

Edmond Hamilton - THE COMET KINGS

THE COMET KINGS

by Edmond Hamilton

Trapped in the Depths of Halley's Comet, the
Futuremen Battle Fourth-Dimensional Monsters in a Titanic
Struggle to Save the System's Solar Energy!

Captain Future parried the blow by a swift jab of his own dielectric blade. (Chap. IX)

CHAPTER I

Vanishing Spaceships

ILLIONS of miles out beyond Jupiter, the battered old space-freighter Arcturion plodded through the void.

M

"I'd just as soon walk to Uranus!" disgustedly exclaimed Norton, the young second mate. "I wish I'd got a berth on a passenger liner. They don't spend weeks crawling along between planets."

Brower, the veteran first mate, smiled tolerantly at the impatient young officer.

"You'll get used to it," he predicted. "Me, I kind of like it. It's restful, plugging along day after day through these big empty spaces."

"But nothing ever happens!" the younger man com-

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plained, "There's never even a close brush with a meteor swarm. I can't stand this deadly monotony."

Ironically, it was at that moment that the catastrophe broke upon them.

The plodding, droning Arcturion suddenly seemed to go crazy in space. Its steelite hull plates screamed beneath the grasp of unearthly forces. The ship hurtled suddenly sideward in space, as though it had, been gripped by a giant, invisible hand.

The sharp shock of that invisible grasp was so powerful that it nullified the Arcturion's artificial gravitation. Young Norton felt himself hurled against the cabin wall, and his brain saw stars.

His last sensation was of mysterious and mighty forces sweeping the old freighter at undreamable speed through the void. Then he knew nothing at all.

That was only the first disappearance.

"But there aren't any uncharted meteor swarms out in that sector of space, sir!"

The man who spoke was a Martian who wore the dark uniform of the Planet Patrol. He wore a captain's insignia, too, for Tzan Thar was head of this Jovopolis Maintenance Division.

His red, solemn face was wrinkled with dismay and there was anxiety in his large-pupilled black eyes, as he protested to the Venusian superior officer who looked

at him out of the square televisior screen.

"Don't try to evade responsibility, Captain Thar!" snapped the higher officer. "You're in charge of the Maintenance Division for that sector of space. You've been lax in your meteor-sweeping, and a score of ships have come to grief as a result.

"Twenty-three ships gone, since that old freighter Arcturion first disappeared! And every one of them vanished in that sector beyond Jupiter, and hasn't reported since."

"I can't understand it any more than you can sir," said the Martian captain. "We swept all lanes in that sector only a few weeks ago."

"Then you missed plenty of meteors!" rapped his superior. "You get out there with every sweep you've got - and be fast about it! I want that sector cleaned up at once. And see if you can't find the wreckage of those ships."

The connection was broken. Tzan Thar turned and looked helplessly at his junior officers-lanky Earthmen, squat Jovians, bronzed Mercurians.

"You all heard him," the Martian captain said worriedly. "You know we swept that sector thoroughly, that every space-lane was clear. But something's drifted in that haft been wrecking ships. We've got to get busy!"

Six broad-beamed, dumpy meteor-sweeps soon rose up through the thin sunlight of Jupiter, blasted their tortuous path out through the maze of moons, and then laid a course outward in space.

The six ships, built with steelite walls of massive strength, droned steadily out through the starry void. Their far-ranging spotter beams fanned space ahead. Wherever those beams encountered meteors or other debris, they would be reflected back to indicate the location. Then the sweeps would advance and destroy the meteors by concentrated atom-blasts.

UT their spotter apparatus found no trace of meteors as they droned out along the space-lane. Captain Tzan Thar became deeply puzzled.

B

"I can't figure it," he admitted anxiously. "There are no meteors in this sector. There isn't even any wreckage from all those vanished ships."

His immediate superior, a young Mercurian, looked uneasy.

"It's queer, all right -"

Cataclysm suddenly interrupted their discussion. A colossal, invisible hand seemed suddenly to seize their heavy ship. They were flung to the floor as that giant, unseen hand scooped up all six great meteor-sweeps.

Nor did the tragic disappearances cease.

"Fifty-two ships Do you hear that-fifty-two ships! Freighters, liners tankers, even meteor-sweeps. This can't go on!"

North Bonnet's face was agitated as he paced to and fro in his office, on a high level of Earth's Government Tower at New York. It was a comparatively small office, yet it was the very brain and nerve center of the far-flung Planet Patrol.

Halk Anders, commander of the Patrol, sat at his desk and said nothing. His bulldog face was stolidly grim as he hunched there, staring out through the window at the soaring towers and gleaming lights of this night-shrouded metropolis of the Solar System.

"Commander, something's got to be done," North Bonnet continued vehemently. "Those ships held thousands of people, millions of dollars' worth of cargoes. Shipping companies, planetary officials, anxious relatives are all besieging the Government. You've got to send cruisers out there to stop these disasters!"

Halk Anders did not turn from his grim contemplation at the lights of New York, as he answered.

"We sent two Patrol cruisers into that sector to investigate weeks ago after our meteor-sweeps vanished."

"You did" Bonnet said hopefully. "What did they report?"

They didn't report anything," the commander replied. "They never came back - just disappeared like the others."

The Government official was appalled.

"Patrol cruisers disappeared, too?"

Anders nodded.

"Yes. We kept it quiet because we didn't want to add to the general alarm."

"But what are we going to do about it?" Bonnel

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asked dismayedly.

"I've already done something," the commander told him. "I sent out another cruiser to investigate. Two of my crack agents are aboard. You know them - old Marshal Ezra Gurney and Joan Randall.

"It may look queer, sending a girl," he added quickly. "But Joan's not only the smartest agent of our secret investigation division - she knows the space-ways better than most men. And as for Ezra Gurney - well, he knows the whole System like the back of his hand."

"Have they found out anything yet?" Bonnel demanded eagerly.

Halk Antlers shrugged stolidly.

"I don't know. They were to report by televisor to-

day. I've been expecting their call any minute."

But though the two men waited expectantly, it was not until four hours later that the television on the desk buzzed sharply. From it came the urgent voice of a headquarters switchboard man.

"Cruiser Ferronia calling, Commander. Agent Randall to speak to you."

"Switch her on at once!" snapped Halk Anders.

On the square glass screen of the television appeared the vivid face of a dark, pretty girl. Joan Randall's eyes were shadowed with anxiety as she spoke to them across the millions of miles of space.

I

"Ferronia reporting, Commander," she said rapidly.

"We've been cruising back and forth over the whole sector in which those ships vanished. And we've found nothing."

"Nothing?" echoed Anders incredulously. "You mean -"

"I mean just that. There's nothing here but empty space!" Joan Randall declared. "There's not a meteor in this whole region big enough to wreck a ship. Furthermore, there's no sign whatever of any wreckage of all those ships. It's just as though space itself swallowed them up!"

The white head of an old man appeared over the girl's shoulder. Marshal Ezra Gurney's wrinkled face and faded blue eyes were bleak as he corroborated the girl's report.

"It sounds cursed queer, but it's so," he told the commander. "This is the dangdest, most puzzlin' mystery I ever -"

At that moment, something happened. It happened so swiftly that neither Commander Anders nor North Bonnel get more than a glimpse of it.

They saw something like a blaze of white across the television screen, instantly blotting out the suddenly alarmed faces of Joan and Ezra. And then the television had gone dark.

Anders jabbed its call-button.

"Joan! Ezra! What's happened?"

There was no answer. Anders flung a switch and shot an order to the headquarters operator.

"Contact the Ferronia again at once!"

Ten minutes later, the switchboard division called back.

No success at all, sir. The Ferronia simply doesn't answer."

Anders slowly turned and looked at the Government official, and his bulldog face was heavier than ever.

"It happened to Joan and Ezra, right in front of our

eyes," he muttered. "Whatever struck at the other ships

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Captain Future smashed desperately to close the fateful door as the Allus advanced viciously toward him and Joan. (Chap. XV)

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struck at theirs, too."

Bonnel was appalled.

"But what was it? There was nothing but a blaze of force in the screen!"

Anders shook his leonine head helplessly.

"I can't figure it. I thought I'd seen everything in space but this is something new, and dangerous."

He rose to his feet.

"There is nothing to do but to send a full squadron of Patrol cruisers out there. And if they disappear, too _"

"There'll be a panic that will cripple space travel in the whole System," breathed Bonnel, his face pale.

Then his eyes flashed.

"Commander, this mystery can't be met by force. It's a job for someone who can scientifically ferret out what is really happening. Someone who can use every resource of science to solve the riddle."

Halk Anders understood this at once.

"You're thinking of Captain Future?"

The official nodded emphatically.

"If anybody could crack this mystery, that scientific wizard and his Futuremen could."

"Maybe so," muttered the commander. "Future has plenty of tricks the rest of us don't know. But if you call him in, will he come?"

"Will he come?" echoed North Bonnel. He strode toward the televisor. "Why, Ezra Gurney is one of his oldest friends, and as for Joan - you ought to know what Future thinks of her!"

"Will he come? He'll split space itself getting here when he learns that Joan and Ezra are in danger!"

CHAPTER II

Riddle of the World

SMALL, streamlined ship climbed froze the barren, airless surface of the Moon, with rockets blazing white fire, it shot toward Earth.

A

Had there been any observer, he would have known at once that it was the ship of Captain Future and the Futuremen. For only those four famous adventurers lived upon the lifeless, forbidding satellite. Their underground laboratory-home beneath Tycho crater was the only habitation.

The little ship flew toward Earth at a speed no other craft could match, and which no ordinary pilot would

have attempted. It screamed down through the darkness of the shadowed planet, toward the blazing pinnacles of New York. Like a swooping falcon, it came down to rest on the truncated tip of the looming Government Tower.

Down in Planet Patrol headquarters, North Bonnel was still restlessly pacing his office as Halk Anders sat grimly silent.

"If Future can't solve this thing, nobody can!" Bonnel was saying jerkily. "And if ships keep on vanishing like that -"

A clear voice interrupted him:

"What's this about vanishing ships? And what's happened to Joan and Ezra?"

Bonnel and Halk Anders both spun around. A door had opened silently behind them. And in it were four figures.

"Captain Future!" exclaimed Bonnel. He breathed in gusty relief. "By heaven, I'm glad you and the Futuremen got here so quickly!"

Curt Newton ignored the warm greeting of these two old acquaintances as he strode into the office. His brows were knitted in a frown.

"You said in your call that Joan and Ezra were in trouble. What is it, Bonnel? And why didn't you call me before?"

Captain Future - as the whole System called Curtis Newton - towered a full head above Bonnel. His tall, ranged figure, clad now in a gray zipper-suit, hinted of strength and speed. And the heavy proton pistol belted to his waist recalled that he was not only the famous Wizard Science, but also the most renowned fighting planeteer in the System.

Beneath Curt's torchlike mop of red hair, his spacetanned handsome face and clear gray eyes now mirrored an urgent anxiety. He had few friends, but those few were very close to him. Marshal Ezra Gurney was one of the oldest. And even closer to his heart was the gay, gallant girl agent whose safety now was threatened.

"Where are Joan and Ezra?" he repeated.

"We don't know," Bonnel answered helplessly.

"What do you mean - you don't know?" cried one of the Futuremen. "Devils of space, is this a joke?"

The three Futuremen who were Curt Newton's faithful, lifelong comrades made a striking contrast to their tall, red-haired young leader. Otho, the one who had just spoken, was a lithe, white, rubbery-looking figure of a man, with a devil of fierce recklessness in his slant green eyes. He seemed almost an ordinary man, but was not. Otho had been created in a laboratory, long ago.

He was a synthetic man, an android.

Grag, second of the Futuremen, was even more extraordinary. He was an intelligent robot - a giant metal figure towering seven feet high, with photoelectric eyes gleaming from the bulbous metal head that shielded his mechanical brain. Strongest of all beings was Grag!

The third and strangest was Simon Wright, the Brain. He was just that - a living human brain, dwelling in a transparent metal case whose constantly repurified serums kept him alive. His glass lens-eyes were watching, his microphone ears listening, as he hung poised upon the pale beams of force by which he could move through the air at will.

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"You must have some idea where Joan and Ezra are! Otho was exclaiming impatiently to Bonnet. "Or did you bring us all the way from the Moon just for a silly hoax?"

"Shut up, Otho," Curt Newton ordered. His gray eyes bored into Bonnet's face. "Tell us what happened." ONNEL told them, as briefly as he could. He told of the scores of slips that for weeks has mysteriously vanished in that sector beyond Jupiter, of the assigning of Joan Randall and old Marshal Gurney to investigate, and of the inexplicable interruption of their television call.

B

"The thing has me baffled, Captain Future," confessed Halk Anders when Bonnet finished.

Curt's eyes were hard. "We're going out there at once and find out what did happen to them," he said sharply. He turned toward the door. Otho's slant green eyes flamed with excitement as he followed. And Grag, too, followed Captain Future silently. But the Brain's metallic voice held them back. "Wait a moment, Curtis. I know you're worried about Joan, but getting into too big a hurry won't help us. We need to know more about this."

Otho groaned exasperatedly. "Every time we're in a devil of a hurry, Simon has to delay to plan things out." There was truth in the charge. The cold, almost emotionless mind of the Brain was always more careful in planning action than were the others. That was natural, for the Brain was the oldest of them all.

The Brain could look back across the years to the time before Curt Newton had been born. He had been an ordinary man, at that time. He had been Doctor Simon Wright, brilliant, aging scientist of a great Earth university, dying of an incurable ailment.

His body had died but his brain had lived on. His

living brain had been surgically removed and implanted in the artificial metal serum-case which he still inhabited. That had been done by Roger Newton, his gifted young colleague in biological research.

Soon after that, threats to their scientific secrets had caused the Brain, Roger Newton and Newton's bride to leave Earth in search of a safe refuge. They had found such a haven on the lifeless Moon, where they built an underground laboratory-home beneath the floor of Tycho crater.

In that strange home, Curt Newton had been born. And in it, the science of the two experimenters had created Otho, the android, and Grag, the robot.

Death had come to Roger Newton and his young wife, soon after that. The orphaned infant they had left had been adopted by the three strange beings, the Brain, the robot and the android. These three had faithfully reared the boy to brilliant manhood, giving him the unparalleled education that in time had made him an unsurpassed master of science.

Ever since Curt Newton had begun to use his great powers against the evil-doers of the System, his three former guardians had followed him as the Futuremen. "Before we go out there," the Brain was saying deliberately in his metallic voice, "I want all available data about the spaceships that disappeared. I want to know the route each ship was on, its date of departure, its approximate cruising speed, and about when it vanished."

Captain Future's gray eyes showed quick understanding.

"I see what you mean, Simon. By calculating the courses and speeds of the ships, we may be able to fix the approximate point in space where they vanished."

Halk Anders gave rapid orders into an office interphone. The file of data requested by the Brain was soon brought to him.

"We'll call you the moment we learn anything out there," Curt called back earnestly from the door to the two officials. "Come on, Grag."

HEY hurried up the little private stair to the landing deck atop Government Tower, Otho taking the steps three at a time, Grag's metal limbs clanking, the Brain gliding silently at Curt Newton's side.

T

Up there in the windy darkness atop the tower, the small ship of the Futuremen crowded the deck. The four boarded the Comet in a minute, the airlock door was slammed shut, the cyclotrons started, and Captain Future grasped the space-stick in the crowded little control room.

He sent the Comet climbing steeply up to the stars with a burst of white flame from its tail rocket tubes. It angled sharply above the glittering towers of New York to fling itself space-yard amid a roar of splitting atmosphere, as Curt's foot pressed the cyc-pedal.

Presently they were out in clear space, Earth receding rapidly behind them as Curt Newton built up the speed of the Comet to fantastic velocity. Like a man-made meteor gone mad, the ship of the Futuremen hurtled outward. The bright speck of Jupiter gleamed ahead, a little to the right.

Far out to the left, well beyond the orbit of the monarch world, glowed the brilliant splendor of Halley's Comet. The great comet was plunging Sunward again in its vast, seventy-five-year orbit. Its giant coma or head shone like a blazing world, the long tail streaming backward.

"The ships all disappeared in the quadrant ahead, between the orbits of Jupiter and Uranus," Curt told Otho thoughtfully. "Since all space-lanes have been re-routed to give Halley's comet a wide berth, it cuts down the area that we must search."

There came a sudden booming cry of alarm from Grag, back in the main cabin.

"Someone has planted an atomic bomb on this

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ship!"

Springing up in alarm, Curt Newton slammed the switch of the automatic pilot and bounded back with Otho into the cabin. This main cabin of the Comet was more laboratory than living quarters. It was crowded with telescopic, spectroscopic, electrical and other apparatus. There was a table at its center over which the Brain had been poised, studying a mass of calculations. Grag was standing, pointing his metal arm in alarm at a small, square black case in a corner. It exactly resembled a "live" atomic bomb.

"Don't touch it, Chief - it may let go any minute!" the big robot cried. "Somebody must have put it in the ship while we were out."

Captain Future moved swiftly toward the bomb, snatched it up and tore open the airlock door to throw the thing out. But the "bomb" suddenly writhed and changed form in his hands.

It changed with swift protean flow of outline, into a small, living animal. It was a doughy-looking little white beast, with big, solemn eyes that looked up innocently at Curt.

"It's my pet, Oog!" cried Otho. He jumped forward in alarm. "Don't throw him out!"

Curt disgustedly tossed the little animal to its master.

"It isn't his fault," Otho said protectively. "You know Oog loves to imitate anything he sees. That's his nature."

Oog was cuddling contentedly in his master's arms. The little beast was a meteor-mimic, a species of asteroidal creature which had developed the art of protective coloration to great lengths. This species had the power of shifting its bodily cells to shape itself after any model, and completely controlled its own pigmentation. It could imitate anything.

"I don't mind your keeping the little nuisance around in the Moon-laboratory, but I told you not to bring any pets in this ship" Captain Future bawled out the android.

"Well, Grag brought along his pet, Eek, and so I thought I had a right to bring Oog," Otho answered defensively.

URT uttered an exasperated snort. "So we've got Eek along, too? Where is he, Grag?" Reluctantly the great robot opened a cabinet and released another small animal, but one of a different species. It was a little gray, bearlike creature with beady black eyes and powerful jaws, now contentedly gnawing upon a small scrap of copper.

Eek, as Grag called this pet of his, was a moon-pup. He was a member of the strange species of moon-dogs that inhabited the airless satellite of Earth. These creatures did not breathe air or eat ordinary food, but nourished their strange tissues by devouring metal or metal-

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The Futuremen were drawn inexorably into the center of Halley's comet. (Chap. III)

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lic ores. They were strongly telepathic, that being one of their chief senses.

"Look at the beast - he's chewed up half the copper instruments in that cabinet," Curt said bitterly. "Why the devil did you bring him along?"

Grag shifted uncomfortably.

"Well, Chief, I had to do it. Eek can sense what people are thinking, you know, and he knew we were going and was upset about being left behind. He's a sensitive little fellow."

"Sensitive? That walking four-legged nuisance? All he knows is to eat up valuable metal and to sleep," Curt said witheringly.

Simon Wright had paid no attention to the altercation over the pets. The Brain was too accustomed to such arguments to notice them. "Curtis, I want you to look at these figures," he said.

Curt went over to the side of the Brain, who was poised uncannily upon his pale tractor-beams above the mass of calculations. The brain had been marking small crosses upon a space-chart that showed the quadrant between the orbits of Jupiter and Uranus, ahead of them.

"Each cross represents where one of the spaceships vanished, as nearly as I can figure it," the Brain explained. Captain Future felt dismayed as he looked. The pattern of crosses was not focused around any one point. It extended in a long, strung-out oval, reaching almost from Uranus' orbit to that of Jupiter.

"I can't understand this," Curt muttered puzzledly. "I thought the ships would all have disappeared in the same part of space, and that by going there we could find the key to the mystery. But since that isn't so, it means we'll have to search the whole vast quadrant for a clue."

"I fear so, lad," admitted the Brain. "And a search of such dimensions will take us weeks."

Curt went discouragedly back to the pilot chair.

Gloomily he stared into the enormous, star-specked void ahead of the flying ship. It yawned empty to the eye, except for the bright spark of Jupiter to the right, and the flaring glory of Halley's Comet far out on the left ahead.

Curt's eyes suddenly narrowed upon the comet. His unseeing stare had brought a subconscious idea into his mind. A possibility hitherto ignored abruptly burst upon him with stunning implications. He hastened back into the cabin.

"Simon, let me see that chart of yours again!"

The Brain watched wonderingly as Curt closely examined the plotted crosses, each of which marked the disappearance of a ship.

"Look, Simon! The first slops that vanished did so near the orbit of Uranus. The next ones disappeared further Sunward. The location of disappearances has steadily moved in a Sunward direction."

"That's true," the Brain admitted. "Does it mean anything?"

"I don't know," Curt muttered. "But Halley's Comet has also been steadily moving in a Sunward direction, during these vanishings."

His eyes flashed.

"Simon, I know it sounds insane, but I think that Halley's Comet has something to do with this mystery!"

CHAPTER III

On the Comet World

USHING headlong through the great deeps of space, Valley's comet flamed in the blackness like a world afire. The gigantic spherical coma, over two

hundred thousand miles in diameter, flared in a supernatural glory of dazzling electrical radiance.

R

Within that radiant shell of force, there pulsed the deeper glow of the mysterious nucleus. And back from the head streamed the millions of miles of the glowing growing tail.

Strangest of all the Solar System's children was this vast wanderer. Its long, elliptical orbit carried it out beyond the orbits of even the outer planets, out beyond the frontier of the System to the shores of infinity.

There, as though obeying the call of its parent orb, the great comet always turned and rushed Sunward through the planetary orbits, gathering speed until it was racing in through the circling worlds at frightful velocity.

Curt Newton and his Futuremen gazed with a tinge of awe at the gigantic, glowing body as their ship approached it. They were now but a million miles from the coma.

"It's like slapping a Venusian marsh tiger in the teeth to fool around with this thing," muttered Otho. "That coma is pure electric energy. If we get too close to it, we'll be blasted like a butterfly."

Otho spoke more truly than he knew.

A giant, invisible hand seemed suddenly to seize their ship in an iron grasp. The racing craft, brought suddenly to a halt in space, stopped so sharply that only the cushioning anti-acceleration force-stasis to the control room saved them all from being crushed on the walls.

As it was, Curt's brain blurred from the shock. He heard a loud yell of alarm from Grag. He shook his head violently to clear it.

Their ship, the Comet, was falling at nightmare speed toward the giant flaring comet that was its namesake!

"What happened" Otho was yelling. "Chief, did the cycs fail?"

"No, they're still going. We must have run into powerful ether current that's sucking us toward the comet," Curt said hastily.

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As he spoke, he was jamming down the cyc-pedal and swerving the space-stick to bring the slip back on its course. The massive cyclotrons roared with full power, rocket tubes spouting tremendous blasts of flame backward.

But the ship continued to fall toward the flaring comet. All Curt's efforts could not bring it out of that

racing descent. And now he noticed with increased alarm that the instruments before him had gone crazy. Meteorometers, gravitometers and all the other instruments had either blown out or were showing erratic, impossible readings.

"This isn't any ether current that's grabbed us!" Curt exclaimed. "This is a powerful magnetic beam of some kind, that's somehow projected from the comet and is sucking us in to it!"

A super-powerful magnetic force had seized the ship's steelite hull and was dragging it at rapidly mounting speed toward Halley's comet.

"Chief, something's the matter with me!" bellowed Grag in evident panic. "I'm stuck against the wall here - I can't move!"

Curt discovered the predicament of the robot. Grag was flattened against the wall of the control room nearest the comet. The great robot, with all his mighty strength, seemed unable to free himself. And Simon Wright, the Brain, was also pinned to the wall.

"It's got me too, lad," rasped the Brain, with unper- turbed calm, "This is an effect of the magnetic force that's seized us."

