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W. T.—1

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Corsairs of the Cosmos

By EDMOND HAMILTON



"We machines are mighty. You will only sacrifice yourselves in attempting resistance."

A stupendous story of the Interstellar Patrol—an amazing weird-scientific tale of an invasion from outside the universe

WHAT was the greatest adventure that you ever took part in during your service in the Interstellar Patrol?"

That is a question which I, Dur Nal, captain in the Patrol, and my two officers are often asked.

My own answer is: "I believe our space-fight with the serpent-people was the wildest adventure ever we had."

W. T.—4

Korus Kan, my first officer, disagrees: "It was the time that we were drawn into the dark nebula."

And Jhul Din, my big second officer, differs with both of us and says, "That time we penetrated inside a comet was by far the most venturous."

To settle this difference of opinion I once put the question to Lacq Larus, Chief of the Interstellar Patrol.

Lacq Larus knew of every venture we of the service had ever engaged upon. He considered for a long time before he answered me.

"Dur Nal," he told me finally, "I think that the time we fought the cosmic corsairs was the wildest any of us ever saw."

And looking back, I am not sure but that Lacq Larus is right. For certainly that was the maddest space-struggle in which even the oldest veterans of the Patrol ever took part.

My cruiser had just returned to headquarters at Canopus when the thing first burst upon us. Our ship had been engaged for long weeks patrolling a lonely section of the galaxy beyond Mira, policing space between the suns and seeing that law was maintained in the interstellar void.

We had been glad enough when our relief came and we could return to headquarters. At full speed we flew across the galaxy between suns and nebulæ until at last we were watching Canopus' worlds come out of the huge white sun's glare as our cruiser swept in toward them.

But our stay at headquarters was to be short. For when I went up into the great tower that holds the central authority of the Interstellar Patrol, and reported our return to Lacq Larus, the Chief, I found that a new assignment awaited us.

"Dur Nal, I'm sorry to send you right back out into space," Lacq Larus told me, "but there's a job to be done."

"What is it, sir?" I asked. "A little meteor-sweeping to be done?"

"No, the space-routes of the galaxy are all clear at the moment," the Chief answered. "But I've just had a report from the astronomers at Betelgeuse that a number of celestial bodies are approaching our galaxy from outer space. They report that there are about twenty of these

bodies, that they are non-luminous and are apparently a group of dark stars. They are approaching with phenomenal speed and will reach our galaxy at a point near Betelgeuse."

"And you want us to go out and investigate these oncoming dark stars?" I guessed as he paused.

Lacq Larus nodded. "Yes. I want you to take a squadron of cruisers and go out into outer space to meet them. You will ascertain the exact course and speed of these dark stars and determine accurately where and when they will enter our galaxy. Then return here at once with your report."

I saluted. "Very well, sir. If the cruisers are ready we'll start at once."

"The squadron is waiting for you now down in the docks," Lacq Larus said. And he called after me as I went out, "I'll see that you get the leave due you when you return."

I WENT down to the great docks beside the tower, in which were resting or re-fitting hundreds of ships of the Interstellar Patrol. Most numerous among them were the long, cigar-shaped cruisers, the swiftest ships in space, grim beam-tubes projecting from their sides.

There were also slower, broader-beamed meteor-sweeps; observation ships fitted with elaborate instruments; heat-cruisers such as are used for close work with nebulæ and suns; and representatives of all the other classes of ships in the Patrol.

I found the squadron of twenty-five cruisers assigned me, waiting with all officers and crews aboard. Then I went on to my own cruiser and as I neared the dock where it rested I saw beside it a small crowd of Patrol officers listening to some one discoursing in a loud voice. As I drew nearer I saw that the speaker

was a big, bulky figure and recognized him as Jhul Din, my second officer.

Beside him, listening in some amusement, was Korus Kan, my first officer, and the other officers were hanging on his words.

"——and we ran our ship at full speed right through that meteor-swarm!" Jhul Din was saying. "We went so fast that not a cursed meteor in the whole swarm ever touched us."

