”

“Am I?” Garrand laughed. His hand lightly caressed the bank of little shining keys. “Am I? I was once. I was a little physicist who thought adding to scientific knowledge supremely important and I stole and risked my life to come here for more knowledge.” His eyes lit up. “I came searching for a scientific secret and I found the source of godhead!”

“So now, because you've tampered with the Watcher's powers and tapped the Birthplace, you're a god?” Curt's tone was ironic but Ezra could see the sweat standing out on his forehead.

Garrand took no offence. He was armored by an egocentric emotion so great that he merely smiled wearily and said, “You can go now—all of you. I dislike chattering. I dislike it so much that I will quite willingly call destruction in here to engulf you unless you go.”

His fingers had ceased straying, had come to rest on certain keys. Ezra Gurney felt a slow freezing of his flesh. He whispered hoarsely, “You'll have to kill him, Curt.”

He knew the swiftness with which Newton could draw and fire the weapon at his belt. But Curt made no move.

“Can I fire into that bank of controls?” Curt muttered. “Otho's speed is our only chance.”

He flung up his hand, his fingers crooked. He said loudly, “Garrand, I warn you—”

His gesture had been both a feint to draw attention, a signal. A signal that sent Otho lunging toward the oblong altar.

The phenomenal swiftness of the android, the reaction speed of nerves and muscles that were not human, made Otho's movement almost blurring to the eye. But Garrand saw and with a low cry he pressed the keys.

To Ezra, in the next moment, the air around them seemed suddenly charged with power. The golden haze spun about him, darkened, thickened, all in a heartbeat. He felt the imminent materialization of an agency of destruction drawn from the great matrix of force about them.

He glimpsed through the thickening haze Otho pulling Garrand back from the altar. He saw Curt leaping in, his face desperate and raising the depressed keys.

And Ezra felt the half-materialized shadowy force around him melting back into nothingness. “What—” he stammered, still standing frozen.

“Death,” said Curt. “As to the form of it who knows but Garrand? Anyway, it's over now.” His voice was unsteady and his hands shook on the keys. He looked down. Garrand had gone limp in Otho's arms. Ezra thought at first that he was dead and then he saw the shallow breathing, the faint twitching of the mouth.

“Hunger and exhaustion,” said Curt. “Strain. He was already at the end of his rope. Get him back to the ship, Otho, and have Simon take care of him.”

Otho lifted the unconscious man without effort but he did not yet move away. “Aren't you coming, Curt?”

“Not yet.” He glanced upward through the opening at the brilliant stars that swarmed where no stars ought to be. “I can't leave this imbalance at the heart of the Birthplace. The Watchers were careful about that. They built their one small planet at the exact center of stress, where it



wouldn't upset anything. But those creations of Garrand's—I don't dare leave them here, Otho."

Still Otho did not move and Curt said, "Go on, Otho. Garrand needs help."

**S**LOWLY and reluctantly the android turned and as he did so he looked at Ezra, a look of warning, a pleading look. Then, he went out, carrying Garrand.

Curt Newton bent over the keys. "I haven't forgotten," he whispered to himself. "How could anyone ever forget?" He touched the gleaming keys, not pressing them, just touching them lightly and feeling the power that was in them, the unimaginable control of matter.

Ezra said hoarsely, "What are you going to do?"

Curt looked upward to where the little suns swam in the golden haze, the little suns that could create havoc in this cosmic womb where only the seed of matter belonged.

"Watch," he said. "I am going to dissolve what Garrand created."

Ezra watched. Slowly, carefully, Curt pressed a certain pattern on the keys and around a ruby star waves and bands of golden force began to flicker like faint auroras. They grew and strengthened and became streams of raw electrons, pouring their substance into the little Sun.

Ezra shielded his eyes, but not soon enough. The star had become a nova, but without the second, the collapsed stage of novae. The fury of electronic force launched upon it from outside in this universal vortex of such forces had swept away each fragment of the exploding atoms to return them to the parent cloud.

The ruby star had ceased to exist and its worlds had vanished with it.

Swifter now, more surely, Curt's hands flashed across the keys. And Ezra Gurney cowered beside the altar, blinded, stunned, shaken by the savage explosions of far-distant matter, riven and burst apart.

How long he crouched there while the great lights flared in the sky and the

cosmic hammers beat he never knew. But there came a time when everything was still and he looked up and saw Curt standing there with his hands motionless on the keys and his head strained back so that he could search the farthest reaches of the sky.

He spoke and Curt did not answer. He touched him and spoke again, and it was like speaking to a statue except that under his fingers he could feel the subtle tremors of Curt's hard flesh, the taut quivering.

"*Curt!*" he cried out. And Curt very slowly lowered his head and looked at him with a kind of amazement in his eyes, as though he had forgotten Ezra Gurney.

"Is it finished, Curt?"

"Yes. It's finished."

"Then come away."