APTAIN FUTURE understood. Both the great body of Grag and the case of the Brain were composed of metal alloys whose base was steelite. Thus they were pinned against the wall by the magnetic force.

C

The scene was one of desperate confusion. The speed with which the unseen magnetic beam was drawing them toward the ominous glowing coma was increasing by the second. Grag and Simon were helpless. Eek was cowering in a corner as he telepathically sensed his master's alarm. The little meteor-mimic, Oog, had promptly turned himself into an exact imitation of Eek, in his fright.

"Take it easy, men!" Curt ordered sternly. "We'll have to try the vibration drive. Go back and start the generators, Otho. Simon, you and Grag can't help - just wait."

Curt's presence of mind brought order out of the momentary chaos. Otho raced back into the cabin to start up the powerful generators, which were the source of power for the Comet's auxiliary vibration drive. This drive, whose mechanism could fling the ship at incredible speeds through the reactive push of etheric vibrations, was intended only to be used in the vast spaces outside the System. But Curt knew it was their only hope of breaking free of the remorseless magnetic grip that was dragging them to doom.

Captain Future discovered that he himself was being dragged by a persistent force toward the wall against which Grag and Simon were pinned. He found that the effect was due to the proton pistol at his belt whose steelite was tugged toward the wall by a powerful pull. Curt hastily took the weapon out of his belt and at once it flew toward the wall.

"Hey, look out!" Grag exclaimed. "That thing hit me right in the stomach!"

"You can hammer out the dent in your stomach later," Curt retorted. "Otho, have you gone asleep back there?" He was answered by the thrumming roar of the vibration-drive generators, which soon were shaking the ship with their powerful drone.

"All ready, Chief!" Otho reported, tumbling back into the control room. He, too, had been forced to jettison his weapons.

"This will yank us out of the magnetic grip, if anything will" Curt gritted. "Hold on, Otho!"

He flung in the switches of the vibration drive. The slip, still falling dizzily toward the comet, shuddered violently as the powerful propulsion vibrations were projected suddenly from its stern.

But it still continued to fall toward Halley's Comet, still gripped by the relentless magnetic beam. Curt increased the power. The ship shuddered even more strongly, and an ominous creaking warned of tremendous stresses that were weakening its frame. Yet it still could not break free.

"We're caught for good!" Curt exclaimed dismayedly. "Even the vibration drive can't tear us loose. Fiends of Pluto, there must be a world of power in this beam that's seized us!"

"What are we going to do?" cried Otho. "We don't have much time left. Holy sun-imps, look at that coma!"

The spectacle outside the windows was now an appalling one, as the ship hurtled toward the comet at incredible speed. The immense spherical coma of Halley's comet filled almost all space ahead of them, a blinding sea of dazzling white light. It was not really light, at all, Curt well knew.

HAT coma was a vast shell of ions, electrically charged atoms whose tremendous potential was such as to destroy by an unearthly lightning blast any matter that touched it.

T

And their ship would strike that coma in a dreadfully short time. Captain Future felt, as he had never felt before, a sense of being trapped by forces that even the resourcefulness and scientific powers of the Futuremen

could not contend against.

Yet it was characteristic of Curt Newton that even in this moment of frightful danger, he was not thinking of
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himself. It was of Joan Randall and Ezra Gurney that he was thinking, and of the others who had been lost in vanished ships.

"They were all drawn into the comet by a magnetic beam, the same as we," he declared. "Simon, that beam was deliberately projected to seize us!"

"Aye, lad," came the answer of the helpless Brain.

"There's intelligence and menace inside Halley's comet."

"We've got about five minutes before we hit the coma!" Otho yelled. "This is the end of our space-trail. Good-bye, Grag, old pal - I'm sorry now I was always ribbing you about being a robot. You may be made of metal, but you're a better man than I ever was."

"No, Otho," Grag boomed earnestly. "You were a swell guy but I didn't appreciate you. I guess I was just jealous."

Curt Newton, looking fearlessly ahead into that appalling sea of light, toward which they were being dragged, suddenly shouted.

"Before you two grave-diggers make your last farewells, look at this!" he cried. "I think we're going to get through the coma!"

They stared unbelievably. "Their ship was now rushing straight toward the vast, flaring wall of electric force, the head of the comet. There was a round aperture in the gloving shell of the coma. And the ship was being sucked straight toward that hole!

"I get it now!" captain Future exclaimed. "The magnetic beam that holds us is projected out through the coma to make that aperture. We'll be dragged through that hole, perhaps without touching the coma!"

The moment was at hand as he spoke. The Comet seemed rushing headlong toward destruction in the flaring sea of electric force. One touch would destroy them as lightning might shatter a toy.

Straight as an arrow, the Futuremen hurtled toward that aperture in the coma: They entered it and Curt and Otho cried out and shielded their eyes. The blaze of force all around the ship was blinding in intensity.

When he uncovered his eyes, Curt perceived with a thrill of hope that they were through the coma! Their ship was inside the spherical shell of the comet's head, was being dragged at unabated speed toward a little planet that hung at the center of this vast enclosed space.

A world here at the heart of Halley's Comet! A little world that was the solid nucleus of this vast, mysterious wanderer of the void!

"We're through - we're in the comet!" Otho yelled hopefully. Then, remembering something he added hastily to Crag: "I hope you don't think I meant it when I said you were a better man than I. I was just handing you another rib, you poor metal imitation of a man!"

"The same goes for me!" Grag bellowed angrily at the android. "I was just hoping to make death easier for you, when I told you what a swell guy you were - you offspring of a smelly retortful of chemicals!"

URT ignored the verbal combatants.

Simon the magnetic beam comes from that little world! That means Joan and Ezra must have been dragged here in the same way!" lie said excitedly. "If they're on that world -"

C

"We'll never know if they are!" Otho groaned suddenly. "We're going to be smashed to Henders when we hit that planet at this speed!"

Curt, too, had realized their peril. It seemed they had miraculously escaped the coma, only to meet an equally frightful end. Their velocity was suicidal as they plunged toward the mysterious planet.

The planet that poised here at the heart of the great comet was a small green world, blanketed by thick forests. It was drenched in the brilliant, unearthly glare of the glowing coma that completely surrounded it.

At one point upon this small green world, there was a star-shaped white city. And they were being dragged straight down toward that city, whose alabaster domes and towers and streets rushed up toward them with fearful speed.

Captain Future, nerving himself for the inevitable crash that meant annihilation, felt a sudden deceleration of their flashing fall. So sharp and swift was that slowdown that even through the cushioning stasis of force which protected them, they felt again a blurring of their senses.

"They don't want us to crash!" choked Curt. "Whoever's operating that magnetic beam wants us to land in one piece -"

"Chief, look at that!" Otho yelled, pointing unsteadily down.

In the fiercely flaring light of the coma, the strange white comet-city lay close beneath their falling ship.

Curt glimpsed a round court of spaceport size near the center of the ivory metropolis.

It was toward that court that the ship was falling.

The court was several thousand feet in diameter, ringed

by white towers crowned with massive copper electrodes. At the center of the round court was a circular, silvery disk five hundred feet across. Around the disk rested scores of spaceships of familiar appearance.

"That disk is the magnet that's pulling us down!"

Curt deduced. "I see people down there."

"Here comes the crash!" drag shouted.

It was not really a crash, their impact against the silvery magnet-disk. It was a jarring contest that shook them violently. But so greatly had their speed been decelerated in the last moments that the ship was not shattered.

An instant after they came to rest, Curt and Otho were picking themselves up. Grag and the gain were pinned helplessly now on the floor.

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"Help me get loose, chief!" the robot bellowed.

"That cursed magnetic force is holding me -"

He was suddenly interrupted by a sound of hammering and prying outside the Caret's airlock door.

"They're forcing into the ship, whoever they are!"

Otho cried His slant green eyes flared. "We've got a fight on our hands. These cursed comet pirates can't kidnap yes like this!"

Curt and Otho jumped to pick up their proton pistols. But the weapons were pinned against the floor by the powerful magnetism beneath.

The airlock of the ship burst open with a crash and a half dozen men charged into the cabin.

"Holy sun-imps!" screeched Otho. "They're devils of the comet!"

VEN Captain Future was for a moment petrified by stupefaction. These comet men who had entered did indeed seem utterly unearthly.

E

They were tall, fair-haired fellows who wore sleeveless shirts and shorts of silvery cloth. They also wore long swords at their belts, and two of them carried gun-like weapons with electrodes instead of barrels.

But these men glowed with dazzling light! From every inch of their bodies, from their hair, their faces, their arms and legs streamed a halo of brilliance that was like the corona of the awful coma itself.

"They're men, even though they do shine with light!" Curt cried. "Clear them out of the ship! If we can wreck that magnet -"

He was plunging forward as he spoke, his fists flying toward the weird, shining invaders. Then as his fist hit one of the glowing comet men, Curt Newton felt a paralyzing electric shock along his arm.

His body stiffened in agony. He realized it was not merely light that glowed from these shining men, but electric force. These were electrically charged human beings! The body of each was invested with an electric potential that should have been enough to kill them. "Get back - don't touch them!" Curt yelled a warning to Otho

As he shouted, one of the shining electric men extended a hand and touched Curt's head. The full electric shock stabbed to Captain Future's brain, and he was plunged into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER IV

The Cometae

CURT NEWTON'S returning consciousness made him aware, first of all, of a strange, tingling sensation through his whole body. He felt as though he were lying beneath a super-powerful generator that was flooding every fiber of his being with electric force.

C

"He is coming around now, Grag," a familiar, metallic voice was rasping. "So stop your worrying."

Curt forced his eyes open. Grag and Otho and the Brain were hovering anxiously over him. The pets, Oog and Eek cowered close by.

He lay on the floor of a small, cell-like room of white synthestone. There was a single heavy metal door, and a high, tiny window through which flooded a brilliant white light.

"Simon, what happened in the ship after I passed out?" Curt cried.

"I know what happened to me!" Otho burst out furiously. "One of those cursed shining men grabbed me the same as you, and I felt a shock that knocked me silly. I woke up here just a few minutes ago."

"And we couldn't help you," Grag boomed angrily.

"Simon and I were pinned against the ship's floor by that devilish magnetism from beneath."

"That is the truth, lad," the Brain told Curt. "After stunning you and Otho, the shining men secured Grag and me with chains. Then they turned off the magnetism outside, and dragged all four of us, even the two pets, to this prison."

"Did you see anything of Joan Randall as we were brought here?" Captain Future demanded anxiously.

"No, lad," murmured the Brain. "She may be imprisoned like us somewhere in this cursed city."

Curt strode with nervous quickness! to the window. He drew himself up to it and stared out at the amazing city.

Graceful alabaster buildings of white synthestone, crowned by bubblelike domes and slender towers, rose

in his field of vision. He was looking across the great central plaza of the magnet-disk. He could make out his own ship and other captured ships parked out there. On the other side of the plaza bulked a large white palace with one huge, looming dome.

Curt saw that in the white streets and green gardens moved many of the natives of this comet world, afoot and in six-wheeled power vehicles. They were all fair-haired folk, beautiful women, stalwart men. And all of them glowed with that dazzling, uncanny radiance of electric force. They seemed like angels of light inhabiting some strange celestial metropolis.

Down upon the alabaster city poured a flood of white brilliance from the sky. For the sky of this comet world was the flaring aura of the comet's nucleus, completely enclosing this hidden world, thus nebulous coma arched across the heavens like a firmament of scintillating white fire.

"Who'd have dreamed that all this existed inside Halley's comet?" muttered Otho, peering out with awe from over Curt's shoulder.

Curt's gray eyes narrowed.

"These comet folk are enemies of our System. They must be, or they wouldn't have devised that great electromagnet which sucks distant ships in here by means

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of its beam."

"But what are these people?" Grag demanded puzzledly. "They shine just as though they were highly charged with electricity."

"By all the imps of Uranus!" Otho swore. "If you'd have touched one of them, you'd know that they really are electrically charged!"

Curt Newton nodded quickly.

"There's no doubt about it. All these people possess physically an electric charge that should destroy them - but doesn't. Simon, what do you make of it?"

"It is strange," muttered the Brain. "Yet life is electrical in nature. Even back in the twentieth century, Crile showed that the living cells of a body are tiny batteries which produce the electrical current we call life."

"Theoretically, all life may be electrical. But nobody ever saw electric people like these before," objected Otho. "And why did they drag our ship in here? What are they going to do with us?"

"More important what have they done with Joan and Ezra?" Curt interrupted. His eyes flashed. "If they've harmed her -"

"I hear a tapping in the wall," Grag suddenly announced.

HEY listened. But they heard nothing for a moment. Then footsteps outside their cell door became audible.

T

"That must be what you heard," muttered Otho.

"Our keepers coming."

A little panel in the bottom of the locked door was suddenly opened, and something was pushed through.

Then the opening was closed.

Their captors had left them two things - a bowl of synthetic-looking mush obviously intended as their rations, and a book. The book was a queer one. Its leaves were of thin, silvery metal. Upon them were pictures of objects and actions, and under each picture an unfamiliar word.

"Why, it's an elementary textbook of their language," Curt said puzzledly. "Maybe they're not really hostile to us at all."

"Maybe that shock they gave me was all in fun,"

Otho retorted bitterly.

"I hear that tapping in the wall again," Crag interrupted.

"That tapping is inside your skull, bucket-head,"

Otho told the robot impatiently. "Four mechanical brain has stripped a gear, probably."

Crag, always sensitive to mention of his mechanical nature, flared up.

"Why, you miserable little mess of chemicals -"

"Shut up!" Captain Future ordered them sharply. "I hear that tapping, too. It's an interplanetary code. Listen!"

The sound came faint from one wall of their cell.

"SQ?" it spelled out in the System's universal code.

"SQ - who's there?" Curt translated. His eyes lit.

"There are other prisoners in here with us. Maybe it's Joan!"

Hastily he rapped in answer, stating his identity and finishing with the same inquiring signal.

The answer came quickly.

"Are you new prisoners really the famous Futuremen? I am Tiko Thrin, a scientist of the Syrtis Laboratories of Mars. I'm sorry that you are also captives of the Cometae.

"The Cometae? Is that what you call these comet folk?" asked Curt.

"It is what they call themselves," tapped Tiko Thrin.

"I have learned their language and many facts about them, for I have been here ever since the space-liner on which I was traveling was dragged into the comet."

"Have you any knowledge of other prisoners here?"

Curt rapped anxiously. "Especially Marshal Ezra

Gurney and a girl, Joan Randall."

"Both of them are here in this city of Mloon," came the quick reply. "I heard them brought in, many days ago. Ezra Gurney is still a prisoner in this place. I have talked with him many times in code. Prisoners in the other cells relay our signals from cell to cell."

"Ask him if he and Joan are all right," Curt directed quickly.

Ire waited with fast-beating heart for the answer, feeling a new hope. But when Tiko Thrin's report came, it brought dismaying information.

"Ezra is overjoyed that you Futuremen are here. He says he is all right but is worried about the girl. She is not here in prison, he says, but is somewhere in the city."

"Ask him what happened to her," Captain Future bade the Martian anxiously.

Again minutes dragged by before the relayed answer came.

"He says that he and Joan were taken before the rulers of the Cometae, King Thoryx and Queen Lulain. They were asked to join the Cometae. Ezra refused and was brought back here. But the girl was not brought back."

URT'S anxiety increased. Tiko Thrin tapped on. All prisoners brought here are first given a chance to learn the language and then are asked to join the Cometae. Those who refuse are brought back here, as I was. We are kept locked up until the solitary confinement makes us change our minds. Many prisoners have weakened and surrendered. Perhaps the girl was among them."

C

"If they're hostile to the System, Joan wouldn't join them under any circumstances!" Curt tapped back. "She may be trying to deceive them. Tell me, what are these Cometae planning that they need recruits?"

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"I do not know," came Tiko Thrin's answer. "It is obvious that the Cometae are preparing some important venture, but I have no idea what it is. They are only obeying the orders of the Allus in what they do."

"The Allus? Who are they?"

"That, too, I don't know," the Martian replied. "I only know that the Allus are the real masters of this strange comet-world, and that these Cometae regard them with a respect and awe verging on dread."

"Are the Allus men? What do they look like?" Curt demanded.

"None of us prisoners has ever seen any Allus,"

Tiko Thrin tapped back. "The Allus never come to this city of the Cometae, but inhabit some mysterious place in the north. The Cometae speak always of the Allus as 'the dark masters' or as 'they from beyond the veil.'"

"Devil take all these mysteries!" Otho exclaimed violently. "What I want to know is - how are we going to get out of here?"

When Curt tapped that question, Tiko Thrin's reply was flatly discouraging.

"I fear that even you Futuremen cannot escape this place. You will be confined until you learn the language of the Cometae. Then you will be taken to the rulers."

The Martian added a warning.

"Do not attempt any rash attack upon the Cometae. They have very powerful weapons, as well as the protective charge of electricity which keeps their bodies immortal."

Immortal Curt repeated. "You mean that these electric folk are deathless?"

"Yes. The Cometae cannot die unless they should leave this comet. Then they would perish for lack of the
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Captain Future and the Brain bent over the electron microscope. (Chap. VII)

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electric radiation that is their food."

"These Cometae live on electricity?" Curt tapped incredulously.

"They do," replied the Martian. "As you no doubt know, life itself is essentially electrical. We get our vital electricity from the chemical batteries of our body cells. When the cells wear out and can no longer produce the vital electric current, we age and die.

"But the cells of the Cometae have somehow been so altered that they do not produce this all-important energy but simply receive it from the coma's electric radiation - the same radiation you doubtless feel tingling through your bodies now.

"Thus the Cometae do not need to eat or drink, for their cells absorb their vital energy from the coma's electric radiance. Because of that, they cannot age and cannot die - unless killed by accident."

"This is very interesting," the Brain declared absorbedly. He had Curt tap a further question to the Martian. "Were the Cometae always like this, or were they once ordinary human people?"

"I am sure, according to what is passed along the prison 'grapevine,' that until a few years ago they were ordinary humans," replied the Martian scientist. "It is said that only a few years ago, the Allus changed them from normal people into undying electric men."

"Whoever these mysterious Allus are, they must wield incredible scientific power if they can accomplish a feat like that!" said Otho startledly.

HE exchange of messages was interrupted by a deep vibration of sound that traveled through the window. It sounded like the note of a great bell.

T

"It means that `night' has come," tapped Tiko Thrin in answer to Curt's question. "There is no real night upon this world, of course, but the Cometae have a period of sleep which they all observe."

The activity in the city outside lessened. Soon but few of the shining electric folk were to be seen in the streets.

Next "morning" the small panel in the door of the Futuremen's cell was again opened and another ration of synthetic food thrust in to them. One of the Cometae guards spoke to them through the door, asking what seemed to be a question in his unfamiliar language. Receiving no answer, the guard went on.

For three "days" the guard followed the same procedure. Curt spent nearly all of the time in intensive study of the Cometae language. He assumed from Tiko Thrin's information that when they could speak the language, they would be taken before the rulers of these strange comet folk.

Curt Newton now realized that this was their sole chance of getting out of their prison. The door was never unlocked. The Futuremen had been stripped of every tool and weapon. Simple as their prison was, it seemed inescapable.

Otho and Grag and the Brain also picked up a working knowledge of Cometae language from the textbook, though Simon Wright spent much of his rime discussing with his fellow-scientist in the next cell the mysteries of this comet world. Crag and Otho, chafing at confinement quarreled endlessly, while Oog slept peacefully and Eek gnawed contentedly on a metal bowl.

On the third "morning," when their guard asked his usual question, Captain Future was able to understand it.

"Are you able to speak our language?" the guard was saying.

"Yes, I am," Curt replied haltingly.

The guard exclaimed in surprise.

"You learned very swiftly! I will call Zarn, the prison captain."

Presently the deep voice of that official came through the door.

"So you can speak our tongue already?"

"Yes, and we demand that your people give us an explanation for this enforced captivity," Captain Future retorted.

"You will receive your answer from King Thoryx," replied Zarn. "But I cannot take you to him, for I have not the authority. I will notify Khinkir, captain of the king's guard."

Later that day the door of the Futuremen's cell was unexpectedly opened. Two officers of the Cometæ and a half-dozen soldiers stood outside.

All of the shining electric men of this guard wore swords at their belts. And three of them carried alertly the gunlike weapons that had copper electrodes instead of barrels. Zarn, the prison captain, was a massive, stocky, rough-looking individual. Khinkir, captain of the king's guard, looked younger and his silver-cloth garments were more ornate.

"Let me advise you," Khinkir immediately warned Captain Future, "that these weapons project a concentrated electric blast that can destroy you in a split second, should you attempt any rash act. Now come with me."

The other three Futuremen moved forward with Curt Newton, but Khinkir hastily warned them back.

"Not you! Only this man is to come."

"Why can't my comrades come with me?" Curt demanded.

"They are not human," replied Khinkir, glancing somewhat nervously at the strange trio of robot and android and Brain. "We do not know what powers they may possess, and the king ordered them to be kept here."

THO showed the rage he felt at this contretemps.

Otho had secretly been nursing a hare-brained

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plan of attacking the Cometæ ruler and holding him as a hostage, though the android had been careful not to tell Curt. Now the plan was ruined, and Otho boiled with anger.

"You do well to dread our powers!" he told the captain of the guards menacingly. "If you keep us imprisoned here, you will feel the weight of those powers! Why, my metal comrade here could tear down this place if he so desired!"

Grag, somewhat amazed at this assertion, nevertheless backed it up with an imposing show of ferocity. He beat clangingly on his metal breast.

"That's rights" he growled in his deep, booming voice. "I could tear this place up like it was made of paper."

"And the Brain yonder," Otho went on with his threats, "has scientific powers beyond your dreams - powers greater even than those of the Allus."

"Shut up, you idiot!" hissed Curt to Otho. "Let me handle thus,"

Zarn, the prison captain, had shrunk back a little from the Futuremen and so had the Cometae soldiers. But Khinkir now answered angrily.

"No individual has powers comparable to those of the mighty ones from beyond the veil! You utter a blasphemy against the Allus!"

He turned to the prison captain.

"Set guards outside this door from now on, Zarn.

These creatures are dangerous!"

Curt Newton inwardly cursed the android's foolish threats as he was conducted down the corridor. The passage ended in a guard room full of Cometae soldiery. Curt was led out of it into the open air. He blinked, half-blinded by the coma's brilliant sky. Its electric force tingled through him strongly. Khinkir and the guards kept their weapons trained upon him alertly as they conducted him around the plaza to the looming white palace.

The high-arched white halls of the palace were magnificent, their alabaster walls decorated by frescoes of silver. They passed into a large, circular throne room whose ceiling was the curving white dome far overhead. Facing Captain Future was a sunburst throne, a wide benchlike chair of solid silver backed by a golden disk.

Upon it sat a man and a woman of the Cometae, two richly dressed, radiant figures who were listening now to an older man.

"So that's King Thoryx and Queen Lulain," Curt thought, as he was led toward the rulers. He glanced swiftly around. "I don't see any of the mysterious Allus."

Around the big throne room were knots of the Cometae nobility, handsome men and beautiful women, whose glowing electrical radiance of body deepened their strangely angelic look. But their faces were not those of angels! Curt read in many of those faces a shadowy oppression, a dim, haunting dread.

Then Captain Future stiffened as he noticed one of the Cometae women. In her scanty silver-cloth garment, she was a figure of shining, unearthly beauty, her slim white body brilliant with glowing electric energy. But she was not fair-haired, as all the other Cometae. Her hair was dark.

Curt Newton felt a staggering shock. He could not believe the terrible thing his eyes told him.

"It's impossible!" he muttered hoarsely.

Then as he came closer to the girl, he saw that it was true. This girl of the Cometae, this weirdly shining electric figure, was none other than Joan Randall!

CHAPTER V

Shadow of the Allus

IN the prison cell, after Captain Future had been taken away and the door had been relocked, the Brain faced Otho condemningly.

I

Simon Wright never gave way to anger. The cold, intellectual mind of the Brain abhorred useless emotion. But for that very reason, his rebuke was the more stinging.