"But weren't you afraid to head your cruiser into a meteor-swarm like that?" asked a young officer.

Jhul Din stared at him. "Afraid? You won't know what it is to be afraid when you've spent as much time out in space as I have."

"Well, you're going to spend a little more time in space right now," I broke in. "Jhul Din, call the crew to stations at once."

He looked at me in dismay. "You don't mean that we're going out on patrol again, Dur Nal? Not when we've just come in?"

"We're going out again, but not on patrol," I told him, and informed them briefly of the mission Lacq Larus had assigned to us.

"Why did the Chief have to pick on us?" Jhul Din exclaimed. "Look how long it'll take us to go outside the galaxy far enough to meet those dark stars."

"Well, it can't be helped," I said as we entered the cruiser. "The sooner you quit complaining and we get started, the sooner we'll be back."

He left us, still grumbling, and I heard his deep voice calling the crew to their posts as Korus Kan and I climbed to the cruiser's bridge-room.

"Is everything in order for a start?" I asked Korus Kan and he saluted.

"Everything in order—all generators and projectors satisfactory, air-tanks and

supply-rooms full, all beam-tubes working."

"Very well," I said, and picked up the space-phone by which I could communicate with the other cruisers of my squadron.

"Dur Nal speaking—we will start in five minutes," I ordered. "Triangle formation, and keep at two light-speeds until we clear Canopus."

As the captains of the other cruisers responded their understanding, I turned to the pilot who had just come up into the bridge-room. "Start in four minutes, Jan Allon," I ordered. "Lay our course for Betelgeuse for the present."

I heard Jhul Din bellow an order down below and the space-doors clanged shut. Then the whining hum of the great generators in the lower deck began.

Jan Allon waited for a few moments, then threw on the power and pulled the cruiser's wheel slightly toward him. Our ship arroded up at once into the sunlight, the other cruisers following close behind in the familiar triangle formation of the Patrol.

In a short time our squadron was clear of Canopus, and with the huge sun glaring behind us like a great white eye we were racing across the galaxy's spaces at many light-speeds toward Betelgeuse. We followed the straightest possible course, and this took us past the Orion nebula, which lies almost directly on the space-route between Canopus and Betelgeuse. The nebula bulked for billions of miles in space beside us, a stupendous burning cloud along whose edge our comparatively tiny cruiser crawled.

ONCE the mighty nebula was behind us, it was not long before our squadron reached Betelgeuse and the galaxy's edge. There was no need for us to halt at Betelgeuse; so we passed that

sun and in a short time were passing clear out of the galaxy into outer space.

Behind us lay the galaxy, a colossal swarm of suns floating in the infinitude of space. Before us lay only space itself, vast, lightless, empty. Far, far across its unthinkable reaches glowed a few little patches of soft, hazy light, galaxies as large as our own but so far away they were hardly visible.

Out in space some distance from our galaxy we could descry with our instruments a group of dark bodies coming toward us. They were the score of dark stars approaching the galaxy from the outer emptiness. Our squadron headed right out into the infinite toward them.

Korus Kan took observations on the dark stars as we approached them, while Jhul Din and I watched.

He found that they were all of large size and that they were coming on with astounding speed.

"They're moving faster than any dark star I ever heard of before!" Korus Kan told us.

"That's all the better," Jhul Din grunted. "We'll meet them the sooner and can get back sooner into the galaxy."

We watched as the black globes of the oncoming dark stars became dimly visible in the blackness ahead. Then I gave an order for the squadron to slacken speed.

"When we meet the dark stars we'll turn and move above them and with them, back toward the galaxy," I directed, "long enough to investigate them."

In a short time the dark stars had grown to huge black worlds booming toward us close ahead.

We ascended to a higher level and prepared to turn and follow above them when they reached us. They came on with truly amazing velocity, those mighty

burned-out cinders that long ago had been suns.

From what far region of space had they come, I wondered? How came these dark wanderers to be rushing through outer space far from whatever galaxy had been their origin? What chance had led them through infinity toward our own galaxy?