Newton's gaze, the unfamiliar gaze that did not see small things like men but looked on larger distances, slipped away to the banks of keys and upward to the sky again.

"In a moment," he said. "In just a moment."

Two red bars burned across the bones of his cheeks and the rest of his face was like marble. Ezra saw in it the beginning of the exaltation, the terrible beauty that had marked the face of Garrand. Curt smiled and the sinews of his hands moved delicately as he stroked his fingers across the keys.

"The worlds that I could make," he whispered. "Garrand was only a little man. I could create things he never dreamed of."

"*Curt!*" cried Ezra in a panic. "Come away!" But his voice was swallowed up in dreams and Curt whispered very softly, "I wouldn't keep them. I would dissolve them afterward. But I could create . . ."

His fingers were forming a pattern on the keys. Ezra looked down at his gnarled old hands and knew that they were not strong enough. He looked at his gun and knew that he could not use it in any way. Searching desperately for a way to pierce through the dreams he cried, "Could you create another Earth?"

For awhile he was not sure that Curt had heard him, not sure but that he was beyond hearing. Then a vaguely startled look came into Curt's eyes and he said, "What?"

"Could you create another Earth, Curt? Could you put the mountains and the seas together and build the cities and fill them with men and women and the voices of children? Could you create another Otho or Grag or Simon?"

Curt slowly looked down at his fingers, curved and hungry on the waiting keys, and a kind of horror flashed across his face. He snatched his hands away and spun around, turning his back to the altar. He looked sick, and shamed, but the dreams were no longer shadowing his face, and Ezra began to breathe again.

"Thanks, Ezra," he said hoarsely. "Now let's go. Let's go, while I can."

**T**HE black cloud lay behind them and the *Comet* fled away from it like a frightened thing, back through the great blazing clusters of Suns that had now no terrors for them. Curt Newton sat silently at the controls and his face was so brooding that Ezra Gurney did not venture to speak.

Ezra looked ahead because he did not want to look back into the main cabin. He knew that what Simon was doing there was perfectly harmless and utterly necessary but there was something so uncanny about it that he did not want to see it being done.

He had looked in once and seen Simon hovering over the strange projector that Grag and Otho had rigged above the heads of the drugged unconscious Garrand and Herrick. He had come away from there quickly.

He sat unspeaking beside Curt, watching the great clusters wheel slowly past them until at last Simon Wright came gliding into the control-room.

"It is done," said Simon. "Garrand and Herrick will not wake for many hours. When they do they won't remember."

Curt looked at him. "You're sure that you expunged every memory of the Birthplace?"

"Absolutely sure. I used the scanner to block every memory-path on that subject—and checked by questioning them hypnotically. They know nothing of the Birthplace. You'll have to have a story ready for them."

Curt nodded. "We picked them up out here in deep space when their ship cracked up in cosmic ray research. That fits the circumstances—they'll never doubt it."

Ezra shivered a little. Even now the blocking of part of a man's memories, the taking away forever of a bit of his experience, seemed an eerie thing to do.

Curt Newton saw his shiver and understood it. He said, "It doesn't harm them, Ezra—and it's necessary."

"Very necessary, if the secret of the Birthplace is not to get out again," said Simon.

There was a little silence among them and the ship crawled on and on through the cosmic glare and gloom. Ezra saw that the somber shadow on Newton's face deepened as he looked out through the wilderness of Suns and nebulae toward the far, far spark of Sol.

"But someday," Curt said slowly, "someday not too far in the future, many men will be pushing out through these spaces. They'll find the Birthplace sooner or later. And then what?"

Simon said, "We will not be here when that happens."

"But they'll do it. And what will happen when they do?"

Simon had no answer for that nor had Ezra Gurney. And Curt spoke again, his voice heavy with foreboding.

"I have sometimes thought that life, human life, intelligent life, is merely a deadly agent by which a stellar system achieves its own doom in a cosmic cycle far vaster and stranger than anyone has dreamed. For see—stars and planets are born from primal nothingness and they cool and the cooling worlds spawn life and

life grows to ever higher levels of intelligence and power until . . .”

There was an ironical twist to Curt’s lips as he paused and then went on “. . . until the life of that world becomes intelligent enough to tap the energies of the cosmos! When that happens is it inevitable that fallible mortals should use those energies so disastrously that they finally destroy their own worlds and stars? Are life and intelligence merely a lethal seed planted in each universe, a seed that must inevitably destroy that universe?”

Simon said slowly, “That is a terrible thought, Curtis. But I deny its inevitability. Long ago the Watchers found the Birthplace, yet they did not try to use its powers.”

“We are not like the Watchers, we men,” Curt said bitterly. “You saw what it did to Garrand and to me.”

“I know,” said Simon. “But perhaps men will be as wise as the Watchers were by the time they find the Birthplace. Perhaps they too will then be powerful enough to *renounce* power. We can only hope.”