"You have committed a rash piece of folly," he told Otho severely. "Your empty boasts have convinced the Cometae captains that we are dangerous. Now we shall be guarded even more closely."

"I lost my temper," Otho admitted sulkily. "Anyway, what difference does it make? We couldn't get out, anyway."

Presently they heard footsteps reapproaching their cell. But to the amazement of all three Futuremen, the door of the cell was unlocked. Zarn, the prison captain, stepped inside.

Zarn held one of the electrode-barreled weapons ready for use. But the Cometae captain stood eyeing his charges for a moment in silence. His stocky, shining figure had an attitude of indecision, and there was an expression of mingled doubt and hope upon his massive face. Finally he spoke to the Brain.

"Is it true, what your comrade said, that you are master of a science greater than that of the Allus?"

Simon answered cautiously.

"My, comrades and I possess certain scientific powers, yes. I do not know whether they are greater than those of the Allus, for I do not know anything about the Allus or their methods."

Zarn came a little closer and thrust out his hand.

That hand, glowing, as all his body with electric energy, was trembling a little.

"You see that I am now an electric creature, as are all my people," Zarn said hoarsely. "It was the science of the Allus that made me like this. Could you undo

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what they have done?"

"You mean, could I change you back into a normal, non-electric man?" the Brain asked surprisedly.

Zarn nodded anxiously, his eyes clinging to the weird face of the Brain.

"Could you?" he repeated.

Simon sensed that much might depend upon his answer. He could not yet fathom all that as in the Cometae captain's mind, but it was evident that his reply was of supreme importance to Zarn.

The Brain thought rapidly before he spoke.

"It should be possible," he said carefully, "to bring you back to normal by reversing whatever deep alteration has been made in your bodily cells. Our red-haired leader and I would need to study your body first, before we could say definitely."

A wild, haggard hope showed in Zarn's eyes. The electric man trembled with visible emotion. His free fist clenched.

"If you could do that!" he whispered hoarsely. "If you could free my people and me from this horrible death-in-life and make us real men and women again!"

"You mean that you Cometae don't like being electric men?" Otho demanded incredulously.

"Like it?" repeated Zarn. He laughed bitterly.

"Stranger, would you willingly suffer such a joyless mockery of existence? Once we were real men and women. Once we grew up through happy childhood to maturity, loved and had children of our own, grew peacefully old and passed to the quiet rest of death.

"But now!" His voice was thick with passion. "For us there is no escape, unless we so sicken of this life that we put violent end to ourselves!"

The somber picture Zarn painted communicated itself to his listeners.

"I remember now that I noticed no children at all in this city," the Brain recalled. "I should have known that this electrification of your bodies would make your whole race sterile."

THO asked Zarn a blunt question. "If your people don't like this electric existence, why did you let yourselves be changed so?"

O

"My people had no voice in the matter!" Zarn answered violently. "It was done to us without our consent. The only ones who wanted this change were the tyrants who rule us - Thoryx and Lulain, and that devil's wizard, old Querdel. It was they who plotted this thing with the Allus."

"Who are the Allus, really?" the Brain asked him.

Dread crept like a chilling shadow into Zarn's eyes.

"None of us Cometae except our rulers know much of the Allus. But we do know that they are in no way human, having unguessably alien forms and powers. And we know that they do not belong to this cosmos at all, but came from outside it,"

"From outside our cosmos?" gasped Otho.

"I tell only what I have heard," Zarn answered. "I have never seen the Allus myself - though it was in their black citadel in the north, that I and all the rest of my people were changed into this terrible electric state."

"You're talking in riddles!" Otho exclaimed. "If you were in the Allus' citadel, if it was they who changed you, you must have seen them!"

"No, none of our people saw them or knew how it teas that they changed us," Zarn repeated. "I know it sounds incredible, but it is so."

"Let him tell it in his own way, Otho," ordered the Brain.

Zarn continued earnestly.

"We Cometae have lived long upon this comet world, which our pioneering ancestors reached long ago by coming in their ships through a chance rift in the coma. We were then a quite ordinary human race, and lived here as such for many ages.

"Our government slipped into the hands of a small class of nobles which centered around the hereditary king. Yet in spite of the exploitation by this ruling class, our life was bearable.

"Then, as though in a bad dream, the shadow of the Allus fell upon us. It came about through Querdel, an elderly noble who is one of King Thoryx's councillors. Querdel is somewhat of a scientist, though our science may be crude and primitive compared to yours.

"Somehow, in his devilish researches, old Querdel first got into communication with beings inhabiting a weird, alien universe that lies in the extra-dimensional gulf outside our ordinary cosmos.

"These beings called themselves the Allus. They had, it seems, been trying for a long time to communicate with someone in our universe. For the Allus desired to enter our cosmos. They wanted to open a door into our world from the black extra-cosmic abysses in which they dwelt. And the door could not be opened from their side alone, but must be unlocked from both sides. Hence their need for someone to cooperate with them on this side."

Anger blazed in Zarn's eyes.

"They found the one they needed in old Querdel," he said. "They made alluring promises to that old devil and to Thoryx and Lulain. They told them, We Allus have powers of which you do not dream, and will richly reward you - if you will help us open a way into your cosmos. We will reward you by making you and all your people ageless and undying. You will be like gods.

"Thoryx and Lulain, and Querdel and our other

rulers, seized the bribe the Allus offered. They coveted that promised immortality. And so, obeying the explicit mental commands of the Allus that came through the veil, they prepared to help open the door through which the dark masters could invade our universe.

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"They had us people of the Cometae build a great, ring-shaped citadel at the northern pole of our world. They had us build also certain strange mechanisms and apparatus, the purpose of which was totally unknown to any one of us. Only the Allus, who transmitted their instructions by mental messages through the veil, understood the nature of the instruments we constructed."

ARN'S eyes blazed in reminiscence.

"Then, eyes in that northern citadel, Thoryx and old Querdel operated the strange machines at the bidding of the dark masters. They unlocked the door into the extra-dimensional abysses that lie outside our cosmos. And through that door, the Allus somehow came into our universe, and made that citadel their home. And they kept their promise of making Thoryx and old Querdel immortal.

Z

"For when Thoryx and the old wizard returned to us from the citadel, they had been made into shining electric men, such as you note see. They told us then that the Allus had done that to them, that the Allus would give us all this wonderful gift of electric immortality. Every one of our people of the Cometae was to achieve deathlessness.

"Some of my people, especially the nobles of the ruling class, were won over by this prospect. But the great majority of us were not. Even though it meant deferring death and age indefinitely, we shrank from becoming inhuman electric men such as Thoryx and Querdel. We did not wish to lose our humanity. And we were afraid of these dark, mysterious Allus from the unguessable outside, and suspicious of their purposes.

"But we ordinary folks had no choice! Thoryx and the nobles were resolved upon making us deathless. For the Allus had promised our rulers that then they would reap great powers and eventually sway over many peoples. They of the nobles went first, one group after another, to the citadel of the Allus in the north - to return to us as electric men and women.

"Then we of the soldiery and the people were ordered to go, group by group. We went north to that mysterious citadel which we ourselves had built for the dark masters. But before ever we entered it, a pall came upon our minds. The Allus employed that mental dark-

ness so that none of us might learn their secrets. When the cloud lifted from our minds, we were again outside the citadel and had been made into electric men and women, such as you now see!"

Otho uttered a low exclamation.

"They had you all in some kind of anesthesia as they altered you!" he declared.

"It is more probable," the Brain said thoughtfully, "that the Allus used an artificially induced amnesia on their subjects. These so-called dark masters must be great wielders of mental force, indeed."

Zarn shook his massive head.

"I do not know how it was done. Perhaps Thoryx and Querdel know. They are the only Cometæ who are permitted to go freely to and from the citadel of the Allus."

Zarn concluded his story somberly.

"But we know now that the Allus are alien and evil, that they are planning something dark and wicked," he summarized. "It was they who directed Thoryx and Querdel and our other rulers to construct the great electromagnet that sucks spaceships into the comet. That electromagnet is operated by some of Querdel's men, through a special detector apparatus that can spat any ship within millions of miles."

"Why do the Allus want ships and men from the outside brought in here as captives?" the Brain asked keenly.

The Cometæ prison captain shook his head.

"I don't know. None of us knows just what their unfathomable purposes are. But we are certain some involved and sinister scheme is afoot."

HE Futuremen glanced at each other. It was the Brain who spoke the thought that was in all their minds.

T

"This is no mere menace within this comet, but a dark, threatening force from outside our cosmos that we've run into," muttered Simon Wright. "I'd give a lot to know what these Allus are like - and what they plan."

The Brain thought hard.

"I feel certain, Zarn, that Curtis Newton and I can devise a way of retransforming you people when we have thoroughly studied the problem," he told the Cometæ captain. "But until then, I cannot promise. We must have a chance to investigate your bodies with certain instruments."

"I will bring secretly everything you need, next sleep-period," Zarn promised excitedly. "And I will contact my friends, also."

The Brain quickly named a list of things he would require from the Futuremen's confiscated spaceship. Suddenly the prison captain started as. They heard a sound of approaching footsteps in the corridor. "Someone is coming!" Zarn exclaimed fearfully. "If I am caught in here with you, our whole plan is ruined!"

CHAPTER VI

The Throne Room

ETRIFIED by a freezing horror, Curt Newton stood amid his guards in the throne room of the Cometae, staring with wild eyes at Joan Randall. He was stunned to his very soul, unable for the moment to believe what he saw. He had found the girl he loved, the girl whose danger had brought him on this perilous quest into the P

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comet world. He had found her - and she was one of the Cometae!

Joan had never looked so beautiful. Her soft, dark hair and lovely face, her lithe, utterly feminine figure so completely revealed by the scanty silvercloth garment were brilliantly enhanced by the glow of inherent electric force, scintillating from every inch of her body and investing her with its shining halo.

But to Captain Future, that dazzling aura of living light was a horror beyond description. He forgot his guards and stepped blindly and numbly forward, all the agony of his love and despair showing in his bloodless face.

"Joan!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "My God, what have these devils done to you!"

"Curt, stay back!" the girl cried in sharp alarm.

It was too late. In the tumult of emotions that shook him, Curt Newton had reached hungry arms toward her.

His hand barely grazed her shining shoulder - and he recoiled, his whole arm paralyzed by electric shock.

"Don't try to touch me, Curt! You can't." Joan Randall was telling him, her eyes full of apprehension.

The voice of Khinkir captain of the Cometae guards, snarled from behind.

"King Thoryx awaits you, prisoner. Move on!"

Captain Future barely heard him.

"Joan, I'll kill these fiends for doing a thing like this to you!" he raged. "I'll tear this devil's city of theirs to fragments!"

"But Curt, I wanted to be changed like this!" Joan exclaimed. "I wanted to become one of the Cometae." He had thought he could receive no greater shock, but her words left him mentally gasping, eying her in incredulous disbelief.

"Curt, the Cometae are not fiends," Joan was continuing earnestly. "They are a fine and friendly folk, who are allied to a wonderful race of superhuman beings called the Allus. The Allus gave these people immortality, and they freely offered me the same priceless boon. "Think of it, Curt - I'm practically immortal! I'll never grow old and ugly; I can live on and on and on! Is it any wonder that I accepted this wonderful thing they offered? And if you are allowed to join them, Curt, we two could live here forever!"

Khinkir's snarl came sharply then to Curt's shocked ears.

"Unless you move on, prisoner, you will be blasted where you stand," said Khinkir sharply.

"Please go, Curt. The king is waiting," Joan said in distress. "And try to conquer this hostility of yours toward the Cometae. I want you to see their greatness, and to join them as I have done."

She drew back into the group of Cometae nobles in the background, and Curt lost sight of her. Khinkir and his subordinate guards had raised their electrode-weapons toward him, with grim purpose.

Curt Newton stumbled along with them, on across the great, open throne room.

The scene before him, the brilliant throne room and the shining figures of the Cometae nobles, was a somber blur to his eyes. It was difficult for him to breathe, as though iron bands had been clamped around his chest.

Dimly he heard a voice through the confused throbbing of his thoughts. Then came the hissing, furious whisper of Khinkir who was standing beside him.

"The king is speaking to you, prisoner"

CURT'S vision cleared. He was standing with his guards in front of the sunburst throne. He looked up at the man and woman who sat on the benchlike silver chair.

C

Thoryx, hereditary king of the Cometae, was handsome as all his fair-haired race, his youthful figure invested by that alien halo of electric force that gave them all such an incongruously angelic appearance. But Curt read weakness in the smooth and effeminate features of the king, and in his suspiciously narrowed eyes.

There was no weakness in the girl beside him, the queen Lulain. Her blond beauty, flaming with the electric glow, was brazenly revealed by her brief, richly jewelled silver garments. She sat with languorous, feline grace, looking down with insolently appraising eyes at Captain Future's tall, red-haired figure.

"You do not answer me, stranger!" Thoryx was saying. The king glanced petulantly at Khinkir. "I thought you said he had learned to speak our language." Curt answered for himself, in the Cometae tongue. "I have learned it," he said, a harsh edge in his voice.

"Do not take that tone with me, stranger!" flared the Cometae king. "You are a prisoner here. If I but say the word, you will be dead before your heart beats twice." The Cometae noble who hovered at Thoryx' side hastily bent toward the angry king. Curt now noticed this councillor for the first time. The shining halo of his electric vitality could not disguise the man's advanced age. His elderly figure was slightly stooped, his hair thin and gray, his face a wrinkled mask of cunning with crafty, watchful eyes.

"The stranger does not know our ways, sire," he was telling the king soothingly. "It would not be wise to order his destruction before we have learned more about him and his strange companions."

"Very well, Querdel," Thoryx told the old noble fretfully. "But let him not look at me again so threateningly. I am master on this world - under the Great Ones, of course."

He added the last words hastily, with a nervous, involuntary glance around the throne, room. Curt surmised the reference was to the Allus.

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Lulain bolted half scornfully at her consort.

"Are we to spend all day in examination of this prisoner?" she inquired.

Thoryx addressed himself to Captain Future.

"Why did you and your companions approach the orbit of this comet?"

Captain Future had got a grip upon his raging emotions by now. Shaken as he was by the terrible surprise of his encounter with Joan, he still retained enough presence of mind to realize the wisdom of temporizing. So he answered the question.

"We did not approach the comet of our own free will. You dragged our ship in here with your magnet-beam, as you have kidnapped many other ships of our worlds."

"Yes," old Querdel agreed craftily. "But those other ships were all seeking to avoid the comet, while you were boldly approaching it. Why were you approaching it?"

Captain Future saw no reason for concealing the truth.

"We were searching for those other ships," he retort-

ed. "Note we find that it is you Cometæ who have dragged them in here. What could be your reason? The people of the planetary worlds have never harmed your race."

"You are not questioning us, prisoner" flared Thoryx angrily. "It is an order of the Great Canes that we seize as many ships as possible. Who are you to dispute the command of the dark masters?"

So, Curt thought swiftly, it was the mysterious Allus themselves who were behind the capture of the ships. UERDEL was asking him another question.

"Who are the three strange beings who are your comrades? They are not human."

Q

"No, they are not human," Curt answered carefully.

"But they are more than human in many respects."

"I thought as much," muttered the old councillor.

His cunning eyes narrowed. "I think that you are dangerous, stranger."

Curt perceived that the outlandish appearance of the Futuremen was what had made the Cometæ take a deeper interest in him than in ordinary prisoners. He sensed doubt and apprehension in the attitude of Thoryx.

"We had better destroy all four of them, Querdel," declared the king uneasily.

The crafty old councillor, who was obviously the brain behind the Cometæ throne, demurred.

"We should report to the Great Ones first, Your Highness. They told us to enlist into the Cometæ all captives willing to join us. But these captives are different."

Thoryx nodded nervously.

"Communicate with the Great Ones in the usual way, Querdel. Khinkir, return this insolent prisoner to his cell."

Captain Future turned without reluctance to leave the throne room, even though he felt he had learned nothing concrete about the Allus and their purposes. He was hoping desperately to get another word with Joan on the way out.

But his hopes were dashed. For Joan Randall was no longer to be seen in the brilliant throng of Cometæ. She had apparently withdrawn. Crushed by a heavy burden of fear and anxiety for her sake, Curt unseeingly accompanied his alert guards back across the plaza to the prison building.

As they approached the cell in which the Futuremen were confined, prison Captain Zarn hastily made his exit. He showed confusion.

"What were you doing in the cell with the

prisoners?" Khinkir demanded.

"The three strange ones were fighting among themselves. I went in to stop them," Zarn explained nervously.

"It might have been a trick to gain their escape," snapped Khinkir. "Do not enter their cell again, for these four prisoners are dangerous. And where are the guards I ordered you to post at this door?"

"I was just going to get them," Zarn answered quickly. When Curt entered the cell, the Futuremen came toward him at once. Otho asked the question they all had foremost in their minds.

"Did you find out anything about Joan?"

Curt Newton nodded heavily.

"I saw her. She is one of the Cometae now."

They stared incredulously. Then Otho began to rave.

"The devils! They forced her to become an electric monstrosity like themselves!"

"She said she became one of them by her own freewill," Curt told them miserably.

But the Brain asked a shrewd question.

"When you and she talked there - did you converse in English?"

"Of course," Curt nodded.

"Then," pointed out the Brain, "why did she have to pretend to you at all? Your Cometae guards couldn't understand your conversation."

Fingers of doubt clutched sickeningly at Curt's brain, poisoning his thoughts. With a violent effort he broke their grasp.

"This isn't a time to be doubting Joan, but to be helping her!" he exclaimed. "We've got to find a way to bring her out of that horrible electric existence!"

"Yes, lad, everything depends on our finding such a way," the Brain told him soothingly. Simon went on to relate what Zarn had said.

"The Cometae people will revolt against their rulers," he concluded, "if they can only be sure that we can retransform them afterward to normal men and

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women."

APTAIN FUTURE paced agitatedly to and fro.

"But how can we find the answer to that scientific secret in sufficient time?" he asked desperately.

C

"We shall not be wholly without instruments, if Zarn does not fail us," the Brain interposed. "He promised to try to bring certain apparatus from our ship, if it was possible `tonight'."

"Then we may have a chance, though it's still a gam-

ble," Curt muttered. "When will he be here?"

"Soon after the sleep-period begins, if he is successful," answered Simon. "I described for him the electrochemical apparatus I thought we'd need."

Grag snorted gloomily.

"Maybe these guards that Khinkir made him post outside our cell now will spoil the whole thing."

"Always cheerful and optimistic, that's Grag," Otho chimed in sarcastically. "Why don't you get a job haunting some dead planet?"

As they waited for "night," Curt's turmoil of spirit did not lessen. His feverish impatience was finally broken by the sound of steps down the corridor. The Futuremen listened tensely as the steps approached. Then they heard a low challenge from the guards posted outside their door, and the voice of Zarn replying.

CHAPTER VII

Desperate Research

THE door opened and Zarn came in. The prison captain clutched a bundle of scientific apparatus in his arms, and his shining face showed an extreme nervous excitement. With him was another man of the Cometæ - a big, hulking, craggy-featured soldier who stared at the Futuremen.

T

"This is Aggar, a captain and one of my friends."

Zarn introduced him quickly. "He is one of us Cometæ who have long desired to revolt against our heartless rulers."

Zarn put down the bundle of apparatus.

"I think I got everything you described from your ship," he told the Brain. "It was not easy to do so unobserved. But I got in here safely with it, for I had taken care to post guards 'tonight' who are of our secret party."

"You have already spoken to your friends among the Cometæ about a possible revolt?" Captain Future asked Zarn quickly.

The prison captain bobbed his head.

"We potential rebels have an undercover organization. I made contact with its heads, of whom Agar is one. They long to rise against the tyrants, against Thorix and that old devil Querdel. But they will not do so unless certain that success will make it possible for us to be normal men once more."

The hard-fisted Aggar spoke bluntly to Curt.

"Can you do that, stranger? Can you use those instruments to match the science of the Allus and undo what the Allus did to us?"

"I can't tell without some study," Captain Future answered honestly. "And my comrades and I would like

the help of the man in the next cell - the Martian scientist Tiko Thrin. Can you get him in here, Zarn, and also the man named Ezra Gurney?"

"Yes, I can do that," said Zarn, and hurriedly left the cell.

He was back in a few moments and with him came two men. One was an elderly little Martian, a small, withered creature with an incongruously big and bald red head, and weak eyes which peered through thick spectacles.

But it was the other man toward whom the Futuremen jumped with an exclamation of delight. This one was elderly, too, a wrinkled-faced Earthman with iron-gray hair and faded blue eyes, whose bleak depths now were sparkling with pleasure.

"Ezra Gurney!" Captain Future wrung the old Planet Patrol veteran's hand. "You old buzzard of space. If there's trouble anywhere in the System, you'll find it."

"Yes, an' I found plenty of it in this cursed comet, Cap'n Future," said Ezra earnestly in his drawling voice. "Did you find Joan?"

Curt's face darkened.

"Yes. She's become one of the Cometae."

Ezra uttered an incredulous oath.

"It's impossible! She'd never accept that Thoryx' offer to join them!"

"She did it only for some purpose we don't know,"

Curt declared stoutly. "I'm convinced of that."

Yet, even as he spoke, he had to force down that haunting doubt that had poisoned his thoughts ever since Joan had spoken to him so strangely.

Meantime Grag and Otho were slapping the old veteran on the back in high glee at the reunion. Even Oog and Eek, recognizing an old friend, had come trotting up eagerly from their corner.

Zarn intruded then. The face of the Cometae captain was anxious.

"We may be interrupted at any moment!" he warned.

"Khinkir and other officers loyal to Thoryx often come snooping about this prison."

Curt rapidly explained to Tiko Thrin what they had in mind.

"You have been here, observing the Cometae, for some time," he told the old Martian scientist. "What do you think of the possibility of re-transforming them?"

Tiko Thrin wagged his head doubtfully.

"We can only try. It will not be easy. The science of the Allus may be far beyond our own."

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APTAIN FUTURE addressed Zarn and Aggar,

who were waiting tensely, while the Brain and Otho set up the compact electron microscope, ray probes and other delicate electric apparatus.

C

"We'll need a sample of your tissues," Curt said slowly to the two Cometae men. "It's the only way we can make a thorough study of the altered cells of your bodies."

The big Aggar calmly drew his dagger and poised it over the skin of his glowing forearm.

"Just tell me how much," he grunted.

Captain Future directed him. The big Cometae captain coolly cut a thin strip of skin from his forearm and placed it in the chamber of the electron microscope. Curt and the Brain bent over the instrument. The apparatus was a compact adaptation of the old-fashioned electronic microscope, magnifying almost indefinitely by using magnetic action to focus rays of free electrons, instead of a lens to focus rays of light.

The strip of tissue still glowed with scintillating light under the microscope, although its luminescence seemed to be fading. Curt focused down until he was examining a single cell of that changing tissue. Ire and the Brain, and then Otho and Tiko Thrin, studied the enormously magnified cell.

As he straightened, Tiko Thrin shook his head.

"I'm afraid it's beyond me," he confessed. "The whole molecular pattern of the cell has been altered beyond recognition. I can't see how the Allus did it or how it can be undone."

"Curse it, the Allus must be gods or devils to accomplish a thing like this!" Otho swore.

The Brain was looking at Captain Future.

"Not only molecular change, but also atomic, lad," said Simon.

Curt nodded his red head, frowning deeply.

"Yes. Some force has been utilized to break down each cell's molecules, not only into atoms but into sub-atomic particles - and then recast them in a wholly new pattern."

Captain Future was feeling a sensation he had never experienced before. This unthinkable tampering with the finest units of life was evidence of a science vast and alien beyond conception.

"Can you undo what was done to us, Captain Future?" Captain Yarn asked anxiously.

Curt knew that the hopes of a race hung upon his reply. That the fate of Joan Randall hung upon it, too. Yet he couldn't answer in an unqualified affirmative, much as he would have liked to do so.