Musing on this, I watched as our squadron passed close over the group, executed a broad turn, and then came back and flew above the dark stars toward the galaxy.

Now we were almost stupefied to find that they were moving through space nearly half as fast as our swift ships could move!

"By all the suns, this is incredible!" I cried. "These dark stars are moving faster than any celestial body was ever known to move!"

Korus Kan's eyes were excited. "There's something strange about this whole business! Wait and I'll take some observations."

As he trained his instruments on the hurtling worlds below, Jhul Din and I stared down at them in increasing amazement.

"Maybe there has been a cosmic convulsion in some other galaxy that hurled these dead suns into outer space," Jhul Din suggested.

"Even that wouldn't account for their tremendous velocity," I was saying, when Korus Kan interrupted.

"By the suns, it's as I suspected!" he cried. "Those dark stars are propelled by artificial power!"

We turned our stare on him. "What are you saying?"

"It's the truth!" Korus Kan affirmed. "Our instruments show that they are being impelled through space by super-powerful propulsion vibrations like those

that impel our ships! It means that the dark stars have been fitted with huge generators and projectors and controls, and are being driven through space like so many colossal ships!"

"It can't be!" Jhul Din exclaimed incredulously. "Whoever heard of dead suns the size of those being propelled artificially?"

But rapidly I was thinking. "I believe that Korus Kan is right," I said. "And if these dark stars are really being propelled deliberately through space, it means that there are living creatures of some kind on them directing their flight."

"Why have they steered their twenty worlds across the outer void toward our galaxy? Where have they come from and for what?" Jhul Din asked.

"We must learn the answer to these questions and report to headquarters. This matter may be of import to our whole galaxy."

"Shall we descend and land on one of those dark stars to investigate, then?" asked Jhul Din.

Quickly I considered. "There's no need to imperil our whole squadron," I said.

I grasped the space-phone and spoke to the other ships. "It appears that these twenty dark stars are being deliberately propelled toward our galaxy, no doubt by beings of some sort upon them," I stated. "Our cruiser is going to descend to investigate. All others of the squadron will remain at their present level, and if we do not rejoin you within two hours you will return at full speed toward the galaxy and report what has happened at headquarters."

From the captains of the other cruisers came assent to the order, and then I turned to the pilot. "Very well, Jan Al-lon—descend toward the foremost of the dark stars."

IN TENSE silence Korus Kan and Jhul Din and I watched as our cruiser shot down through space toward the first of the onrushing dead suns. What would we find there? We waited in taut anticipation as the ship dropped down through the millions of miles.

Presently Korus Kan spoke. "None of the dark stars seems to have any atmospheric halo," he said.

"What kind of creatures could exist on worlds without atmosphere?" Jhul Din marvelled.

The foremost dark star's surface rushed up toward us. We saw on it crowded movement, a stir of hosts of moving things.

"There's life of some kind down there, all right," said Jhul Din.

Then as our ship raced lower an exclamation of utter astonishment came from me. "Life? This isn't a world of life as we know it. It's a world of machines!"

For the moving things that existed in hosts on the dark star were all machines!

The twilight surface of the star was crowded with their numbers. There were towering machines that stalked to and fro; many-limbed mechanisms such as I had never seen; and dozens of other kinds.

The eye could not count them, so great were their numbers. There was no other life or moving things in sight. Here was mystery of the cosmos, dark, enigmatic. How came the active and apparently masterless machines to be peopling these dirigible worlds?

"By the suns, there must be people of some kind here!" exclaimed Jhul Din. "If not, who made these machines?"

Korus Kan uttered a sharp cry. "Dur Nal! Some of the machines are coming up toward us!"

A hundred or more mechanisms had

risen from the dark star and were flying swiftly up through space toward us.

These mechanisms had no occupants, no operators. They were simply masterless machines flying in space, disk-like in shape and with tubes much like beam-tubes projecting from them.

"They may be going to attack us," Jhul Din warned. "Shall we beam them?"

"No—don't loose a single beam," I commanded. "There are a hundred of them to our one."

The flying-mechanisms came rapidly up, swarmed in a crowd around our descending cruiser. There was something chilling and uncanny at the sight of the metal machines acting with apparent volition and intelligence. They seemed watching us, but made no move to attack us. I had a lively sense, though, that they were only waiting for an untoward movement on our part to leap upon us.

"Keep descending," I told the pilot. "They're not going to harm us at present, apparently."

"There's a clear space down there to the left that looks like the center of activities, sir," the pilot reported to me.

"Land there, then," I directed.

The spot on the dark star's surface toward which we now descended was a clear circle surrounded by hosts of machines. As our ship slanted down toward it, with the flying-mechanisms keeping in a close swarm around us, I turned.

"Jhul Din, order every one in the ship to don space-suits," I commanded. "There is no atmosphere on this world."

KORUS KAN ALLON turned to me and saluted. "We have landed, sir."

"I am going to emerge. Korus Kan and Jhul Din and five of the crew will accompany me," I said. "The rest will remain in the cruiser and in case of acci-

dent to us will attempt to escape with the ship."

With my two officers I went down from the bridge-room to the lower deck.

"Open the space-door," I ordered.

The heavy door swung, and with Jhul Din and Korus Kan and our five followers I stepped out onto the dark star's surface.

We looked about us. We stood in an unimaginably weird and alien scene. A thick twilight lay over everything, but half-way up to the zenith in the black heavens glittered a great swarm of stars. It was our galaxy, toward which these dark-star worlds were rushing.

All around us in that twilight, surrounding with their hosts the clear circular space in which our cruiser had landed, towered the mighty machines. They were now motionless, as though they were watching us. With a chilling of my blood I knew that they *were* watching us.

Across the circle from us loomed a huge panel, and beside it great levers and wheels. Near this stood a half-dozen curious, squat, cowled mechanisms resting each on three metal limbs.

Korus Kan touched my arm, whispered. "Dur Nal, that panel and the levers — they must be the controls by which this dark star is propelled and steered through space!"

"We'll go over toward them, then," I said. "If there's any center of authority, it will be there."

As we neared the huge controls a stir went through the machine-giants around the clearing, menacing, watchful.

"By the suns, these cursed machines are all *alive!*!" muttered Jhul Din.

We stopped before the six cowled mechanisms that stood by the controls. Some instinct told me of power, of authority, concentrated in them.

Then out from one of those squat,

cowled machines came a clear thought-message, impinging directly on my mind. The machine was speaking to us.

"You are inhabitants of the galaxy which our twenty dark stars are now approaching?" it asked.

"We are," I answered, projecting the thought toward it. "Are you machines the only inhabitants of these dark stars? It is you who are steering them toward our galaxy?"

"It is," the machine replied. "We come from one of the galaxies nearest in space to your own galaxy. And that one from which we come is a galaxy inhabited only by machines like ourselves."

"A whole galaxy peopled only by machines?" I said. "How can such a thing be?"

"It has been so for countless ages," the mechanism answered. "Long ago we machines came to power in that galaxy and we have retained it ever since."

"But how did these machines come into existence in the first place?" Korus Kan whispered, beside me.

The cowled mechanism must have caught his thought. "In our galaxy in the far past," it told us, "there existed a race of beings who were not mechanisms but were living things similar to yourselves. They constructed many and diverse machines to aid in their conquest of nature, and they made those machines ever more automatic and self-sufficient. Finally they devised mechanisms that possessed a mechanical brain-structure capable of memory and association and decision, machines that could think. These thinking machines soon came to be superior in capabilities to their living creators. With unerring logic they recognized this fact and saw themselves better fitted to rule than their creators. So they rebelled against those who had made them and destroyed them all.

"Since then we machines have ruled supreme and alone in that galaxy and long ago spread out to every part of it and now are masters of all its suns and worlds."

"A machine-race rebelling against its creators!" Jhul Din exclaimed incredulously. "And these metal monsters rule a whole galaxy!"