"I feel certain," he said slowly, "that this process can

be undone, that the molecular and atomic pattern of your cells can be recast to normal by the right force. But it will not be an easy thing to do!

"You see," he explained, "the living cell is normally a tiny electric 'battery,' that by chemical action produces the electric energy which we call life. But the Allus have worked deep and subtle changes in your cells. They have recast their molecules and atoms so that now each cell forms a tiny transformer,' which simply receives its energy from the coma radiation which permeates everything here."

Zarn and Aggar seemed impressed by Curt's knowledge,

"Then you'll promise to change us all back to normal if our revolt succeeds?" they cried.

Captain Future took the plunge.

"I promise to restore you to normality - or to die trying!

GGAR'S massive face glowed with hope and resolution. "Then we of the Cometae will rise!"

Curt seized the opportunity.

"How many of your people will revolt against Thoryx?" he asked quickly. "How soon can you organize and strike?"

"Nine-tenths of the Cometae hate our rulers," Aggar replied. "But not all of them will risk rebellion, at first. Our secret organization is what we must chiefly rely on. We number fully five thousand men."

"How many fighting men can Thoryx count on?"

Otho demanded.

"About as many," Aggar admitted. "The regiments of the palace guard are loyal to him, because they are a favored class. The nobles, of course, will support Thoryx. So will some of the people, because of their superstitious regard for the Allus."

"What about weapons?" Curt asked him. "Can you secure enough of those electrode-weapons?"

Aggar laughed.

"They would be of no avail against Cometae. They simply project a powerful electric blast, and that wouldn't hurt one of us in the least. The things are used only to keep you captives under control."

"Then what the devil do you use for weapons against each other?" Otho exclaimed.

"Swords and daggers are all that can be used effectively on a Cometae," Zarn answered. "Only the soldiers are allowed to possess them."

"All us captives here can fight with you, if you can get swords of dielectric material for us," Curt told Zarn quickly. "You know we can't touch you Cometae, even with an ordinary metal sword, without receiving a para-

lyzing electric shock."

"I can touch them!" said Grag loudly. To prove it, he laid his heavy metal hand capon Zarn's shoulder. "It's only inside me that I have steelite parts. The whole outside of my body is of dielectric metal, a non-conductor!"

"Good of Grag!" chuckled Ezra Gurney. "You won't need any sword."

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"Yeah, for once your dumb metal carcass will come in handy," said Otho gibingly.

"How soon can you strike?" Curt was asking Aggar intently. "What is your plan?"

"The only possible plan," replied Aggar, "is to attack the palace, overcome Thoryx' guards in the first rush, and round up the tyrant and his spitfire queen and the nobles in short order."

"Especially," put in Zarn anxiously, "it is necessary to grab that old wizard Querdel at once. It's said that he has a way of communicating with the Allus."

Captain Future saw again that chill shadow of dread creep into the eyes of the two Cometae captains at mention of the Allus. But Aggar forced the fear away.

"The Allus have never come out of their citadel in the north, and they won't now," the husky fighter said emphatically. He turned to Captain Future. "We can be ready to strike by tomorrow `night'. It's the `night' of the Lightning Feast, and Thoryx and all the nobility will be gathered in the palace, ours for the taking."

The plan was quickly arranged. Aggar and Zarn were to mobilize the Cometae rebels around the plaza when the next `night' carne. Zarn would release the Futuremen and the other captives. At a given signal, they would join forces and attack the palace.

"One more thing!" said Curt urgently. "The Earthgirl who is now one of the Cometae - she must not be harmed under any circumstances."

"Agreed. Now let's get out of here," Zarn warned.

"Everything would be ruined if we were discovered plotting together."

Tiko Thrin, the Martian, and Ezra Gurney were taken back to their own cells and the door of the Futuremen's cell was relocked.

THO paced to and fro excitedly.

"Action at last: Anything's better than rotting away in this cell."

O

The Brain looked at Curt.

"The plan is a precarious one, lad. Suppose the Allus should intervene with their mastery of mental

force."

"That's exactly what I don't understand," Grag interposed puzzledly. "All this talk about mental force. What in the world is it?"

Captain Future explained.

"Thought is basically electrical, like life itself. Grag. When a man thinks or wills something, the synaptic pattern of his brain cells conducts to his nerves a definite electrical current, which energizes his physical body to obey that thought or will.

"Theoretically," Curt added, "it should be possible for a man to 'broadcast' his electric thought or will-impulses, as electromagnetic vibrations that would impinge upon and seize control of another man's brain and body.

"That's what is meant by mental force. No man has ever possessed more than a fraction of this power. But it seems the Allus have mastered it."

The hours of the following day-period passed with dragging slowness. Tension built up with each passing hour. Captain Future labored under a growing nervous strain as "night" approached. He had never felt so tense at any time in the past, on the threshold of struggle.

"Night" came at last. There was no lessening of the coma's brilliant light from the window, but in the alabaster city outside the passing throngs of Cometæ dwindled away. The sleep-period had come.

Curt, watching tautly from the window, saw more and more of the six-wheeled Cometæ vehicles arriving at the great palace across the plaza. The nobility of the Cometæ were streaming into the big building.

"They're coming for the Lightning Feast that Aggar mentioned," Curt muttered. "I wonder what kind of function it is, anyway."

"Sounds crazy, like everything else in this cursed comet," Grag snorted.

"Zarn should be here with the others, by now, to release us," Captain Future said, biting his lip. "If he's too late -"

"I hear him coming now?" Otho exclaimed joyfully.

The tramp of feet was clearly audible.

In a moment their prison door was hung open.

To their surprise and consternation, it was Captain of the Guards Khinkir and a half-dozen of the palace sentries who stood there.

"They carried electrode weapons and trained them uncompromisingly upon the Futuremen.

"You four strangers are to come with us," Khinkir snapped. "Sentence has been passed upon you. You are too dangerous, and are to die 'tonight.'"

CHAPTER VIII

The Lightning Feast

O Captain Future, the announcement was a thunderbolt that wrecked all their plans. He could not keep the sharp momentary dismay out of his face. And Khinkir saw it, and smiled thinly in triumph.

T

"You learn now what it means to defy the King and blaspheme the Great Ones, stranger," he rasped. "For the Great Ones, through the wise Querdel, have decreed that you four might be a danger and that it is safer to destroy you at once."

His smile widened.

"But you will not die ingloriously, strangers. You are to die at the Lightning Feast. Your destruction will afford an enjoyable spectacle for our king and court." Curt Newton desperately decided that since all was lost, he would perish righting here and now. And Khinkir read that, too, in his face. The Cometae captain

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recoiled and shouted a sharp order to his men, who brought their electrode weapons to bear on Captain Future's heart.

"Curt!" cried a clear silvery voice in anxious alarm.

Joan Randall had appeared in the corridor outside!

A dazzling electric-gloving figure of beauty, her radiant face was taut with apprehension.

Khinkir had turned startledly at her cry. The guards, too, had glanced sideward. That moment was enough for Grag. The great robot's mighty metal arms reached out and seized the Cometae captain!

"Kill them!" shrieked Khinkir. But his scream was choked off as Grag's arms crushed him.

With yells of alarm, the Cometae soldiers triggered their strange weapons to loose crackling blasts of electric force at the Futuremen. But Joan had bravely flung herself against the guards, distracting them and spoiling their aim. The blasts missed Curt Newton and Otho and Simon.

One of the electric blasts struck Joan's shining body.

Mad with apprehension for her, Captain Future plunged in at the soldiers with whom she was struggling.

He touched one of those Cometae guards - and was flung back half senseless by the paralyzing electric shock of contact. He fought to get to his feet, and was dimly aware of a tumult of shouting and running about him.

Curt's eyes began to clear, as the first effects of the shock passed. Staggering drunkenly, he found himself witnessing an amazing scene of conflict.

Zarn and Aggar had arrived! With them were a score

of other Cometae. All carried swords, and were hacking down the Cometae guards who had come with Khinkir. Even as Curt stumbled forward, the last guard fell a mangled, radiant corpse.

Khinkir himself lay on the corridor floor, a crushed and broken thing. And big Grag was straightening grimly.

"I told you that I could touch them!" the robot boomed.

The Futuremen were all unhurt. But Curt stumbled toward Joan Randall.

"Joan, are you all right? That electric blast that hit you -"

"It couldn't hurt me," she breathed. "No electric force can harm a Cometae, Curt."

Zarn was close beside Captain Future, speaking wildly. "We've little time! The alarm will be given when Khinkir doesn't return to the palace!"

"Release Tiko Thrin and Ezra Gurney and all the other captives," Curt ordered. "You brought swords for us?"

"Yes, here they are," said Aggar, pointing to a bundle of long, gray, saberlike weapons. "We had them hastily forged of dielectric metal. You can use them, even against the Cometae."

OAN spoke now in a sobbing rush. "Curt, I was afraid I'd be too late! I came here as soon as I heard that your executions had been ordered, though I didn't know what I could do -"

J

"Joan, tell me quickly," he interrupted. "You didn't join the Cometae because you really wanted to, did you?"

"Oh, no, Curt! It broke my heart to have to keep up that pretense when I met you yesterday in the throne room."

"But why did you keep it up with me?" he asked bewilderedly. "We were talking in our own English, which the Cometae couldn't understand."

"There were captives who had become Cometae, like myself, in the throne room," she said earnestly. "If they'd heard and betrayed me -"

"Of course. What a fool I was not to think of that!" Captain Future exclaimed. "But even so, I knew it wasn't the real you talking."

"Curt, I only pretended to join the Cometae," Joan cried. "I pretended to be allured by the prospect of immortality - but only because I thought it the only way in which I could learn the secret of this comet's mystery."

She came closer, her eyes wide and haunted as she

looked up at him.

"Curt, there's a threat in this mysterious setup. A strange, unguessable threat to our Solar System from those Allus who came from outside our cosmos. It's not a physical menace, I feel certain of that.

"I'm convinced the Allus have in mind nothing so crude as a physical attack upon our System. But they are planning something! They direct everything the Cometae do, as incomprehensible details of some dark, baffling plan."

Her shining face was earnest

"I wanted to find out, to carry a warning out to the System, if warning was needed. So I pretended that I wanted to become a Cometae and live a deathless electric life. But I've found out so little!

"I was in an induced mental amnesia when I was taken to the citadel of the Allus and made a Cometae, so I remember nothing about them. And I've never seen any Allus since. I'm certain that only Querdel, Thoryx and a few others have really seen the Allus. And they themselves are in deadly fear of the dark masters!"

"But Joan, even if you'd found out anything, you couldn't have escaped from here to give warning!" Curt exclaimed. "You couldn't have lived outside the comet, now that your body feeds on the coma's electric radiance."

"I knew that, Curt. But I thought that if I could get away in a ship, my ship would be found and my written warning read - even if I died," she answered simply.

Curt Newton felt a lump in his throat as he contemplated the girl's matter-of-fact heroism. He took a step

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closer toward her.

"Joan -"

"Stay back, Curt!" Her warning was a sob. "You can't touch me now, or ever again. I'm a Cometae!" Captain Future felt a tumult of emotions such as he had never experienced before.

"Joan, I'm going to get you out of this terrible electric existence, no matter what else I do!" he vowed fiercely. "You and all these Cometae, after our revolt succeeds!"

By now the other prisoners in the rows of cells had been released. Tiko Thrin, the little Martian scientist, and Ezra Gurney were hastening toward Captain Future. After them came the other captives of the vanished spaceships - Plutonians, Earthmen, Venusians - a bewildered, heterogeneous crew.

ARN spoke a warning to Curt Newton.

"We mustn't delay here any longer. The Lightning

Feast will have begun by now. Our people are waiting!"
"Tiko Thrin, you keep Eek and Oog safe for us here!"
cried Grag.

Z

"Joan, you stay here with Tiko also," Curt told the girl authoritatively. "No, I won't have you with us! We'll be back, never fear."

"Oh, Curt - be careful!" she cried.

"It's not Thoryx or the guards I'm afraid of, but Querdel and his evil link with the Allus."

Curt had grabbed up one of the dielectric swords, and Otho and Ezra and the other released captives were similarly arming themselves.

"This way!" rumbled the deep voice of Aggar.

The hulking Cometae captain led them through the corridors of the prison building, toward another entrance than that which opened onto the plaza.

"Fiends of Pluto!" gasped old Ezra Gurney, hastening beside Captain Future. "This, is the queerest bunch I ever went into a fight with!"

Curt realized the strange spectacle he and his companions must present; the two radiant, electric forms of Zarn and Aggar leading, he and Ezra just behind them, the Brain gliding at their side, with lithe Otho and ponderous Grag following closely.

Behind them in turn came the fierce-eyed, newly released Venusians, Earthmen and other captives, followed by the score of Cometae, vanguard of the rebels who had joined forces with Zarn and Aggar.

All had swords for weapons. All were grimly tense as they emerged from the building into a narrow street at the rear of the towering prison. Aggar led the way along it, in a rapid trot.

They met no one. The city Mloon seemed deserted beneath the flaring coma-sky. It was well into the sleep-period, and most of the city of the Cometae was wrapped in slumber.

"We're circling around the plaza to approach the palace from the rear," Zarn told Captain Future as they hurried along. "Our comrades were to meet us there at this hour."

From a branching street of the alabaster city, a solid mass of armed Cometae poured out to join them a few moments later. As they hastened on, other bands of the Cometae were coming in from side streets.

Aggar's secret organization of rebels was functioning well. By the time they approached the network of narrow streets behind the looming palace dome, the conspirators numbered into the hundreds.

"The others will be on their way here by now," Aggar declared as he signaled to halt. "But there are two

thousand guards inside the palace, and as many more within easy call."

"What's your plan - to rush the entrances?" Captain Future asked tensely.

"No. The guards would slam the gates on us before we could get through," grunted the big Cometae rebel. He turned to his fellow officer.

"Zarn, I'm going inside with a 'small band, by a little-used entrance I learned of when I was captain of the palace guards myself. We'll try to dispose quietly of the gate guards. You can bring the main force in when you hear our signal."

"I'm going with you, Aggar," Curt said quietly. And the other Futuremen and Ezra Gurney hastily chimed in.

Aggar laughed.

"All right. The one you call Grag may be useful."

Aggar quickly designated a score of Cometae to accompany them. Then he and the Futuremen led the small band toward the palace.

THE vast, white synthestone structure loomed above them like a man-made mountain when they reached its massive rear wall. Aggar led them to a narrow entrance in one of the indented angles in the wall.

T

"A servants' entrance," he muttered. "There should be only two guards on duty. Stay back out of sight." They remained as he bade them, while Aggar himself sheathed his sword and strode boldly toward the inconspicuous entrance.

Two Cometae palace guards sprang suddenly from the entrance and barred his way with drawn swords.

"Why are you here, Captain Aggar?" one demanded suspiciously. "You are not on palace duty any longer."

"You fools? Haven't you heard that Khinkir is dead and that I've replaced him?" snarled Aggar.

Half convinced, yet still doubtful, the two guards lowered their swords a little. Then Curt and his companions saw a wonderful feat of swordsmanship.

They saw Aggar suddenly hurl himself forward, drawing his blade as he plunged it and wielding it like a brand of light. It ripped into the breast of a Cometae guard and out again, struck down the other man at the

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very moment his mouth was opened to yell an alarm.

"Hot work," panted Aggar as Curt and the others came running up. His massive face hardened. "And don't waste any pity on these palace guards, strangers. They've long been the instruments of Thoryx's tyranny over the people. I myself was one of them, until I could

stand such injustice no longer."

They had crowded into the entrance now and stood inside the palace of the Cometae kings. A narrow corridor, which could be closed by a huge gate of metal, led to a flight of ascending steps.

"Up this way," said Aggar, hastening up the stairs.

"We're working on scant margin of time now!"

Curt Newton heard then, from somewhere deep within the great palace, a burst of thrilling, rippling music. Long, falling chords quivered in his ears with alien tonal beauty of muted strings.

"That's from the Lightning Feast," Aggar grunted.

"But it hasn't begun yet or we'd hear it."

They came up into a long gallery, one of a maze of cross-halls and passages that intersected the palace's vast bulk. Luxury was evident everywhere here, the alabaster walls hung with beautiful tapestries of red and gold, the floors soft with silken rugs.

Aggar shot rapid orders at the score of Cometae he had brought along, directing them to work their way back through the palace and overcome the gate guards at the main rear entrances.

"Then give the signal. Zarn and the others will pour in, and all will be on the knees of the gods!" finished the husky Cometae officer.

He turned to Curt.

"The main force of the palace guards is always close to Thoryx. They'll be in the great court for the festival. This way! "

They raced along deserted, splendid halls whose occupants had apparently all been drawn by the mysterious festivity. Soon they reached an upper gallery, from which they could peer down into a large court that seas situated in a wing of the palace.

The court was circular, open to the flaring coma-sky. It was two hundred feet in diameter, paved with alternating blocks of red and white that made a beautiful contrast to the alabaster walls.

At the very center of the court bulked a thing like a squat, upright copper pillar. Not far from this stood a wide double throne, upon which King Thoryx and Queen Lulain were sitting. The old noble, Querdel, hovered close beside the king, as usual. Scores of Cometae nobles were standing expectantly around the court, facing their rulers.

A

Captain Future perceived that a solid ring of palace guards encircled the rim of the court. In an alcove, musicians played instruments from which rippled the haunting, alien music that now was loud in all ears. It was music that pulsed with a fierce, feverish undertone of

expectation and avidity, music that set Curt's pulses lumping as he listened.

The Futuremen gazed upon this strange scene with wonder. Upon no far world had they seen a more brilliant and unearthly spectacle than was presented by these radiant Cometae rulers, gathered here for festival beneath the glow of the comet sky.

Thoryx raised his hand and the music died to an undertone. The king's voice came clearly to the watchers in the gallery.

"Let the Lightning Feast begin!"

The squat copper pillar at the center of the court began silently to extend itself upward, like an unfolding telescope. Higher and higher it extended, until it was a slim rod reaching hundreds of feet into the sky.

"They're raising the radiance rod." Aggar muttered tautly. "If we're lucky, the feast will drown out the noise our men make at the gates."

The Brain hovered over Curt's ear

"That rod is designed to attract increased electric radiation from the coma!" Simon whispered. "Is it possible that -"

The sentence was never finished. The copper rod had now been raised to an unbelievable height above the palace. As it attracted electric energy from the vast coma overhead, its whole height was wrapped in a purple, brushlike flame that grew in intensity with each minute.

A slender lightning bolt smote from above into the court! Its jagged white brilliance blinded Curt's eyes for a second, and its reverberating concussion of thunder almost deafened him.

But he had seen that thin bolt strike Thoryx, the king. He had glimpsed the white brilliance of unthinkable electric energy splashing over the ruler's body.

Then as Captain Future's dazzled eyes cleared, he heard Thoryx laughing in exhilaration! The king was unharmed by that jolting stroke.

Now bolt after bolt of dazzling flame was striking in the court, with continuous shock of thunder. The bolts were hitting the Cometae nobles, who threw their hands up as though to welcome and attract the crackling flashes, and who laughed in wild intoxication as the lightning struck at them.

A mad, unbelievable phantasmagoria, it seemed, as the almost continuous lightning plated like dancing witch upon the luminescent, revelry-mad figures of the Cometae.

"The Lightning Feast!" Aggar was shouting to the Futuremen. "Electric energy is food, is life itself to us Cometae. Even the concentrated energy of lightning

cannot harm us, but serves only to stimulate and intoxicate."

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CHAPTER IX

Dark Triumph

HEY turned suddenly from the unearthly spectacle, as a mass of armed Cometae came pouring down the gallery in which they stood. Then they recognized Zarn at the head of these hundreds of men.

T

"Our forces are inside the palace!" cried Zarn above the shattering reverberations of thunder. "I've ordered them to spread out through the building, to encircle the court."

"Good! When they're all in place, I'll give the signal for attack!" exclaimed Aggar.

"Too late for that - look down! There!" yelled Otho. A Cometae - one of the palace guards - had flung himself into the mad festival of lightning in the court. The man was swordless, wounded, shouting something in chocking tones.

"One of the gate guards who got away!" roared Aggar. "No time to wait now! Down at them, men! Let none of the nobles escape!"

A read roar of long-repressed hate answered him from the throats of the Cometae rebels. Swords gleaming, they charged behind Aggar and the Futuremen toward a stair leading from the gallery down into the court.

Zarn was shouting alarmedly to Captain Future.

"You strangers can't go into that court! You're not like us - the lightning will destroy you!"

"A little thing like lightning isn't going to keep us out of this!" Curt Newton exclaimed recklessly.

The court was a scene of mad confusion. From a dozen entrances, Cometae rebels were pouring in and fiercely engaging the palace guards. Swords were gleaming, men going down in death, and the chaos of lightning and thunder still raged.

Curt glimpsed Thoryx standing in appalled irresolution, his weak face distorted by alarm. But crafty old Querdel was fiercely shrilling orders to the guards. Then Captain Future and his companions clashed with the guards around the edge of the court. Curt glimpsed a roaring Cometae soldier lunging toward him, a shining figure whose sword was stabbing fiercely.

Captain Future parried the blow by a swift stab of his own dielectric blade, then ran the point through the man's throat. The guard crumpled to the floor. The

Cometae, deathless as far as age or sickness were concerned, died as swiftly as ordinary men when a vital organ was stricken.

"Cut through them - get to the king and the nobles!"

Aggar was yelling fiercely, through the crash of thunder.

"Demons of Mars, what a crazy fight!" gasped Otho.

His blade flashed to one side, parrying a blow aimed at Curt's back. "Did for him!"

The Brain hovered above the battle, coolly calling Warning to Curt and the others as the guards desperately shifted their tactics.

All around the court, the defenders were being pushed inward as the maddened rebels sought to reach the royal tyrant. Curt as he fought was half blinded every few moments by the appalling hiss and crash of striking threads of lightning.

As Captain Future had banked on, the dancing lightning bolts always struck Cometae, attracted by their intrinsic electric charge. The bolts could not harm the Cometae. But their blinding flare and the deafening explosions of thunder made infernal, unnerving background for this desperate assault.

Somehow the ring of palace guards held firm around Thoryx and Lulain, spurred by the undaunted orders of the clever Querdel.

"We've got to smash through them now before the other soldiers arrive here from their barracks!" Aggar was shouting to his Cometae rebels. "Think what you're fighting for, men! Freedom, the end of tyranny, the chance to be normal men again!"

And it was at this moment, when desperate resistance held the battle's fate in the balance, that Grag tipped the scales.

IKE a monstrous metal genie, Grag strode forward from where he had fought beside Curt Newton.

The great robot's massive metal body could not be harmed by the swords of the Cometae.

L

He advanced, flailing mighty arms, his huge balled fists knocking guards aside like tenpins. Swords stabbed in vain at his metal body. Cometae opponents leaped on him to pull him down, and were brushed away. Grag walked through them like a stolid, avenging giant.

"Come on, Otho - what's holding you back?" his voice boomed back through the thunder.

"Grag's broken the ring! Push through and cut them up!" Curt yelled.

The attackers plunged forward through the breach.

The circle of palace guards was disintegrating.

A sword touched Curt's right arm. The electric shock that flew along it from his opponent staggered him. He struggled fiercely to keep from falling. By superhuman resolve, he transferred his own weapon from the paralyzed arm to his left hand, and stabbed fiercely back.

He downed his assailant and pressed on, fighting like a red-headed fury. Beside him, Otho uttered his hissing, heart-chilling battle-cry as he slashed and struck with uncanny swiftness. Ezra Gurney's shrill, exultant yell came from behind them. Aggar was roaring orders through the inferno of crashing thunder and dying screams.

Sheeted lightning flares illumined Grag's figure as

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the dauntless robot strode forward in an orgy of destruction, his flail-like arms sweeping all before them. It was small wonder that the Cometae guards broke before this awful personification of inhuman vengeance, upon whom their swords could make no impression.

"They're breaking up! Cut through to Thoryx!"

bawled Aggar's stentorian voice. "Get the tyrant!"

"We've won!" Zarn yelled to Curt, as they swayed together in the fight. The rebel captain's face was flaming with triumph. "Look, they're trying to flee - we've broken the tyranny forever!"

"Curtis!" came the thin, urgent cry of the Brain from nearby. "Curtis, listen -"

There was no time to listen. Captain Future was exchanging deadly thrusts with a raging Cometae guard, who seemed suicidally bent upon slaying Curt Newton at any risk, to himself.

Curt got through the man's guard, poised for the stab that would finish the fight. A blinding thread of lightning wreathed the Cometae for a second, the blaze and concussion staggering Captain Future backward.

His opponent, as though drawing new strength from the lightning stroke, leaped forward as Curt stumbled over a fallen man. Captain Future desperately swung up his dielectric sword as he fell - and his antagonist literally spitted himself on it.

"Nice swordwork, Cap'n Future!" cried Ezra Gurney. The old veteran's wrinkled face was flaring with bloodmad excitement. "We've beat 'em - we've got 'em runnin'!"

Curt saw that it was true. The remnants of the palace guard were being hacked to pieces. And the nobles whom they had protected were now being fiercely assailed by Aggar's rebels.

Aggar was bawling continuous orders to his follow-

ers, to cut through to the Cometæ king who cowered at the center of his nobles.

"Kill the tyrant!" echoed Zarn's maddened cry. "Remember what we fight for, men!"

"Curtis, listen!"

This time, there was such taut urgency in the rasping cry of the Brain that Captain Future turned toward him. Simon right, hovering close by his shoulder, was the strangest figure in all that weird scene of infernal combat. Dancing flares of lightning glanced off the Brain's glass lens-eyes as he spoke.

"Curtis, the man Querdel whom you described to me is escaping! I saw him slip back from the fight a moment ago - yes, there he goes now!"

APTAIN FUTURE, glancing a little wildly around the crazy, crowded scene, spotted the fleeing noble for himself. He barely glimpsed the sinister Cometæ councillor as Querdel darted out of the court into a palace passageway.

C

Instant alarm drummed in Curt's mind. He remembered what Zarn had told them. "It's said that Querdel has a way of communicating directly with the Allus." Was that why Querdel was fleeing the fight? There was no time to weigh the possibility. Captain Future plunged across the court toward the passage in which the old wizard had disappeared.

He had to fight his way half across the court, through still-resisting Cometæ nobles and guards. He finally won past them and raced into the corridor.

He was aware of the Brain gliding beside him, and of Grag and Otho racing loyally down the passageway after him. Then Curt burst into a small, vaulted chamber that had the look of a primitive laboratory. Unfamiliar electrical instruments stood around its walls.

But Captain Future's eyes flew to the center of the room. There stood the radiant figure of the old councillor, Querdel. The Cometæ noble was facing an enigmatic object.

The thing was a towering, dull-black globe that was ten feet in diameter. It rested upon a tripod metal pedestal. The most arresting feature was the fact that its deadblack spherical surface was covered with a crawling, metallic film, whose gleaming substance constantly changed pattern.

Querdel was standing utterly motionless and silent in front of this strange, looming object. But the terrible intensity in the old noble's face and eyes as he confronted the globe was significant.

"He's thinking into that thing!" Curt exclaimed sharply. "It's some kind of transmitter of mental force,

connecting with the Allus -"

Captain Future plunged forward with his sword poised. He meant to kill Querdel, without parley. For Curt sensed terrible danger in the superhuman efforts of the man to contact the mysterious Allus.

But before he ever reached Querdel, something happened. The crawling metallic film upon the black sphere suddenly spun and seethed with inconceivable rapidity.

Out from the sphere pulsed a wave of what looked like black light. An emanation of unguessable force, at sight of which Querdel's strained eyes flamed in wild triumph.

Curtis, 'look out!" came the thin cry of the Brain.

"He's reached the Allus - that's a wave of force -"

The warning came too late. As it reached Curt's ears, the pulsing wave of blackness took hold of him.

He stood petrified, rooted to the floor. For he was experiencing a sensation of mental assault such as he had never felt before.

Into his brain beat the sharp mental commands of other minds - a collective intelligence so vast and alien, Captain Future felt his mental defenses tottering and crashing before its assault.

He knew, in a wild flash of perception, what was happening to him. He knew that the electric mental pat-

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tern of his own brain was no longer commanding his body. The will of more powerful minds, broadcast as a wave of electromagnetic force, had invaded and taken possession of his brain and body.

"I must not oppose Thoryx and Querdel and their guards. I must submit to them."

HAT was the command of an alien will, flowing out from the sphere in a wave of dark, electromagnetic force to dominate Captain Future and all his fellow-rebels!

T

Curt struggled wildly to resist that dominating, hypnotic wave of mental force. He could not. He was like a child in the grasp of a giant. He knew now that the Allus whose aid Querdel had called were mighty indeed. Yet Curt Newton's fighting soul rallied for an instant against even this overwhelming attack. By extraordinary mental effort, he opened his lips.

"Grag! Otho!" he gasped to the Futuremen, who were now bursting into the room. "Get away! Save Joan and - and -"

He could not finish. His brain was reeling under the crushing mental attack.

Curt staggered, still trying to resist as his last mental defenses crumbled. He glimpsed the triumph on Querdel's evil old face. He saw the dark wave pulsing out through the corridors and courts of the entire palace.

Then his mind was crushed into complete senseless acquiescence.

CHAPTER X

Road to Mystery

THO had been fighting furiously in the court of the Lightning Feast, helping Zarn and Aggar and their followers to break the resistance of the demoralized palace guards. Then the android glimpsed Captain Future and Simon racing into the corridor in pursuit of Querdel.

O

At once, Otho broke off to follow them. Even in the fierce blood-madness that always swept him in battle, the android's prime loyalty yeas always to his beloved, red-haired leader. As he plunged after Curt and Simon, he yelled to Grag.

"Come on, Grag - the chief needs us!"

Grag came hurrying clankingly with him, stolidly brushing aside unfortunate Cometæ who got in his way. A moment later Otho and Grag burst into the vaulted laboratory of Querdel. They halted, appalled by the weird spectacle before them.

From the great black sphere at the center of the room, the wave of dark, hazy force had pulsed out to engulf Captain Future and the Brain. It was flowing around Querdel, too, but the old Cometæ councillor showed nothing but triumph on his evil features.

But Curt's face was ghastly as Otho had never before seen it. An agony of mental struggle was in Captain Future's eyes as he gasped out a few words.

"Grag! Otho! Get away - save Joan - and -"

Curt did not finish the words. Grag and Otho saw Captain Future's agonized face become suddenly mask-like, expressionless. They saw Curt stand now as stiff as a statue, staring stonily into nothingness. And the Brain, too, was poised, speechless, motionless.

Otho realized instantly that it was that pulsing aura of black force which had somehow overcome his leader. But the android plunged recklessly right into the dark, outward-welling haze. He clutched wildly at Captain Future's arm.

Chief, what's the matter?" he cried. "Wake up!"

Then Otho, too, felt a dim, chill sensation of alien forces seeking to invade and master his mind, of the attack of a powerful intelligence.

But Otho resisted that mental assault to which Curt

and Simon had fallen victims! The android resisted, and so did Grag. They stood their ground, unheeding the flowing dark haze from the sphere, trying frantically to awaken Curt and the Brain from their strange stupor. "Otho!" yelled Grag suddenly. "That old devil who did this has got away!"

The android whirled fiercely. It was true. Querdel had taken advantage of their moment of desperate distraction to slip from the room.

Both Grag and Otho raced furiously down the passage by which they had come to overtake and kill the Cometae wizard who had called forth the power of the Allus.

That haze of unimaginable mental force, emanating from the laboratory Grag and Otho had just left had pulsed outward to invest the whole palace. It was all about them like a nightmare dusk as they sped down the corridor, yet still it seemed not to affect them.

They burst back out into the palace court, looking about fiercely for Querdel. Then they forgot the wizard in the horror of the sight they witnessed.

Fighting between Cometae rebels and palace guards had suddenly ended. It had been ended by the pulsing dusk of force that now pervaded everything. Under the influence of that terrible pall, the Cometae rebels had dropped their weapons and stood about like mindless automatons, where a moment before they had been shouting their victory.

UT the Cometae palace guards and nobles remained unaffected by the weird force. They were disarming the stricken rebels, who could no longer resist them. Thoryx was shouting angry orders.

B

"Secure every rebel! Be sure to get the leaders!" he shrilled vindictively. "We'll teach the people what it means to challenge us, chosen by the Allus!"

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Querdel, who had reached the king, pointed at the stunned Grag and Otho.

"There are two of the strangers who were ringleaders!"

Cometae guards leaped toward the robot and android from all sides. With a bull-like roar of rage, Grag met and hurled them back in broken heaps.

An alarmed cry went up.

"The power of the Allus has not stricken them! They are devils!"

"They are only two and you are hundreds!" raged Thoryx. "Get the electric blasting weapons and finish them!"

Grag was momentarily at a loss.

"Otho, what in the name of all the sun-imps are we going to do?" he yelled. "We'd better get the chief and Simon and get out!"

Otho whirled, his flaming green eyes instantly taking in their precarious situation. They were almost hemmed in by masses of charging Cometae guards, who had completely cut them off from the passage leading to the laboratory where Curt and Simon remained stricken.

"We can't get to Simon or the chief now!" Otho hissed. "And the chief told us to get Joan away. We've got to do that and come back later. Come on, Grag - this way out!"

Otho had spotted their only remaining chance of escape. An entrance in one side of the court remained still unblocked by guards. The android realized that unless they escaped instantly by that opening, the, now-triumphant Cometae guards would bring up weapons capable of destroying them. Otho knew that the revolt was now a disastrous failure.

Ordinarily, Otho would not have dreamed of deserting his leader. But Curt's frantic last order to assure Joan's safety rang in the android's ears. Also he knew that only by saving themselves from imminent destruction could they hope later to be of any help to their two stricken comrades.

Grag comprehended his reasoning. The great robot plunged ahead with him toward the side entrance.

"After them!" screamed Thoryx through the stillreverberating crash of thunder. "They seek to escape!" Grag and Otho were hurling themselves along a corridor, the flying figure of the android paces ahead of the clanking robot.

"Wait - I can stop them from pursuing!" Grag boomed, bringing up short in the corridor.

Grag had spotted one of the barred metal gates designed to close off the corridor. He swung it shut. Then, instead of trying to lock it, Grag tore out one of the metal bars by main strength. He literally tied the heavy metal bar around the two halves of the gate, as though it had been a length of rope.

"That'll hold them for awhile!" he boomed triumphantly.

They could hear the whole palace in wild uproar around them. And through it all pulsed the dark haze of incredible mental force.

Otho and Grag burst into the open air, to find themselves at the rear of the looming palace.

"Come on!" the android urged. "If we can reach the prison, get Joan away in the Comet -"

Then as they came into sight of the great plaza before the palace, they halted, baffled. Companies of Cometae guards were running across it toward the palace, and other guards were pouring into the prison across the plaza.

"Now we can't reach the prison or the Comet!" Grag exclaimed. "It's head for the jungle - or else!"

INSTINCTIVELY he and Otho started on a dead run through the narrow streets, away from the palace and plaza. They encountered only a few Cometae as they plunged through the slumbering city, and these few hastily recoiled from the alarming spectacle presented by the fierce-eyed android and the monster metal robot. Within a few minutes, thanks to the city's comparatively small area, they glimpsed ahead of them the green of the jungle.

I

There was no zone of cultivated land around the city. The Cometae, who did not rely on food to maintain their strange electric life, needed no agricultural acreage. Only a few hundred yards from the outskirts brooded the green jungle that blanketed most of this fantastic world in the comet's heart.

Otho and his metal comrade flung themselves across the open space and into the jungle's shelter. They found themselves in a forest of tall, queer trees whose trunks were green as well as their grotesquely geometrical foliage. Vines and brush choked much of the space between.

The jungle was a place of translucent green light. At first, Otho thought this was wholly the effect of comalight filtering through the foliage. Then as they slowed down, he realized that part of the glow came from the vegetation itself. Tree trunks and branches, as well as their leaves, shone with a faint, intrinsic luminance.

"This is far enough," Otho said finally, coming to a halt. "We mustn't go too far from the city, for we're going to have to get back in there somehow to help the chief and Simon and Joan."

His voice grated with frustration.

"Gods of space, how did things fall to pieces so suddenly?" he exclaimed.

"It was that old devil Querdel, who called the Allus!" said Grag, clenching his metal fingers. "That black sphere was some means of mental communication with the Allus."

"Yes, the sphere was both a transmitter and a receiver," Otho muttered. "And those mysterious devils, the

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Allus, used it to project a wave of hypnotic mental

force that seized every rebel in the palace."

"But why didn't that wave of force seize us!" Grag wondered. "We felt it, but it didn't overcome us as did the chief and Simon and Ezra, and all the rest."

"Grag, I think I understand why we were able to resist it!" Otho exclaimed. "The others are all humans - even Simon's brain is that of an ordinary homo sapiens. Apparently the Allus knew just what kind of mental force to utilize that would overpower a human brain.

"But you and I are not ordinary humans, Grag," the android went on excitedly. "Our bodies, our brains, are of artificial origin and differ in pattern. The Allus' weapon of hypnotic force missed fire against us for a very fundamental reason. We're a couple of minds such as they never ran up against before!"

"Well, now what are we going to do?" Grag demanded practically.

Otho shook his head gloomily.

"I haven't figured it out yet."

He threw himself down upon the grass, leaning back against the faintly luminous green trunk of a big tree. But an instant after he did so, Otho bounded to his feet with an involuntary yell of pain.

"What are you trying to do - howl out to everyone where we are?" Grag reprimanded him.

"You touch that tree and you'd howl, too!" Otho exclaimed. "I got the devil of an electric shock from it."

"A shock from a tree? You're dreaming!" Grag scoffed.

HE robot advanced his metal hand toward the luminous green trunk. A spark immediately bridged the gap.

T

"Why, it's true! All these trees and thus vegetation are electrically charged!" Grag exclaimed, marveling. "Now I understand," Otho declared after inspection of the growths. "This vegetation relies on the electrical radiation of the coma, instead of on sunlight, for its agent of photosynthesis. It must contain either a variant of chlorophyll or a totally different substance, capable of absorbing the electric radiation as a photosynthetic force. The process builds up a small charge in every plant and tree -"

Grag suddenly interrupted with a tense gesture.

"Listen, someone's coming!"

Otho froze instantly. They stood in the middle of the glade, listening. Then Otho, too, heard the stealthy rustling.

"Cometae coming after us!" he whispered hissing.

"Thoryx' guards must have found our trail! And we have no weapons -"

The stealthy sounds filtered to them through the brush from the direction of the city. Both the lithe android and the towering metal robot braced themselves for a hopeless battle.

Then a small gray shape burst out of the brush and derv toward Crag, to caper in 'frantic, soundless joy around his metal feet.

"Why, it's Eek!" the robot said happily.

It was indeed the little gray moon-pup. His beady eyes were glistening with joy and his whole body was wriggling wildly as Crag picked him up. An instant later, Oog's fat, white little figure appeared also. The me-teormimic waddled over to Otho and went through a bewildering series of protean changes expressive of his excitement.

"Now how in the name of the sun did they get here?" Otho marveled. "We left them with Tiko Thrin and Joan, back there in the prison."

"Tiko and Joan must have been seized by Thoryx' guards, same as the other rebels," Crag asserted. "That would scare Eek and he'd try to find me. He could do it, with his telepathic sense. Oog just followed him."

The two Futuremen now held a council of war. They decided to circle around through the jungle to the other side of the city, to find a place of concealment until the next "night." Then they would make the precarious attempt to get back into Mloon to free Curt and the rest. So robot and android started through the luminous green forest. They made a strange pair as they swung along - the giant metal robot with his moon-pup clinging to his shoulder, and the lithe, fierce-eyed android, whose fat little pet cuddled affectionately under his arm.

Grag, who was leading, suddenly stopped. He made a gesture of warning. Otho hastily came to his side.

There was a break in the jungle ahead. It was a narrow ribbon of smooth white synthestone road - a highway that began at Mloon and ran straight north through the forest.

"I never noticed this road before," Crag declared.

"Since the Cometae didn't mention any other cities, where do you suppose it leads?"

"It leads north, and that means it leads to the citadel of the cursed Allus," Otho guessed immediately. "Come on, let's get across it and out of sight."

At that moment they heard a humming sound, rapidly growing louder. It came from the south. Grag and Ocho hastily dived back into the brush.

They glimpsed one of the torpedo-shaped, six-wheeled power vehicles of the Cometae approaching from the south with great speed. The vehicle whizzed

past them. But its occupants remained photographed on their minds.

COMETAE soldier was driving the strange car. Beside him sat old Querdel. And in the rear of the machine lay a prone figure with red hair.

A

"That was the chief!" yelled Otho as the car streaked out of sight. "That figure in the back - that was Curt himself!"

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Both he and Grag rushed back out onto the highway in a vain effort to overtake the car. But it had already vanished. After their first frenzied sprint along the highway, they realized the futility.

"That devil Querdel is taking the chief to the citadel of the Allus!" raged the android. "Why didn't we kill that wizard when we had the chance?"

Grag balled his mighty fists.

"They're not going to do anything to him. We're going to his rescue!"

As indomitably as though they had but a few miles to go, the two Futuremen started forward along the white highway in a swinging trot.

The endurance of Grag was practically limitless.

And that of Otho's artificial body was almost as great.

These two could stand indefinite exertion that would kill an ordinary man. For hour after hour, they followed the highway north through the jungle.

They met no one on that road. Hours passed, as they trotted grimly northward. It was hard to measure time, for the coma-sky that flamed overhead never changed.

Oog whimpered with hunger. Eek cowered in fright on Grag's mighty shoulder, as flame-winged birds or flying reptiles flashed across the highway from the jungle.

They knew they had covered many scores of miles, and yet the road went endlessly on. Then, through the scintillating haze, they glimpsed the outlines of a small black mountain ahead of them.

They came closer. Both Futuremen cried out in amazement. It was not a small mountain that loomed ahead. It was a black structure of mountainous bulk, rising stupendously from the luminous green forest.

"The citadel of the Allus!" whispered Otho, his slant eyes aflame. "Gods of space, what kind of beings are they?"

The Futuremen had come to the jungle's edge. A few hundred feet away rose the sky-storming black, eyeless walls of the sinister enigmatic castle.

The citadel had the shape of a squat, truncated cone.

Its massive walls of black synthestone were blank and

windowless, and sloped slightly inward. The only break in those walls was an arched entrance, without any kind of gate or door. The white highway led into this passage.

"Say, that's a break for us!" Grag exclaimed.

"There's no gate or guards - we can walk right in."

"Don't be an idiot!" hissed Otho. "If the Allus have no gate or guards, it's because they don't need there. Get it through your iron skull that we're up against creatures such as our cosmos has never seen before. I'd as soon dive into the sun as to walk through that entrance."

"But the chief's in there - we've got to get inside,"

Grag anxiously protested.

"Not that way," Otho insisted. His eyes keenly inspected the looming wall. "I believe I can climb that slant wall and get on the roof."

"What good will that do you?" Grag demanded skeptically.

"I won't know until I try it, will I?" Otho flared. "But there ought to be some ventilation or other aperture in the roof."

"But I can't climb it!" Grag complained anxiously.

"I know - you'll have to wait here," Otho said hastily. "Keep Oog and Eek here, too. I'll reconnoiter and come back for you."

HEN the android wormed himself through the high grass toward the wall of the mighty citadel. Ibis rubbery flesh crept at the sensation that he was being watched by alien eyes from within the blank, massive pile.

T

Yet he reached the wall without mishap. It resembled the side of a steeply sloping mountain, above him. Otho could see that the great blocks of synthestone were tightly joined together by cement.

The Joints gave his incredibly nimble and deft fingers a precarious hold. The inward slant of the wall helped him. With spidery agility, the android started up the wall. Clinging to holds from which a bird might have fallen, using his phenomenal litheness and skill, Otho climbed higher

The climb seemed endless. He had ascended a thousand feet when he finally reached the roof. He drew himself onto it with a sigh of relief.

Now he made a startling discovery. The citadel was ring-shaped. At the center of its roof yawned a circular opening a hundred yards across. From it projected a ring of copper electrodes, pointing at the coma-sky.

"What the devil is the meaning of it?" Otho wondered.

He crawled silently across the synthestone roof to

the lip of the circular opening. Then he froze, petrified by the unimaginable terror and strangeness of the scene which lay before his eyes.

CHAPTER XI

The Allus

URT NEWTON awoke from the hypnotic trance that had crushed his senses into oblivion. Wonderingly, he looked around him.

C

He was lying on a couch in a small room. The walls, floor and ceiling were of black synthestone. There was no window, but there was a door, and the door was open to a brightly lighted hallway.

"Now what in the name of Pluto's ice-fiends -" Curt began bewilderedly.

Suddenly, he remembered everything: the revolt of the Cometae whom he had helped Aggar and Zarn to lead; their triumph in the court of the Lightning Feast; then the escape of Querdel and the dark wave of force

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from the black sphere, which had plunged him into unconsciousness.

Sharp dismay invaded Captain Future's mind, as he realized that the others had been overcome like himself. They must have succumbed, he knew, as he had done. That meant that the Cometae rebellion was by now completely crushed, that Thoryx and Querdel - and the Allus - still ruled. It meant that Joan Randall must remain one of the deathless Cometae.

That thought brought Curt Newton to his feet in an excess of raging emotion. He was not through yet! He'd find a way to undo the devilish thing that had been done to Joan, to overthrow the tyranny that made the Cometae slaves of unguessably alien masters ...

His rage faded away, and a queer chill possessed him as he glanced around. This black, cell-like room did not look as though it was part of any building of the Cometae City. He had seen not one such black structure in all that alabaster city.

He suddenly remembered a phrase that Zarn had used. "The black Citadel of the Allus."

He was in that citadel now! The truth crashed home to Curt's mind in staggering shock.

Icy certainty possessed his mind. Thoryx and Querdel and the other Cometae rulers were but pawns of the Allus. The fact that he had been a ringleader of the revolt, added to the strangeness of his three unhuman comrades, had apparently made the Allus think him dangerous. They had therefore had him brought here.

So Curt Newton reasoned swiftly. And his reaction to the situation was characteristic. A grim, bleak look entered his gray eyes. His tanned face set in a fighting expression.

"So - I'm up against the real masters now," he muttered. "At least, I ought to find out what they're planning."

The Allus, the mysterious lords of whom all the Cometæ spoke with such shuddering dread - yet whom none could describe! What was the core of truth in the fearful stories that he had heard from Zarn and the others, Curt wondered.

Was it true that the Allus came from outside the cosmos? Did he, Curt Newton, stand now inside the unimaginable stronghold of beings utterly alien to the universe? He still could not completely believe that.

His scientist's mind rejected the possibility that the matter of one universe could ever exist under the physical laws of a totally strange cosmos.

Above all, what was the Allus' purpose? Whoever or whatever they were, why had they made of the Cometæ deathless electric slaves? What unimaginable scheme of extra-cosmic or non-human minds was being hatched on this weird world inside Halley's comet?

"They can't plan just to kill me out of hand," Captain Future reasoned. "They could have had their Cometæ underlings do that without delay, once I was senseless. What do they want of me?"

He turned his attention to the door that led into the brightly lighted hallway. It was not a real door at all, but just an opening. There was no gate or barrier of any kind.

H

But Captain Future was not so naive as to believe he had been left completely unguarded. Examining the opening closely before venturing through, his keen eyes detected a faint, dark haze across it.

"That might be a barrier of some sort," he muttered.

"I'll soon know."

He thrust his hand swiftly in and out of the haze in the doorway. Nothing happened. He felt no new sensation.

Doubtfully he started to walk through the opening into the hallway. But the moment his figure entered the haze, Curt suddenly changed his mind about leaving the room.

"No, I don't want to go out in that hall," he thought sharply. "I don't want to, at all!"

And he stepped quickly back into the room. Then a feeling of bewilderment overcame him.

"Why the devil didn't I go on through? Why did I

change my mind? Of course I want to get out of here." Again he started through the door. But again the moment he was halfway through he changed his mind and came back.

He couldn't understand it. Was it some strange, warning instinct at work?

Nonsense! Curt uttered a low exclamation.

"What a fool I am! That's the barrier! A mental barrier!"

He understood now. That dark haze was a curtain of hypnotic force across the opening. Incredible mastery of mental science had devised that intangible curtain to affect the minds of anyone who attempted entry. That person would become mesmerized with the powerful conviction that he did not want to go through the door. Curt's respect for the mysterious Allus went up several notches. Creatures who could invent and utilize such subtle powers knew more about mental currents than anyone alive.

"Why lock up your prisoners, when you can simply make them want to stay in their cells?" he reasoned.

"Clever, simple and economical."

Calmly Curt went back to his couch and sat down.

He was trying, in his clear-minded way, to assemble from his scanty facts about the Allus a working hypothesis concerning them.

But there was not yet enough data.

Curt felt that there would be facts in plenty before long, and that they would be highly unpleasant. But he doubted whether he would ever live long enough to make use of them.

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"No doubts!" Captain Future reprimanded himself fiercely. "If you're dealing with creatures who use mental force as their chief weapon, doubt and fear would be fatal."

He sat there, letting his mind rove back to Joan Randall. He remembered her with vivid clearness as she had parted from him in that frantic last minute at the prison, on the eve of the revolt.

Horror and rage shook Curt again as he remembered the unearthly, terrible beauty of Joan's altered form. He swore again that he would somehow win clear and find the means to restore the girl to normality.

Somewhere here in the Allus' citadel, he knew, was where it had been done - the metamorphosis of Joan into a Cometae. Here, too, all the other Cometae had been changed into electric beings. If he had only a single hope of finding out how the Allus had done it, of correlating his and Simon's and Tiko Thrin's researches

to undo the process -

URT NEWTON suddenly became aware that the dark haze in the doorway had disappeared. He was on his feet in an instant, striding toward the opening. He stepped through the door, half expecting that queer mental compulsion to operate again and force him back.

C

But this time, nothing happened. He strode through the opening without hindrance, to find himself in a long, lighted hallway.

Captain Future smiled grimly.

"They turned off that barrier of mental force by remote control. Which means they want me to come out."

He shrugged coolly.

"All right, gentlemen - I'll play."

He was near the end of the long hall now. It was a passageway with dead-black synthestone walls and floor, lighted by concealed sources of white brilliance. It stretched away in a broad arc, curving out of sight. There was only one way Curt could go - down the hall. He had not the slightest doubt that was where the Allus intended him to go. Without hesitation, he started along the curving passageway.

He came to a doorway in the side of the hall. It was screened by an opaque curtain of dark haze. From the other side came unfamiliar rustling sounds, and now and then the clank of metal.

Curt Newton stopped and approached the door. He wanted to see what was beyond and it. But as soon as he started through the dark, opaque haze he halted. He didn't want to go through that doorway! His whole being clamored against such an action, forcing him to step hastily back into the hall. He had he knew, run into another barrier of mental force.

Curt smiled crookedly.

"It seems there's just one way I can go in this rat-trap, and that's the way they want me to go."

He went on along the curving passage. There were other doors in its side, but all of them were curtained by the opaque haze. He did not try to enter them, for he knew now it would be quite useless.

Captain Future's nerves were strung to highest pitch. There was something ghastly about these brooding black corridors, with their background of uncanny whisperings and rustlings and their emptiness of all visible life. The most hideous planetary monster he had ever met would have been almost a welcome sight in this forbidding, alien labyrinth.

He had followed the curving hall for several hundred feet, when he came to a door in its wall which was curtained by the dark haze. Curt stopped, staring

ahead at that innocent opening.

"So I'm supposed to go in there. But what if I choose to keep right on?"

Then he perceived that a little further ahead, one of the hazy mental-force barriers extended across the hall. He laughed mirthlessly.

"They leave nothing to chance, it seems."

Deliberately, he approached the open door. His muscles were tense for possible action, though none knew better than he the futility of physical strength against the mental masters of this weird stronghold.

Sounds came to him from the room or rooms beyond the door. They were louder and different sounds than the mysterious whisperings that had oppressed him. He sensed in there the presence of more than one individual.

Captain, Future felt a terrific tension. He knew that he was at last to face the enigmatic masters of the comet world, the dreaded Allus. Well - he was ready for anything. He would not be surprised if the Allus were monsters more fearsomely alien than the weirdest inhabitants of the System's farthest worlds.

E REACHED the door and stepped through it into a great, brilliant room of cruciform shape. He halted and stared frozenly at its occupants.

H

"Good God!" Captain Future said huskily. He was completely overwhelmed by surprise, in spite of his expectation.

The cruciform chamber itself was astonishing. Its four alcoves contained an array of apparatus and machines, of which even Curt Newton's scientifically trained eyes could tell nothing.

He did dimly recognize a big black sphere, sheathed by crawling, metallic films. This was the counterpart of the globe he had seen in Querdel's laboratory - the transmitter-receiver of mental force through which the Allus had intervened to suppress the Cometæe revolt.

But the other apparatus was unguessable. A massive, barrel-like chamber of copper, with a myriad tiny lenses set in its floor and ceiling, proved the central attraction in a quite bewildering mass of electrical equipment. Other mechanisms were as baffling. Yet the most

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staggering sight of all was the half-dozen individuals at the center of the cruciform laboratory.

"They can't be the Allus!" Captain Future told himself numbly. "They can't be -"

Yet he knew they were Allus. For some of them were working leisurely over certain of the unfath-

omable machines, with all the attitude of mastery and authority. And the rest were staring at Curt Newton expectantly.

These six Allus were - men! Just ordinary, normal-looking young men like himself! They were not even electric, like the Cometæ. They were dark-haired, fair-skinned young men who might have come straight from Earth, and who ever wore commonplace zipper-suits very much like his own.

One of them, a tall, likable young man with clear blue eyes, advanced a few steps toward Curt Newton. He smiled engagingly.

"Come on in," he said. "We've been expecting you. My name is Ruun, by the way. I'm sort of a leader among us Allus."

Curt still couldn't believe his eyes or ears.

"But you can't be the Allus!" he stammered. "Why, you're only men!"

Ruun laughed, and the other young men chuckled.

"That surprises you, doesn't it? I knew it would. It surprised Querdel, here, when he first found out that we were only human."

The Allus leader gestured his dark head as he spoke, toward a shadowy corner. Curt saw now that the old Cometæ noble stood there, his radiant electric body shining through the shadows.

Querdel as standing in an attitude of extreme, almost cringing respect. There was an overpowering awe and fear in the old wizard's face as he watched the Allus. Ruun, the young Allus leader, went on in earnest explanation.

"You see, if the Cometæ populace knew that we Allus are just ordinary men, they would never obey us. So, through Querdel and Thoryx, we put out the legend that we were strange and terrible beings from the unknown. We played on the superstitions of the Cometæ in that way."

Curt felt a terrific reaction from his previous tension.

"Then all that talk about your being from an alien universe was just a hoax?"

Ruun chuckled. "That's it," he said. "Do we look as though we came from another universe?"

APTAIN FUTURE grinned shakily.

"No, you don't. You look as though you came from my own world, Earth."

C

"Actually, we're simply part of the Cometæ race ourselves," Ruun explained. "We're a scientific sect who have been working in seclusion to help our people. We've made some great discoveries in electricity and

mental force. We even discovered how to make our people electrically immortal - though it seems that now they're dissatisfied even with immortality."

"But why did you have outside ships dragged into the comet?" Curt asked bewilderedly. "Why did you make electric Cometæ of your captives?"

Ruun shrugged.

"It was wrong to drag those ships in here, I admit. But we needed certain materials for our research that we could obtain in no other way. And we thought we were recompensing the crews of those ships, by offering them electric immortality."

Curt Newton felt a vast relief. The knowledge that the Allus had worked a beneficent hoax on the Cometæ put everything in a new light.

"Yet you crushed the revolt of Agar and his men -" he said uncertainly.

"Of course. We didn't want any more bloodshed," Ruun told him. "If the Cometæ people are dissatisfied with immortality, why, we'll change them back to normal again. We were only trying to help them."

Ruun went on eagerly.

"We had you brought up here because we think you can help us, stranger. It's obvious that you possess great scientific knowledge. We think you may know much about things outside the comet, which we have had no chance to learn."

"You'll restore to normal the girl I came here after?"

Curt Newton interposed quickly.

"Why, of course!" Ruun declared. He pointed to the massive barrel-like chamber in the alcove. "It'll require only a reversal of that converter's circuits to change her back to normal, if she doesn't like being immortal."

Curt felt his spirits lift immeasurably. For the first time, his deep and agonized worry over Joan disappeared.

"I'll help you with any knowledge I have, if you're really working for the good of the Cometæ," he said.

"Fine!" exclaimed Ruun. He turned toward Querdel.

"You can go back to Mloon, now. Try to quiet down the people there."

Querdel, cringing in almost ludicrous respect, bowed tremblingly and squeezed past Ruun.

The old noble almost ran out of the chamber.

Ruun turned brightly to Captain Future.

"Now, stranger -"

Abruptly Curt's face had gone dead white. He stared at the young man and the other Allus with dilated eyes. His heart was suddenly pounding.

He had seen something, when Querdel had brushed past Ruun, that had made him doubt his senses. He had

seen Querdel's elbow seemingly past through the solid body of Ruun!

A ghastly knowledge dawned slowly upon Captain Future. If the old noble's elbow had passed through Ruun

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un's body, it meant but one thing. It meant that Ruun wasn't really there at all!

True enough, he saw Ruun and the other Allus; he could hear them. They were a half-dozen ordinary young men, as solid and real as himself - to the eye.

Ruun was gazing at him puzzledly.

"Why, what's the matter?"

Curt suddenly extended his hand toward the young Allus leader. He wanted to touch Ruun, to assure himself that the fellow was real, that his eyes had just played a cruel trick upon him.

UT Ruun recoiled swiftly from his touch. And that furnished conclusive evidence for the conviction that had formed in Curt's shocked mind.

B

"You're not real, then!" Captain Future said thickly.

"You're not real men at all."

Ruun's clean-cut face flared with anger.

"Are you insane?"

"Whatever you Allus are, you're not men!" Curt went on stiffly, staring at them. "You made me think you were. Ah - that's it! You're masters of mental science. You hypnotized me into believing that I was talking to men like myself!"

As that bitter enlightenment burst upon Curt Newton, a sudden and awful metamorphosis took place in Ruun and the other Allus.

Their human-seeming bodies abruptly vanished.

And Curt knew that his sudden enlightenment had broken the hypnotic spell in which they had held him - the spell that had made them seem human.

But what were these six shapes now poised before him, where Ruun and the others had stood?

Why, they were six black, opaque shadows! But they were shadows that had a definite form. And that form was a terrible one.

They emerged as shadows of a horrible travesty on humanity. The upright figure was that of a lithe, snaky body, with serpentine arms and legs, and a blunt, hideously ophidian head from whose face grew a mass of writhing tentacles.

Yet these ghastly figures were not solid matter, but were living shadows like dreadful silhouettes of madness come to life. As though the darkness of outer space had spawned fearful, nebulous, unhuman chil-

dren.

"Gods of space!" choked Captain Future, staring wildly.

He knew that he was looking at last upon the true aspect of the Allus.

CHAPTER XII

Mental Duel

APTAIN FUTURE had faced terrifyingly unhuman creatures on many a world in the past. In the depths of Jupiter's mighty jungles, upon the floor of Neptune's planetary ocean, on worlds of far-off suns, he had confronted beings far removed from humanity. Put never had he felt the impact of such horror as he felt now, facing the Allus.

C

Had they been solid and real, the terror of it would have been lessened. Even such hideous serpentine creatures as their outline showed them to be, even those ghastly faces of writhing tentacles, would not have been so appalling to look upon.

But it was the fact that they were living, moving shadows, black and monstrous silhouettes rather than tangible beings, that gave the last turn of the screw to Curt's horror. He felt every fiber in his body and brain clamoring in frantic revulsion.

The black silhouette of the nearest Allus, the one who had called himself Ruun, moved glidingly toward Captain Future.

"No! Stay back!" yelled Curt, hardly aware that he was shouting.

In an excess of mingled horror and loathing, he struck out frenziedly with his clenched fist. His fist went right through that opaque black serpentine shadow. He felt no contact with real matter.

He knew then that the Allus were not material, whatever else they might be. But what were they? Bodies of black gas? Of force? Did they even exist outside his own chaotic mind? Was he dreaming all this?

"Stand still, Earthman!"

The command rang inside Curt's brain like a clear, spoken voice. Yet he knew that it had not been spoken. It had been thought by the Allus, and the thought had reached his brain.

At the same moment, he felt his mind grasped by a powerful force. He had the same chilling, uncanny sensation as when the power of the Allus had reached from Querdel's black sphere to crush the Cometae rebels. Curt Newton stood rooted to the floor, unable now to move a muscle. Mentally, he was like a child in the grasp of these alien, shadowy creatures.

The foremost Allus - the one he still thought of as

Ruun - was but inches from his face. That dreadful black silhouette was clear in every ghastly outline against the background of the lighted laboratory. Captain Future's dilated eyes now perceived that from the shadowy black figure of Ruun, a strange, thin filament led to the end of the cruciform chamber, to disappear through the solid wall. That filament moved when Ruun moved, remaining always attached to his immaterial black figure. Each of the other Allus had

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similar filaments, leading in the same direction out of the room like weird puppet cords.

"Earthmen, you have penetrated our deception," The icy mental voice of Ruun was sounding in Curt's brain. "It is unfortunate that you did so. We Allus hoped to attain our ends with you painlessly, through deceiving you into willing cooperation. Now we must use other methods."

Curt found his voice. Ire could not move, but he could still speak. And strength and resolution were coming back into his numbed mind.

It was the threat implicit in the monster's words that had galvanized him out of that deadly numbness.

Curt Newton was a fighter. A challenge, a threat, was the most powerful of all stimulants to his indomitable nature.

I

"Then everything you Allus said was a lie," he said huskily. "You did come from outside our universe! No part of our cosmos ever spawned creatures such as you."

"It is true, we came from Outside," replied Ruun's icy thought. "Your cosmos of curved, three-dimensional space is merely a bubble floating in the abyss of extra-dimensional infinity. In your cosmos, you are like insects crawling around the inside of a spherical shell. You have never burst out of the shell, have never penetrated the outer abyss in which we Allus live.

"For our home is in that abyss Outside. There, where the laws of force and matter differ far from the laws of our universe, we grew to power and wisdom. We planned finally to enter the bubble of your cosmos. But, with all our power, we could not open a door through its shell from our side alone. The door must be opened from both sides.

"So, Earthman, we sent our thought through the wall to the man of the Cometae you call Querdel. We could contact him. For thought, mental force, could pass from one universe to another, where matter could not. We promised him, and promised him truly, that he

might attain immortality, if he would but follow our instructions and help us open the door between universes:

"We chose him as our agent, chose a man of this comet world, because the vast electric power of the comet would be needed to open that door. And he opened the door, and we came through."

The commanding mental voice of the alien creature came more strongly into Curt Newton's brain, as he stood paralyzed and listening.

"Earthman, why do I tell you these things? It is because you must realize that we are beings from a universe vaster than your own. Our powers make resistance on your part a futile folly."

Captain Future's hoarse voice was steady as he countered with a question.

"Why did you come into our cosmos. What do you plan?"

There was a tinge of amusement in Ruun's mental answer.

"Earthman, your thoughts are childishly clear. You fear we mean harm to your universe, to this little System's worlds. That perhaps we plan to attack them.

"You may dismiss such apprehensions from your mind, Earthman. We have not the remotest intention of attacking your petty worlds and peoples. Of what concern can they be to us, the lords of the Outside?"

"I don't believe that," Captain Future spat. "If that is true, why should you have dragged ships of my worlds into to this comet, through your Cometae tools?"

The creature answered with bored disdain.

"The Cometae are our servants, it is true. We have used them, and have made sure that they did not escape, transforming them into electric creatures who cannot now survive beyond this comet.

"But we need other servants than these people for what we plan. We need men from outside the comet, men of your System's worlds, whose minds hold scientific knowledge about your cosmos that will be necessary to us in our work here. Men such as you, Earthman."

"You'll get no knowledge or help from me," Curt Newton answered unshakenly. "In spite of your denial, I'm convinced that you're planning an invasion of my System or an abduction of its peoples to your worlds."

HE thought-reply of Ruun had a quality of exasperation in its icy impact. "We would not want to live upon your System's petty planets, even if we could. And we could not abduct your peoples into our universe, for matter of one universe cannot exist in the alien dimensional conditions of another. All that we want out of your cosmos is power."

"Power? Energy?"

It was as though a searing flash of lightning illuminated Captain Future's mind. He saw it now, the reason for this long labor of the Allus to penetrate his own cosmos.

Ruun had read his thoughts, it seemed.

"Yes, Earthman - it is energy that we are after here. Energy that we Allus need in our home Outside, which we have come into your cosmos to obtain."

"You mean - you'll drain the energy of this whole comet through your door into the Outside?" Curt whispered unbelievably.

The energy of this comet comprises not a fraction of what we need!" throbbed the icy answer. "We require power on a vast scale. Your universe generates power on a scale commensurate with our needs.

"We shall have our Cometae servants build here for us a great transformer, which will first draw into itself all the energy generated by your sun. That energy will

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flow through the door we have opened, into our world Outside."

"Of course," the alien being added as an afterthought, "our power needs are so great that in time they will exhaust your sun. But there are many other suns in this universe. It is not like our own dark, power-starved universe."

Captain Future had listened in growing horror. At last he understood the devil-spawned purpose behind these nightmare creatures from outside the cosmos.

An inter-cosmic theft of energy on a stupendous scale was what the Allus planned! At the thought of what that would mean to his own System, of its worlds starved of all power, of all the radiant energy of the sun itself being sucked into the outer abyss, apprehension froze Curt Newton rigid.

The shadowy creature before him now delivered its ultimatum.

"You can help us willingly with all your knowledge of this universe, and be rewarded by electric immortality. Or you can refuse. In that case, we will strip your mind of all knowledge and then destroy you immediately."

Curt's brain seethed with impotent rage. Yet he knew that anger against the Allus was foolish. They, the utterly alien offspring of a strange cosmos, saw no wickedness in the monstrous theft of energy they proposed. The morality of his cosmos was completely outside their minds.

With such alien beings, parley would be futile. The

only answer to their plan was to destroy them. Yet how could that be done? Never had Curt Newton felt so helpless. His body was petrified by the mental grasp of the Allus upon his brain. Even had he been free, how could he harm creatures who seemed wholly immaterial Shadows?

"You cannot harm us in any way." Ruun read and answered his thought. "No weapon of this universe could make the slightest impression upon us. I advise you to see the folly of resisting our will."

Captain Future made a desperate, rapid decision. To get himself destroyed would remove all chance of his acting against the Allus. He must play for time - must pretend to cooperate with them, but must actually withhold any information that might be of help.

E had no sooner hit upon this plan than Ruun's thought impinged upon his mind. And the mental voice of the creature held an ironic contempt.

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"Do you really think that we are as easy to deceive as that, Earthman? I thought I had made you understand our mastery over you."

Curt realized that Ruun had read the desperate plan he had formed, even as he had formed it! "Their knowledge of his mental processes was almost absolute.

"It is regrettable that you did not choose to cooperate willingly with us," the alien being's mental words continued. "It will require needless time to strip your mind of all your scientific knowledge. But I perceive now that this is what we must do, and then destroy you."

"No!" Curt Newton thought fiercely with all his mental power. "You'll get nothing from me - I'll give you no knowledge -"

He concentrated upon mental resistance, seeking to keep his mind resolutely blank,

But he felt his resistance weakening as the vast, alien intelligences of the shadowy creatures assailed him. These masters of mental pressure crushed down his defenses. He could feel their thoughts probing the innermost recesses of his memory.

Then came a dark senselessness.

Curt drifted out of unconsciousness, to find himself still standing in the cruciform laboratory. The group of shadowy Allus were a short distance from him now, and appeared to be in deep mental conference.

Captain Future realized what had happened. They had stripped his mind of all his scientific knowledge! They now knew everything about the laws of his cosmos which he himself knew. He did not doubt that they were discussing this newly gained knowledge in rela-

tion to their gigantic plan.

Curt realized that for the moment they had relaxed their mental grip upon him. But he well knew that as soon as they had made certain of extracting his last scrap of knowledge, they would destroy him.

His mind searched feverishly for a way out of this dreadful trap. His body was temporarily free, but he realized the futility of physical action. Neither a physical attack upon the Allus nor an attempt at flight had the slightest hope of success. Yet he must somehow keep them from destroying him, must gain time in which to work against them

A desperate idea came to him. It was a stratagem that had perhaps only a slim chance of success, but it might work if he could keep his mind steady.

The group of nightmare shadows was turning again toward him, each Allus dragging with him that curious filament so like an immaterial tether. Again, Captain Future felt himself seized by Ruun's mental Bras p.

"We have gained much helpful knowledge from your mind, Earthman," pulsed Ruun's thought. "It is unfortunate that we cannot utilize you as a servant, since a scientist of your caliber would be valuable. But your very clear hostility to our purposes makes it necessary to dispose of you."

Captain Future, in this moment, was thinking furiously, concentrating on the idea which had suggested itself to him.

"They looted all my other scientific knowledge, but they didn't learn about the thermodynamic constant of energy-flow in this cosmos!" Curt thought. "They don't

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know that constant will prevent them from ever conducting energy in great volume to their outer universe. I mustn't let them learn about that. I must keep that factor hidden in the depths of my mind above all else!"

UUN'S cold thoughts pulsed in sudden sharp alarm.R"Earthman, have you managed to conceal some of your knowledge from us? What is this thermodynamic constant?"

The Allus had taken the bait! There was no such thing as a thermodynamic constant that would prevent energy-flow. It was merely scientific gibberish that Captain Future had improvised for his purpose.

His sole aim was to gain time. The Allus would not destroy him as long as they believed he had valuable knowledge which they had not secured. Especially, they would not destroy him if they thought he possessed secret information about a factor that would thwart their great plan.

"Tell us!" commanded the Allus leader sharply.

"What is this factor you managed to conceal?"

Curt answered with seeming bewilderment.

"I don't know what you mean."

"You are hiding something from us," Ruun insisted.

"You possess more mental resistance than we had suspected, since you were able to conceal from us the existence of this important scientific factor."

So far, the Allus had been completely deceived by Curt's subterfuge. They now thoroughly believed that he guarded a secret of the scientific laws of this cosmos which was vital to them.

The Allus were great scientists - far greater even than Captain Future. Yet he had finally managed to deceive them on this one point! For their science was of an alien universe, and the physical laws of Curt Newton's world were wholly strange to them. From their point of view, it was quite plausible that there might be some limiting thermodynamic factor, which would upset their scheme of stealing the System's energy.

"If you will not tell us willingly, we shall soon take your secret from your mind forcibly," declared Ruun.

"I know nothing of such a factor, I tell you," insisted Curt.

His protestations were of no avail. Again the combined mental power of the shadowy entities beat down his mental defenses.

Again, he went into darkness as they probed his mind.

When Curt reemerged from that darkness, he sensed a quality of bafflement in the attitude of the shadowy figures.

Ruun's thought came ominously.

"Earthman, you are stronger than we supposed.

Even while your mind lay completely helpless before ours, you managed to persist in your denial of all knowledge of the thermodynamic factor."

The creatures had read Curt's mind. They had read there that he knew nothing of the supposed scientific secret, that it was all a fake. They had read the truth - but they had not believed it!

Captain Future had introduced a psychological element of doubt into the calculations of the Allus. They could not be certain now that the thermodynamic factor did not exist, in spite of the sincere mental denials of Curt's brain.

They could not be certain, either, that those denials were not mere pretense on his part.

Curt intercepted an Allus thought.

"Let us destroy this Earthman, Ruun. His so-called thermodynamic factor is purely an invention."

"You may be right, Siql," was Ruun's cold reply.

"But we must be certain! If there is such a vital factor regulating energy-flow in this cosmos, we must learn of it or our whole purpose will be thwarted."

"Physical torture of the Earthman might produce the truth," came the chilly suggestion of another Allus.

"No. My reading of this man's mind convinces me that he would remain obdurate to the last degree under such pressure," replied Ruun.

URT could "hear" this mental discussion, for he was still gripped by the vast mental force of the Allus, and hence en rapport with them.

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"There is another means of forcing him to unfold the truth," Ruun went on. "As we have already observed, the intelligence of these human creatures is very largely subservient to their irrational emotions.

"I have already read in this Earthman's mind that his strongest emotion concerns a girl of his own race, whom we made into a Cometae some time ago. I believe that the threat of physical harm to that girl would constitute the strongest pressure we could bring upon him."

Captain Future felt a stab of agonized alarm. If he had brought terrible danger on Joan -

He realized instantly that he must suppress such alarm. But it was too late. Ruun, as always, had read his thoughts.

"You observe that the Earthman betrays deep fear lest harm befall the girl," commented the Allus leader.

"This proves that a threat to her safety is the strongest compulsion we can use upon him. Therefore, I will call Querdel and order him to return here at once. with that girl."

The shadowy, monstrous silhouette of the Allus leader glided toward the black sphere in the alcove, which Curt had already divined was the means of communication between the Allus and Querdel.

Ruun's special black shape hovered beside the sphere a moment, then came back.

"Querdel had just reached Mloon. He is starting

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back here at once with the girl," Ruun announced.

"You can't do this!" Captain Future cried: "I tell you, it was all a fake on my part! There is no thermodynamic factor!"

"You will return to your cell," came Ruun's commanding, icy thought. "We shall summon you for further questioning when the girl arrives."

Curt made a frantic mental effort to break free, to at-

tempt somehow to attack the shadowy group. it was quite futile. The minds that gripped his own sent him stumbling against his will from the cruciform laboratory, down the long, curving passageway into his prison. As he entered the little room, the mental compulsion upon him ceased. But now the curtain of haze had sprung across the doorway once more. When he tried to go through it, he found that the mental barrier was impassable.

Curt Newton sat down, overwhelmed by a horror greater than anything he had yet felt. His stratagem had recoiled upon himself. It had gained him time, but it had put the girl he loved in deadliest danger. The Allus would torture her until he told them about the thermodynamic factor.

And he couldn't tell them, for there was no such thing!

CHAPTER XIII

Secret of the Invaders

THO crouched frozenly upon the roof of the vast black Allus citadel, gazing down with incredulous eyes at the fantastic scene within the great central court.

O

"Devils of space!" whispered the stupefied android.

"Have I been using dreamdust?"

In fact, the scene below him seemed more fitting to a grotesque and terrifying nightmare than to reality.

Otho had seen queer things and places on many a world and moon, but never anything like this.

The circular open court that pierced the center of the Allus citadel was three hundred feet in diameter. Since its depth was the thousand-foot height of the building, it resembled a huge black well upon the rim of which Otho was crouched, looking downward.

Around the edge of the court rose a ring of eighty copper rods, that soared up out of the black well and far above the citadel roof. The tops of these rods, high above Otho, were bulbous electrodes, upon which played a ceaseless violet brush of electrical force. Otho perceived at once that this mighty ring of electrodes was designed to milk electrical force from the coma-sky.

The terrific electric voltage gathered by the copper rods manifested itself at the bottom of the well as a crackling, brilliant ring of electric flame. This ring of flaming force completely encircled the interior of the court, in a dazzling wall twenty feet high. It was in fact a ceaseless falling cataract of electric energy.

"There's enough power in that to light up a planet!"

Otho thought astoundedly. "What are they using it for?"

He craned his gaze downward, seeking to discern

details on the court's floor. His eyes fastened on an enigmatic central object.

"What the devil can that be?" he wondered mystifiedly.

The torrents of flaming electrical energy that walled in the court were canalized, through massive transformers and conduit cables, toward this central object which so puzzled him. Evidently all this stupendous power was used by the Allus simply for the operation of the central object.

But what was the thing? It looked like a massive arched door-frame which stood perpendicularly upon the black paving. Otho judged it was ten feet high and almost as wide. This arched frame was of solid copper, studded every few feet with heavy, bulging coils, to which were connected the multiple conduit cables that conveyed electric power.

But inside the opening of this elaborate frame there was - nothing. Nothing but a featureless blackness. It was as though space itself did not exist inside that massive arch, so strong was the impression it gave Otho of utter, lightless emptiness.

"If I could only get down there and see for myself what it is!" he muttered all his curiosity and passion for adventure on fire.

Then he realized the practical impossibility. He might be able to clamber down into the court, though even that was doubtful, because of the vertical nature of these inner walls. But even if he could do that, he still would not be able to penetrate the stupendous ring of electric flame that aped in the whole court.

"That ring of force would blast me or anyone else who tried to go through it," Otho admitted to himself.

"But what's it all about? What's that arched frame of blackness, and why does it have to use such terrific, constant power?"

He strained his keen eyes desperately to inspect the object far below.

"It seems to be the very keystone of the Allus' citadel"

UDDENLY Otho gasped unbelievably as he looked downward. He was witnessing something that made his feeling of nightmare even stronger.

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A black, shadowy figure was emerging from that mysterious, coil-framed copper arch. The figure did not go through the arch - it simply came out of it!

It was like a monstrous, moving silhouette of repulsively serpentine outline. Even at this height, Otho's super-keen eyes could detect the essential inhumanity of that shadow's alien dimensions.

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"Gods of space!" he whispered, appalled. "Is that one of the Allus?"

The opaque black shadowy figure was gliding away from the arch toward the side of the court. Otho perceived that from that black shape there trailed a thin, shadowy filament which led back into the mystery-arch from which the creature had emerged.

The dark figure glided unharmed right through the encircling wall of electric flame, to disappear through a doorway which led from the court into the citadel around it. But Otho could still see the filament of shadow it trailed behind it, which still led into the arch of mystery.

"What the devil kind of entity is that?" the android gasped. "Creatures of shadow that come out of a door to no place, on a shadow-string! Creatures that can walk through that blasting wall of force!"

He soon saw another of the Allus. For that these were the mysterious Great Ones, Otho could no longer doubt.

He saw one of the shadowy creatures coming from the citadel into the court, gliding into the arch of blackness to disappear. In the next minutes, several such beings came and went through the arch. All of them who emerged from it trailed that curious shadowy filament after them.

Otho felt badly upset. It had long been the reckless android's boast that he was afraid of neither man, beast or devil. But these Allus were none of the three. As far as he could see; they were just opaque shadows of hideous form. But no mere shadows, he knew, could have mastered a planet as they had mastered this comet world.

"No wonder the Cometae are scared to death of those creatures," Otho thought, stunned. "How in the devil can a man fight a shadow?"

Then a more cheerful thought occurred to him.

"Still, on the other hand, how can a shadow fight a man? The things may have some queer mental powers, but aside from that I don't see what they could do. I'll bet they haven't been able to get the chief down!"

His active mind began to make plans. He and Grag had to get into the citadel somehow, to help Curt if he needed aid.

Otho rejected the possibility of entry by climbing down into this central court. Too many of the shadowy Allus were coming and going constantly down there. He'd be sure to be detected, even if he were able to make it.

The android quickly decided to return to Grag and explore the exterior of the citadel for a possible way inside. There was no opening anywhere to the roof, but they might find one somewhere in the walls.

Hurriedly Otho retraced his way over the synthestone roof of the mighty pile, and with spidery agility and quickness climbed back down the outer wall. Then he raced for the edge of the luminous green jungle.

Grag greeted him with a complaint.

"You took long enough up there! I was beginning to think they had you. What did you find out?"

"Plenty!" retorted Otho. He told rapidly of what he had seen.

HE big robot listened incredulously.

"You mean those Allus are nothing but shadows?" "They look like shadows, but there must be more to them than that," Otho corrected. "The point is, there's no practicable way into the place by the roof. We'll have to look for some crack or window in the wall."

The two Futuremen started to reconnoiter the mighty citadel, moving around it and keeping always in the concealment of the jungle. In less than an hour, they were back where they had started from, baffled. The structure's whole exterior was blank and without openings, except for the single entrance into which ran the white road from Mloon.

"Not a chunk big enough for a Mercurian rat to get through!" exclaimed Otho, exasperated. "Well, there's only one thing to do. We'll have to dig a tunnel up into the cursed place."

Grag stared at him.

"Are you crazy? There's that big, wide entrance right in front of us. We'll go in through it."

"Don't be dumb all your life, Grag!" flared Otho impatiently. "Didn't I tell you that entrance would be guarded somehow by the Allus? A child could see that."

"Querdel went in and out of it in his power-car," retorted Grag. "I saw him come out and speed south, while I was waiting for you."

"Naturally, the Allus would let Querdel in and out, for he's one of their tools," Otho pointed out. "But you can bet a planet that if we tried to walk in there, we'd run right into a terrible trap."

"We've got to get in, and that door's the only way in, and so I'm going through it," Grag announced calmly. And the big metal robot, with Eek still clinging to his shoulder, stalked straight out of the jungle toward the entrance of the citadel.

Otho swore furiously, and then hastened after the robot, with Oog trotting hastily at his heels. The android caught up with Grag just a few yards outside the

yawning entrance.

"Grag, don't be an idiot!" Otho pleaded. "If you weren't so cursed thick-headed, you'd know that we'll never get in this way."

Grag paid no attention. The robot's simple mind was thoroughly made up. Curt Newton was inside, here was a way to get in, and he was going that way without any further talk. Grag could be obstinate upon occasion, and this was one of the times.

They now could see that the big, open entrance that

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pierced the citadel's massive black wall was curtained by a zone of dark haze.

"See - that haze is a force-barrier of some kind!"

Otho expostulated. "It'll either blast us to bits, or else set off an alarm that will bring the Altus down on our heads."

"Aw, it's just a little dark haziness, that's all," replied Grag with sublime denseness. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

"Gods of space give me patience!" raved Otho. Then he uttered a grating laugh. "All right, if you're determined on committing suicide, I'll join you. I'd just as soon get killed here and now, as to have to put up with your company any longer."

And as Grag strode forward into the entrance, Otho accompanied him with angry despair.

AUTIOUSLY they entered the dark haze that curtained the doorway. They felt nothing whatever.

And in a moment they had passed through it into a big, vaulted black gallery that was utterly empty. There was no alarm.

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"You see?" said Grag blandly. "There wasn't anything to be afraid of."

"I can't understand it!" stammered Otho, his jaw dropping in amazement. "The Allus must have put that hazy curtain of force there to bar out intruders! Why, in the name of all the ten thousand separate devils of the nine worlds, didn't it keep us out?"

"I'm afraid your nerves aren't very good, Otho," said Grag patronizingly. The robot looked calmly aroused. "Let's see what's in here. I don't see how we're going to find Curt in this big labyrinth."

Dumfounded by the fact that there had been no alarm or challenge, Otho followed the robot through one of the doors that pierced the walls of the big inside gallery.

They found themselves looking into a maze of curving passageways, whose black recesses were illumined

by a bright, sourceless white light. Otho shrank back and pulled the robot with him, as he glimpsed two dark figures gliding across one of the distant corridors.

They were two Allus. The unearthly black, shadowy creatures of monstrously serpentine outline looked like dark ghosts as they moved across the distant passage. They trailed behind them the curious, dragging filaments of shadow that seemed permanently attached to their weird forms.

So those are the Allus," muttered Grag, as the two black silhouettes disappeared. "They don't look like any race I ever saw."

Otho's attention had shifted.

"What the devil is the matter with that cursed moon-pup?" he demanded angrily.

Eek, crouched on Grag's shoulder, seemed convulsed by a spasm of terror. His little gray body was trembling violently, and his beady eyes were dilated with fear as he tried to hide under the robot's arm.

Eek's cowardice was notorious among the Futuremen. He was inclined to scare at anything unfamiliar. Yet never in the past had the moon-pup exhibited such abject terror as now.

"He's afraid of the Allus," Grag said solicitously.

"You know, he's strongly telepathic - it's the way moon-dogs communicate. He must be getting some fearful thoughtimpressions from the Allus in here."

"Say, maybe we can use Eek to find the chief." Otho whispered excitedly. "We know Curt's in here somewhere. But if we go blundering around searching for him, we're sure to be discovered. But Eek ought to be able to sense Curt telepathically, and lead us to him."

Grag at once accepted the suggestion.

"I'm sure he can do it. I'll tell him what we want."

Grag told Eek by thinking, since that was the way he always gave his orders to the telepathic moon-pup who could not speak or hear.

"Find Curt, Eek!" Grag ordered. He added as an inducement, "If you can get to Curt you'll be safe, Eek!"

Safety was what Eek craved most, at the moment.

Galvanized, he scrambled down onto the floor and started on a run along the outermost of the curving corridors before them.

The two Futuremen followed, praying inwardly that they would meet none of the Allus. They believed that Eek would sense and fearfully avoid the shadowy aliens, and so it proved. For after leading them for some minutes along the corridors, Eek darted through a door in the wall.

HE door was curtained by one of the barriers of dark, hazy force. That did not prevent the two Fu-

turemen from entering. They found themselves in a small cell. Eek was leaping and bounding in frantic pleasure around a man who had risen in astonishment to his feet.

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It was Curt Newton.

"Grag! Otho!" exclaimed Captain Future incredulously. "How in the name of all that's holy did you get in here? Were you captured?"

Otho explained their adventures in swift, excited phrases. As he did so, the android noted the haggardness and pallor of Curt's features. He thought that he had never seen such a strain on his leader's face.

"So we walked right in through the front door, and Eek led us to you!" Otho finished. "Though I still don't see how in the world we were able to pass the barrier of force across the entrance."

"Otho, I can understand that," Curt Newton said eagerly. "That barrier is a curtain of mental force - a pattern of electromagnetic thought-impulses - which impresses upon the brain of any man who enters it that he must on no account go through the door. My cell has

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such a barrier.

"But," Curt continued, "that barrier of electromagnetic thought-impulses is designed to bar out human intruders. Its frequency must be the same as the frequency of impulses in the human brain. You and Grag, though, are not ordinary humans.

"Your artificially created brains function at a different electrical frequency than the human mind. Therefore the thought-barriers of the Allus have no effect upon you two."

"Sure, that's it," said Grag complacently. "I figured that all out before, and that's why I knew we could pass the barrier."

"In a space-rat's eye, you did!" retorted Otho wrathfully. "You were just dumb enough to try it, and got a lucky break, that's all. I should have remembered that the Allus, mental force failed against us before."

Captain Future interrupted with a fiercely impatient gesture.

"Listen to me! The coming of you two is a godsend. It may furnish a chance to save Joan from those alien devils."

"Joan? Is she here?" exclaimed Otho startledly.

"She'll be here soon," Curt answered.

He told rapidly of the intention of the Allus to extort further information from him by threatening the girl.

"Why, the dirty so-and-sos!" swore Otho. "I'd like to

exterminate the whole shadowy crowd of them!"

"Otho, maybe we can do just that, if we can make a particular effort," Curt declared feverishly. "The clue that explains the nature of the Allus is in what you saw in that central court. I want you to tell me every detail you noticed, especially about that arched doorway into nothingness."

Otho complied, quickly describing the entire scene he had witnessed, when he had spied upon the Allus from the roof of the citadel.

Captain Future's gray eyes flashed.

"It all fits together," he breathed. "It's incredible, but I believe it's true."

"You mean, you know now what the Allus are?"

Grag asked, staring.

"I'm sure of it," Curt replied. "There's only one explanation that fits all the facts. The Allus have no material existence at all!"

"What are you talking about?" exclaimed Otho dismayedly. "Chief, are you sure you're not delirious?"

"I tell you, it's the only answer," Curt insisted. "The home of the Allus is in the four-dimensional void outside the bubble of our three-dimensional cosmos.

Therefore, the material bodies of the Allus out there must be fourdimensional matter."

IS eyes flared with excitement.

"Such matter could not enter our three-dimensional cosmos! That's not just my own opinion. When H

he questioned me, Ruun remarked that energy could pass from one universe to the other, whereas matter could not. Therefore, it's scientifically impossible for the Allus to exist in our cosmos!"

"The ones in this cursed citadel certainly exist!"

Otho exclaimed. "Why, they've mastered this whole world!"

They do exist, but not materially," Curt qualified.

"Those shadowy figures consist not of matter, but of photons - particles of energy!"

Rapidly, Captain Future unfolded the astounding explanation that his brilliant mind had pieced together from the scientific evidence.

"The Allus are real, four-dimensional creatures in habiting the four-dimensional abyss outside our cosmos. They needed power, and decided to enter our, cosmos and set up here a giant transformer, which would draw in the energy of our sun and pour it into their own strange universe. Their initial step was to open a door between universes, first getting into contact with Querdel and the Cometae rulers and persuading them to aid.

"The door was open - but the Allus couldn't themselves come through it. Their four-dimensional bodies couldn't exist in our cosmos. But energy, which is dimensionless, could pass back and forth through that door between universes. Atoms, which are particles of matter, couldn't pass through. But photons, which are particles of energy, could.

"So the Allus projected artificial bodies of photons through the door! Their shadowy figures that we see here are merely photon-patterns, which are directly connected by those filaments of energy with their tangible bodies on the other side of the door. They project their minds along that filament into the black photon-bodies that we see here. Thus, in those photon-shapes, the Allus are able to act in this universe."

Captain Future's gray eyes were blazing now.

"It's the only possible scientific explanation. And it gives us a thousand-to-one chance of ridding our cosmos forever of the Allus' threat."

Otho gasped. "I get it, Chief! If we could close that door -"

"If we could close the door, it would cut the filament connection between the Allus' real bodies in the outer abyss and their photon-bodies here and thus end all their internal activities in this universe!" Curt finished for him.

CHAPTER XIV

Curt's Way

HE three comrades gazed at each other with a common excitement, crouching close together in the little black cell.

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"Can we do it, Chief?" asked Grag quickly. "Can we close that door?"

"It should be possible," muttered Curt Newton.

"From Otho's description, the mechanism consists of a frame of super-powered magnetic coils, which set up intersecting fields that cause an unprecedented space-train. Theoretically, scientists have always known that a strong enough strain would rip open an aperture in three-dimensional space. Actually, it's never been done by any System scientist, because it would require vast power.

"But the Allus are using vast power-power of this comet's electric coma. By means of it, they keep the space-strain always operating, the door constantly open. They daren't let it close."

"Then if we wrecked those magnet coils, the door would close?" cried Otho.

Captain Future nodded.

"It would. But can we get at the coils? You said the wall of electric flame around the court had no break in it."

"The devil, I forgot that!" exclaimed Otho, crestfallen. "And that stumps us. The photon-bodies of the Allus could go through that ring of electric fire, but it would blast you or me in an instant."

"I don't think it would blast me." Grag suggested eagerly. "You know the outer surface of my body is dielectric metal. I'll bet I could get through it."

"I doubt it." Curt hesitated. "Yet there's no other possibility. Grag, if you're willing, we'll try it. Come on let's get out of here."

"I thought you couldn't pass through the barrier of mental force across the door of this cell?" objected Otho.

"I can't, of my own accord," retorted Curt. "But you tyro can drag me through it."

"Great space-gods, I never thought of that!" exclaimed the android. "Come on, Grag - get hold of the chief."

Grasping Captain Future firmly by the arms, the two Futuremen approached the cell door. As they entered the curtain of hazy force across it, a frantic clamor awoke in Curt's brain.

"I don't want to go out into the hall!" he thought fiercely. "I don't want to leave the cell!"

His obsession was so powerful that he struggled fiercely to pull back into his prison. But Grag's great grip dragged him out through the hazy curtain, despite his resistance. The moment they were out in the corridor and clear of the mental barrier, Curt's mental revulsion ceased to exist.

"Thanks, boys!" he muttered. "Now we've got to find a way to that central court where the door is located. It should be in this direction. I suppose we have not much chance of reaching it without the Allus' knowledge."

"I've got Eek here with me," drag told him. "He's scared to death of the Allus, and can sense them long before we can see them. He'll warn us of any of them ahead."

They began the hazardous search through the labyrinthine halls and corridors of the vast black citadel. Twice in the next few minutes, Eek, showed wild panic when they were about to enter passageways. They hastily took other turnings, knowing that the little moon-pup had sensed Allus ahead.

They passed unoccupied laboratories and supply rooms, in which lay great masses of mechanisms and

apparatus of totally new and unfamiliar design.

Curt guessed that these were part of the giant transformer the Allus planned to build, for the theft of limitless power from this cosmos.

NCE only Eek's panicky warning enabled them to shrink back as one of the dark Allus glided across the corridor ahead. Curt was near despair. Their time was short, for soon Querdel would arrive with Joan. Then he Allus would summon him and find him gone from his cell.

O

They entered a corridor, whose far end blazed with a sunlike brilliance that outshone the citadel's sourceless illumination.

"That's the court of the door!" Otho hissed.

They hastened forward to the end of the passageway, and then crouched concealed in its mouth and gazed out into the court stunned.

Ten feet from them towered the blinding, crackling wall of electrical fare whose unguessable energy poured down like a cataract from the tall electrode rods.

This wall of electricity, encircling the whole interior of the court, formed a blinding barrier to their vision.

Captain Future strained his eyes to peer through the flaming barrier. He could only dimly descry the massive apparatus at the center of the court - the ponderous copper arch of the door, and the heavy magnet coils that studded that arch.

A few Allus were coming and going, passing through the wall of crackling flame as though it did not exist. They were fortunately using other entrances of the citadel than the one in which the Futuremen crouched, but Curt realized that discovery might come at any rune.

"Look, you can see all those filaments of energy that connect them with the door." Otho whispered, pointing. Curt counted no less than twenty of the shadowy threads that led from the door through the electric barrier.

"Then there's no more than twenty of the Allus in the Citadel!" Curt muttered incredulously. "Twenty - and they've mastered a world!"

"Shall I go through the electric wall now, Chief?"

Grag asked eagerly. "See, there's no Allus out there

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right now"

"Yes - try to make it, Grag," Captain Future said tensely. "If you get through, wreck those coils around the door. All depends on you."

An opportunity had come to them sooner than Curt

had hoped. For the moment, there were none of the dark Allus anywhere in the court. Grag hastily strode out toward the blinding, crackling wall of electric flame. The giant robot stalked right into the cataract of force.

They saw Grag stagger and stop. The robot swayed drunkenly, half hidden from view by the torrents of rav- ing, brilliant energy that were overwhelming him. Then Grag fell backward out of the wall of flange and lay motionless on the paving.

"He couldn't get through!" Captain Future ex- claimed. "Quick, Otho - help me get him in here!"

They darted out to the fallen robot. He had fallen clear of the crackling cataract, and they were able to seize his massive metal body and drag it back into the precarious concealment of their passageway.

Grag lay utterly lifeless. Curt hastily unclamped the broad metal chestplate of the robot's mechanical body, then peered into the maze of intricate wiring and appa- ratus that constituted Grag's vital organs.

"The electricity of the wall got through his outer in- sulation and short-circuited his electric 'nerves,'" Curt said quickly. "His nerve-fuses are blown out."

IT TOOK Captain Future but a few moments to re- place the fuses, which were designed to protect Grag's electrical nervous system from too great a volt- age. Then he clamped down the robot's chest-plate.

I

Grag scrambled bewilderedly to his feet.

"What happened? Didn't I make it?"

"No, and it's useless for you to try again, Grag,"

Curt said somberly. "The Allus' photon-bodies can go through that wall, but we can't."

"Nothing could go through that cursed torrent of power, except one of the Cometae!" hissed Otho in baf- fled rage.

Captain Future suddenly stiffened. He stared fixedly at the android.

"Otho, you're right! One of the electric Cometae could get through that wall! I could get through, if I were a Cometae."

"Chief, what do you mean?" exclaimed Otho anx- iously. "You surely can't be thinking of -"

"Otho, the only way for me to slip through this bar- rier and close the door is to become a Cometae," Cap- tain Future declared.

The grimness of desperate resolution had come into Curt's gray eyes. His haggard face was set in lines of determination.

"There's one thin chance that I could do it," he con- tinued rapidly. "In the cruciform laboratory where they

questioned me, I saw the converter mechanism which the Allus use to transform ordinary men and women into Cometae. I observed it as closely as I could. I believe that if I could get access to it without their knowledge, I could use it to make myself a Cometae."

"It's crazy!" burst out Otho in a clamor of frantic expostulation. "Even if you do succeed in closing the door, then you'll be one of those pitiful electric people!"

"Remember that Simon and I believe we can find a way to retransform the Cometae back to normal," Curt reminded him. "When we find the way, I can become my old self again."

"But suppose you never find such a way?" said Grag, aghast. "Then you'd be a Cometae forever."

"That would be no sacrifice if I can save our universe," Captain Future said quietly. "Anyway, if we can't find the way to undo that metamorphosis, it would mean that Joan would have to remain a Cometae. And I'd want to share her fate, then."

The quiet statement put an end to the objections of the two Futuremen for a few moments. Then Otho made a hopeless gesture.

"It's foolish even to talk of it," muttered the android.

"How are you going to get access to that converter mechanism without the Allus' knowledge? You said that it was located in what seemed their chief laboratory. Some of the Allus will be there, too."

"We'll have to draw them out of there somehow - and at once," Curt said swiftly. "We've little time to work."

He looked at Grag.

"Grag, you can help divert the Allus' attention. Will you do it? It means taking a chance they might destroy you."

Grag uttered an offended growl.

"What do you mean - will I do it? Have I ever refused to take chances? And aren't you yourself going to take the craziest chance of all?"

"Then do this," Captain Future instructed the robot.

"Make your way back out to the entrance of the citadel. Set up a big uproar there at once. Start smashing everything you see. That should bring all the Allus in the citadel. Try to keep them out there as long as you can." Grag's photo-electric eyes gleamed with understanding.

"I get it, Chief. I'll make a racket that'll go down in the history of this comet!"

And the big robot, without further discussion, hurried away back along the passageway by which they had come. Little Eek, his moon-pup pet, went with him.

FEW minutes later, the dim sound of a distant, banging clamor reached the ears of Curt and Otho. From the volume of noise, Grag was more than living up to his promise of creating a disturbance.

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Crouched in their precarious concealment, Cuit and his comrade glimpsed several Allus gliding swiftly through the inner corridors, in the direction of the citadel entrance. They passed out of sight.

"That should have drawn every Allus in the place out there," Curt muttered. "They'd be startled and alarmed by the fact that someone had entered their citadel, despite its barriers. Come on, Otho!"

In a hasty run, the tall, red-headed planeteer led the way through the maze of labyrinthine passages in the direction of the cruciform laboratory. His remembrance of the citadel's interior plan did not fail Captain Future. In a few moments, he and Otho reached the entrance to the fountainhead of Allus science. A glance inside showed them that it was unattended now.

Grag's disturbance had quite evidently drawn away its occupants. The distant clamor of that disturbance was still going on.

"We've little time!" Curt exclaimed, panting, as they sprang into the laboratory. "It won't take long for the Allus to gain mental mastery over even so unfamiliar a type of mind as Grag's."

He ran to the big converter mechanism in an alcove which the Allus had utilized to make the Cometae into an electric race.

Its central feature was a massive, barrel-shaped copper clamber, eight feet high. In the floor and ceiling of this chamber were set a very great array of clustered, tiny lenses. Around the copper chamber, and connected to it by complex cables, stood a number of totally unfamiliar mechanisms, whose purpose was quite unguessable.

"Oh, Chief, this is hopeless!" groaned Otho after a look at the enigmatic mechanism. "We don't know anything about Allus science. We couldn't fathom the design of this apparatus in days of study - let alone in the few minutes we have."

"That's true," Captain Future admitted tautly. "But even though we don't know how the thing works, we may be able to put it into operation. A savage wouldn't have the faintest idea how an electric light works, yet he could turn it on if he found the switch."

Curt was already tensely examining the complex mechanism.

"The Allus used this machine for just one purpose - the conversion of men and women into electric beings," he was muttering. "It stands to reason the Allus would have the thing set to project the correct forces that cause that metamorphosis in the cells of the human body. if we could find out how to turn it on -"

Yet during the next few moments of frantic study, Curt Newton almost lost hope himself. The science and mechanics of the alien Allus were completely unlike those of the System. Even Captain Future, master of System science, could comprehend almost nothing of the converter's design.

But he did locate the heavy main cable that brought power to the machine. Hastily he traced the cable in search of a switch.

He found no switch. The cable went straight into the complex apparatus around the copper chamber. At one point, the cable passed through a square box on which was mounted a silver disk. But though Curt twisted and tugged at the disk, it did not move nor was there any result.

"It looks as though it might be a switch - but it can't be moved," Curt said in exasperation. His haggard face seas dripping with sweat. "Yet there must be some kind of power cut-off."

RENZIEDLY he retraced the power cable, but there was no break in it except that square box and silver disk. Captain Future felt his hopes sinking fast. His plan had been too fantastic to succeed, after all.

F

He could bear the distant clamor of Grag's disturbance dying down, as though the Allus were overpowering the robot. Few minutes were left now. Curt told himself wildly that he must not get rattled, he must think -

"Thinking, that's it!" Curt cried hoarsely. "That must be it! The Allus have immaterial photon-bodies. They could have had these machines built for them by their Cometae aides, but the Allus' photon-bodies could not turn on a material switch. It'd have to be a switch embodying a telepathic relay, a switch they could turn on by thought!"

"Chief, what do you mean?" Otho exclaimed bewilderedly.

Curt paid no attention. He was staring at the silver disk on the enigmatic switch-box. He was concentrating every ounce of his mental power upon that disk.

"Power on!" he was thinking, over and over.

Something clicked inside the switch-box! The delicate electro-magnetic vibration of Curt's projected thought had operated a sensitive relay.

The massed apparatus around the copper chamber hummed with sudden power. From the myriad lenses in floor and ceiling poured a gush of brilliant blue light.

"We've got it going!" Curt exclaimed. "I'm going to try it. Otho, if my attempt fails, you try to get away and warn the System of the Allus' plan. Here goes!"

Before Otho could protest further, Captain Future stepped into the chamber - into the full rood of blue force!

He felt an awful, instantaneous impact through every fiber of his body. Ire reeled beneath the shock of a force cunningly calculated to effect the deepest molecular and atomic changes.

There seas a sharp clicking somewhere in the converter's auxiliary apparatus. The blue force changed abruptly to deep purple. A new, staggering shock ran like lightning through Curt Newton's swaying body.

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It seemed to him that every cell of his brain and being seas on fire. Sick and fainting, he reeled against the side of the chamber. The tinge of the projected force that bathed him was now altering to green. It was running through the spectrum in quick, sharp changes.

Captain Future realized dimly that each change was bringing into play a new frequency of unknown forces.

Each alteration was patterned to break down the molecular and atomic structure of different elements of living cells, then remold them into new, strange patterns.

Curt seemed swimming in liquid fire, he felt as though he were breathing flame through his burning body. The wrenching at his body's subtlest and deepest structure made him think that his very flesh was exploding.

The great `naves of sickness and weakness that came over him began to dissipate. The fiery torment of his body passed into a strange tingling.

"Gods of space!" he heard Otho exclaim hoarsely.

Curt opened his eyes. He still stood in the chamber.

But the spectrum-hued forces had reached the end of their gamut and had automatically cut off.

Captain Future looked down at himself. His whole body glowed! It shone with brilliant electric radiance that matched the uncanny tingling which he felt in every fiber.

"I've done it," he said huskily as he staggered out of the copper chamber. "I'm a Cometæ -"

He swayed from sick weakness. Instinctively, Otho leaped forward to support him.

But as Otho's hand touched him, the android recoiled with a cry of pain. His arm hung limp, paralyzed

by the electric shock of contact with Curt 's shining body.

A shuddering horror threatened to dominate Curt Newton's mind in that moment He had suddenly realized to the full how ghastly a gulf now separated him from all ordinary humanity.

CHAPTER XV

The Door to Outside

HE distant clamor of Grag's struggle with the Allus had died completely away by this time. T"Chief, they must have overpowered Grag!" Otho was exclaiming frantically. "They'll be back here in a moment!"

The urgency of his cry penetrated through the sick spasms that still gripped Captain Future. Drunkenly he staggered across the cruciform laboratory. He grasped a heavy-metal bar he had noticed amid other tools in a corner. Then, in an unsteady run, he tottered with Otho out into the corridor.

His body still felt utterly devoid of strength from the terrific shock he had undergone. He felt at each step that he could not make another, but always his indomitable will forced him: forward.

His outraged, metamorphosed body clamored for rest. He told himself despairingly that even if he could manage to reach the inner court, he would not have enough strength to do what most be done to close the door. Yet blind purpose kept him stumbling forward through the corridors.

They emerged, Curt and Otho, into the central court. A few yards in front of them loomed the blinding, crackling cataract of electric flame that walled everything inside the court. With a convulsive effort, Captain Future pitched forward into that raving torrent.

Stunned, blinded, shocked by impact of inconceivable electric force, he came to a halt in the middle of the roaring barrier. He was standing in a raging inferno of electricity that would have destroyed an ordinary human being in the wink of an eye.

Yet, weirdly enough, Curt Newton felt suddenly stronger. His tingling electric body was drinking in the energy that was now its food, from the flood of electrical power in which he stood. He could feel that new energy seething through every fiber of his being.

"Chief, hurry!" Otho's frantic cry reached his ears.

Curt lunged on, through the wall of electricity and into the interior of the court. He stumbled straight toward the massive door.

It was surrounded by the bulky, enigmatic pieces of apparatus which fed it unceasing power from the electric cataract. But the door itself towered up above everything else.

It was a massive, arched copper frame, ten feet high and eight feet wide. Inset around this frame were sixteen bulging, complex coils, linked by baffling complexities of wiring to the mechanisms which fed them power. Curt knew that these were the magnet coils whose intersecting fields set up the constant space-strain that held the door open.

But it was the door itself at which Captain Future wildly stared, like a man turned to stone.

"God!" he husked through stiff lips.

It was not an expletive of astonishment, but a prayer. He, first of all men, was looking through a rent in the fabric of the cosmos into the outer abyss. He was looking Outside!

The arch of the door framed darkness. But it was no darkness such as Captain Future had ever seen before.

It was the murky dusk of a world whose light is too alien for human eyes ever fully to discern.

That murky twilight shrouded a scene that no human gaze could entirely comprehend. For the world into which Curt Newton gazed was a world of the Outside, where there are four dimensions instead of three. And he, a three-dimensional creature of a tri-dimensioned universe, could not receive clear sense-impressions of such a world.

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HERE seemed to be a city in the murky dusk of that Outside universe, But its buildings were of a fantastic geometry that defied reason. Those black structures rose from slender bases and mushroomed outward like giant, angled black fungi growing upon slender stems.

T

The streets of that mad city were all perfectly straight to the eye. Yet each of those streets returned upon itself to form a circle, in insane defiance of three-dimensional geometry. The perspective of the black city was that of a surrealist nightmare, for the most distant of the mushroom buildings bulked far larger to cum's eyes than the nearer ones.

Most ghastly of all were the dark creatures who glided in troops and throngs through the straight-circular streets of the Outside city. Their bodily outlines were vaguely like the silhouetted shadows of the Allus whom curt encountered. There was the same blood-freezing suggestion of serpentine bodies and limbs, of faces that were masses of feelers only. But the forms of those dark citizens of the abysmal city seemed to change in outline with each movement they made. And they walked through the walls of their own city!

Captain Future, rooted in horrible fascination by this ghastly vision into the Outside, noted then the most hideous detail of all. Through the door, into the murky dusk of the four-dimensioned city, ran the score of shadowy filaments that connected the photon-bodies of the Alfas in the citadel with their real bodies in the Outside metropolis!

"Chief, the Allus are coming!"

Otho's distant yell broke the trance of horror that had held Curt Newton petrified.

He flung himself upon the magnet coils that studded the arch, endeavoring to tear loose their feed-wires. But the tough wiring resisted his stamina.

Baffled, Captain Future lifted his heavy metal bar and thrust it with all his strength into the complex windings of the lowest magnet coil. He tore and twisted, in frantic haste, until a flash of brilliance showed that he had shorted and destroyed the coil.

He destroyed a second coil in the same manner. And now the aperture of murky darkness in the door had grown smaller. The space-strain that held the door open was weakening!

"Hurry, Chief! They -"

Otho's warning cry was suddenly cut short, at the moment that Captain Future wrecked the third coil.

The dark opening of the door was now but a few feet in diameter! With mingled fear and frantic revulsion at the insane world beyond that opening, Curt raised his bar to hack at the fourth magnet coil.

"Earthman, stop!"

The mental command rang icily in his brain, and at the same moment he felt his whole mind and body frozen motionless. Ire made a superhuman mental effort to complete his movement, but could not control a muscle.

The Allus had come! Their dark, monstrous photon-shapes were all about him, beating down his will and resistance with all the vast mental force they possessed.

"Earthman, you die at once for this attempt."

The most awful thing was that even now, there was no trace of so human an emotion as anger in the Allus' mental voice - nothing but icy condemnation.

"You have tried to thwart our great work, to close the door that was so hard to open."

URT knew that he was going to die with the bitter taste of failure in his mouth. If he'd had but a few moments more

C

He stood there, frozen with the heavy bar still up-raised in his hands, knowing that the Allus were gathering their mental force to slay him in his tracks.

"Curt!"

That scream was in a girl's voice. The radiant figure of Joan Randall had burst suddenly through the electric wall, running toward him.

Not until later was Captain Future to know that Querdel and Thoryx had brought Joan to the citadel just as the Allus overpowered Grag. Not until then was he to learn that the sudden alarm, which had brought all the Allus to this court, had left both Grag and Joan temporarily free to act.

To Curt, the girl's appearance was startling as a miracle. And it was no less amazing to the Allus. The dark masters whirled toward her shining figure.

Their startled diversion of attention: left Curt Newton free for an instant of their mental grasp. He felt strength in his body once more. And instantly he completed his arrested movement to bring his bar crashing down upon the door's fourth magnet coil.

The coil flashed and burned out. The shrunken, dark opening of the door instantly disappeared. The weakening of one of the intersecting magnetic fields had ended the space-strain that kept open the aperture in space.

The door to Outside was closed. The filaments which connected the real bodies of the Allus with their photonbeings had been severed! The sole link between two cosmic worlds had been cut in twain.

"Curt, look!" gasped Joan,

The Allus' dark, shadowy shapes still stood all around them. But nosy they had no movement or life. Now they were mere clouds of photons, since the minds that had animated them were forever cut off.

Their shadow-shapes became rapidly more tenuous, more immaterial. They lost outline, drifted away and dissolved - into free photons, into nothingness.

"Joan, we did it!" Captain Future said hoarsely. "We closed the door. And they'll never again get anyone on this side to open it for them. They're penned back in the Outside forever. They can never loot the power of our
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universe."

From outside the flame-walled court came the triumphant, booming shout of Grag.

"Chief, guess what happened! When the Allus came rushing here and left Joan and me free, Querdel and Thoryx tried to kill me. But they didn't!"

"I'll say they didn't!" came Otho's spluttering, excited cry. "Chief, Grag finished off both Thoryx and Querdel!"

"Then it's all over," Captain Future whispered wearily. "The Allus gone, the door closed, and the

tyrants of the Cometae dead."

But Joan Randall stood looking up at him. There were tears on her strangely shining face as she contemplated his radiant, electric figure.

But Curt, you are a Cometae now!" she' sobbed.

"Why did you do it?"

"For the same reason that you did, Joan."

He stepped forward and took her in his arms. He had hungered for her all this time, tortured by the knowledge that he could not even touch her electric form. But now that his life and flesh were also electrified, now that he too was one of the radiant Cometae, there was nothing to prevent him. And to Curt Newton, it seemed worth all the agony of that terrible transformation, to be able to hold her close to him again.

UT there was deep dread shadowing Joan's face as she gazed up finally in his arms.B"Curt, what if you are not able to find a way of undoing the transformation? Then you'll never be able to leave the comet. You'll have to live on here as one of the Cometae, never roaming space again."

He looked down at her steadily.

"Joan, I hope I can find the method of reversing the change, for the sake of the Cometae people. But if I can't, I wouldn't mind living here the rest of my life with you."

She buried her face in his shoulder, and her voice came to him as a muffled whisper. "I'm almost selfish enough to hope that you don't find the way, Curt!"

CHAPTER XVI

Lost Paradise

URT NEWTON stepped back from the work that had so intently engrossed him. He glanced around at the group that crowded the Allus' cruciform laboratory. His shining figure stooped slightly from fatigue.

"What do you think, Simon?" he asked with some anxiety.

C

The Brain, whose strange form had been hovering beside Captain Future and collaborating in the work, answered with his usual deliberation.

"I don't know, lad. I think we've got the right combination of frequencies, but of course we can't be entirely sure."

There was a pause of oppressive silence in the laboratory. The Allus were gone forever from this citadel, in which they had plotted to steal the power of a cosmos. But the shadowy influence of those alien beings, about whom so little really would ever be known, seemed to haunt the somber halls and corridors where once they had been masters.

Like unearthly monuments to their colossal ambi-

tions towered the big, unfamiliar mechanisms of the laboratory. And the people in the room felt patently uneasy.

Beside the Futuremen and Joan, the group included Marshal Ezra Gurney, Tiko Thrin, the Martian scientist, and the shining figures of the Cometæ captains, Zarn and Aggar.

Aggar was now the chosen ruler of the Cometæ. His people had acclaimed him as such, in the wild revolution that had swept away the nobles and their guards forever when word of the Allus' eclipse had reached Mloon.

Weeks had passed since then. And during all that time, Captain Future and the Futuremen had labored to solve the enigma of the Allus' alien science. They had disassembled and studied one after another of the dark masters' strange machines, in the hope of learning a method by which to reverse the circuits of the big converter and use it for re-transformation of the electric people.

Curt himself was a brilliant scientist and he had the help of the Futuremen and of Tiko Thrin. But even so, he had been baffled. The design and purpose of the Allus' apparatus had seemed unfathomable. It was only by long, toilsome study and experiment that they had finally made a tentative rewiring of the converter.

"I believe that it will now project forces of a frequency-pattern to reverse the molecular metamorphosis and make electrified cells normal again," Captain Future said slowly. "But I can't be sure!"

He gazed with a tinge of doubt at the big, barrel-shaped copper chamber and its surrounding apparatus.

"We had to work so much in, the dark," he added, frowning. "We had to try to understand the designs and thought-processes of creatures that never even belonged to this cosmos. And if we've erred and have got the frequencies wrong, this will destroy a man instead of making him normal."

Joan touched his arm reassuringly.

"It will be all right, Curt. You've just worked too hard on it."

Captain Future declared his resolution.

"I'm going to try, it now - on myself. I won't allow another man to take the first chance with it."

"No, Curt - you musn't!" Joan cried, her eyes wide

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with alarm. "If anything happened to you, the rest of us would never be able to solve the problem. Let me be the first!"

"Heaven forbid!" exclaimed the Brain.

"Do you think I'd let her?" protested Curt Newton.

"Not in a million years!"

Aggar settled the argument by stepping into the big copper chamber. The new Cometae ruler bellowed in his bluff voice:

"It's my duty to take the first risk for my people. Go ahead and turn it on."

ELUCTANTLY Captain Future opened the switch that fed power into the redesigned converter. He and the others watched tensely.

R

Brilliant red rays streamed from the lenses above and below, to bathe Aggar's massive figure in a weird aura. They saw the Cometae ruler stagger from the shock, but he remained resolutely upright.

The red shifted into orange, the orange into yellow, as the changing frequencies of force ran down the spectrum. By the time the hue had reached violet, they could see that the intrinsic electric brilliance of Aggar's body was rapidly fading. And when he stepped out of the chamber, he was no longer a shining figure but a normal man!

Weak and swaying, Aggar looked down at himself, held his hands wonderingly before his eyes. A great joy lit his eyes.

"I'm a man again!" he said hoarsely. "I'm an electric travesty no longer. I'll age and grow hungry and get sick now, and finally I'll die. But thank the gods, until then I'll really live!"

Captain Future was the next to undergo the metamorphosis. And after that gruelling ordeal, when he too stepped out as a normal man again, Joan insisted on being next. When she emerged, Curt took her thankfully in his arms.

"Now for my people!" Aggar roared joyfully.

"There's not one but won't want to trade back that pitiful electric immortality for real life!"

It proved so, indeed. The next days saw a great migration of the Cometae people along the road from Mloon to the black citadel. They passed by day and by night through the copper chamber, until at last the last of the Cometae had regained normal humanity.

There were feasting and rejoicings in Moon beneath the coma-sky. Infants would be born again, and the cries of children would be heard once more. The comet people were returning to the ancient ways of their race.

But Ezra Gurney was worried. He confided his fears to Curt and the Futuremen.

"How in the name of Pluto's fiends are we fellows

from outside the comet goin' to get back out of it, Cap'n Future? Our ships are still here, but we can't get 'em out through that coma!"

"Don't worry, Ezra," Captain Future advised. "There won't be any difficulty about that."

Nor was there. The great magnet which the Cometae had built, under orders of the Allus, was now made the instrument by which their ships were enabled to leave the comet. It was not hard to alter the magnet so that it projected a beam of reversed polarity out through the coma's shell.

Into that beam, one by one, rose the spaceships that had been held captive so long. And each ship, as it entered the beam, seas flung out with a force as great as that which originally had dragged it in. Each ship was hurled through the opening made by the beam in the coma, to find itself in the familiar void of System space once more.

The Comet, ship of the Futuremen, was the last of the craft to depart, for the tearful farewells of the grateful Cometae had been long. But at last the Futuremen and Ezra and Joan found themselves in space once more.

"What a relief!" cried Otho, gazing around with sparkling eyes at the familiar vista of black gloom and bright stars. "I'm cursed if I ever want to go within a hundred light-years of any comet again!"

"You'd be back there yet if it wasn't for the help of my little dog Eek," declared Grag, proudly caressing the moon-pup that was snuggling in his arm.

"What are you talking about?" cried Otho. "That little pest didn't do anything but go into one panic after another."

"Sure, and it vas Eek's wonderful faculty for getting scared that guided us through the Allus citadel," boasted Grag. "You didn't see Oog helping us any. He hasn't enough brains to get scared like that!"

Otho began to rave, and the Brain and Ezra Gurney intervened. Chuckling, Captain Future left them in the control room and went back to look for Joan.

E FOUND her in the cabin, gazing intently backward through a window at the brilliant flare of Halley's Comet. It was growing rapidly smaller as their ship throbbed toward Earth.

H

To Curt's surprise, he found a glimmer of tears in her eyes when he turned her around.

"Why, Joan, what's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing - I'm just foolish," she murmured. "But I can't help feeling a little sorry to leave the comet."

He did not understand. Joan looked up at him with

deep emotion in her fine eyes.

"Out here, Curt, you belong to the whole System. I know you love me, but duty comes first - your obligation to use your scientific powers to help the System peoples.

"But if we'd been forced to remain on the comet world, cut off forever from the outside, nothing else

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would have come first for us. It could have been a paradise for us. But it's lost now."

Curt Newton bent and kissed her.

"Joan, don't feel like that. Some day when our work is done, we'll find our own paradise. I know a little asteroid that's waiting for us. It's just like a garden. Some day.

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