"Quiet, Jhul Din!" I ordered. "We've got to find out what they've come to our own galaxy for."

I projected another thought at the cowled master-machines before me. "How come you machines to be propelling these dark stars toward our galaxy?"

The mechanism's thought-answer came. "We took twenty dark stars in our galaxy, fitted them with propulsion-apparatus and other apparatus, and then steered them out of our galaxy and across the gulf of space toward this galaxy of yours."

"But why did you do it?" I asked. "What have you come to our galaxy for?"

The machine's thought-answer came like a thunder-clap.

"We have come for suns!"

"For suns? What do you mean?"

The mechanism explained. "Our galaxy is much older than yours. A large number of its suns are old, red, dying. The worlds of our dying suns have been growing colder and colder. Upon many of them even we machines can no longer exist. We wish to get some new suns to replace the dying ones in our galaxy. We saw across space that your galaxy has many hot, young suns, and we have come to get some of them."

We were stupefied. "You are mad!" I said finally. "How could you hope to move suns from our galaxy to yours?"

"We can do it quite simply," the machine affirmed. "These dark stars can be propelled anywhere we wish and we need

only approach a sun with one of them, project toward that sun a powerful attraction-beam such as we are equipped to produce, and then head our dark star back toward our galaxy dragging the sun with us."

I heard with increasing stupefaction. "And you've come with these twenty dark stars to rob us of twenty of our suns!"

"It's impossible!" Jhul Din exclaimed. "Not these machines or any one else could ever tow away suns like that!"

"It's not impossible," said Korus Kan tensely. "They can do it if they have such equipment as they say."

"We can do it, yes, and we mean to do it," the machine affirmed. "Already we approach your galaxy, and when we reach it each of our dark stars will attach itself to a sun and we will start back with these twenty suns toward our galaxy. We will return again for another twenty suns and will continue this until our galaxy has sufficient hot, young suns to keep all our worlds warm.

"If you do not oppose us, no one in your galaxy will be harmed and we will allow the worlds of the suns we choose time enough to be evacuated of their inhabitants. But if you do oppose us, you will find it useless, for we machines are mighty and no mere living creatures can hope to resist us. You will only sacrifice yourselves in attempting resistance."

The cold, logical statement of the machine stung me to fury. "Do you imagine for a moment that we are going to allow you to come out of space and rob us of our suns at will?" I cried.

The mechanism's reply was completely unimpassioned. "You will gain nothing by resistance," it repeated. "When we have taken what suns we need, you will still have thousands of suns left."

"You'll take no suns at all from our

galaxy!" I answered. "You'll find that we are not such powerless creatures as you machines imagine."

The cowled machine ignored my threat. "You will return to your galaxy," it told me, "and will tell your peoples what we have said. Make clear to them that if they do not resist us, no one will be harmed when we take the suns we need. But tell them also that if any of them oppose us we will annihilate them."

A burning resentment at this mechanical thing's cold arrogance welled in me, but I retained enough reason to choke it down.

"We are free to go, then?" I asked.

"You are commanded to go!" the mechanism answered. "You are ordered to take that message to your galaxy's peoples."

"Very well, we will go," I answered. To our followers I said, "Back to the cruiser."

WE STRODE across the circle with the hosts of machines around it still motionless, watching. As coolly as possible we entered the ship and slammed shut the space-door. I climbed with my two officers to the bridge-room.

"Ascend at once," I ordered Jan Allon.

The generators hummed and our craft rose rapidly from the dark star's surface. Around us rose the flying-mechanisms, too.

"They're seeing us off to make sure we don't attempt any attack," I said. "These machines leave nothing to chance."

"Dur Nal, what will come of all this?" cried Jhul Din as our cruiser rose. "Can those mechanical things actually steal suns from our galaxy?"

"They can do it unless we are able to stop them," I said thoughtfully. "And whether or not we shall be able to stop them, I don't know."

"Why, if we gather all the Patrol together we ought to be able to beam them and their cursed dark stars out of space!" Jhul Din exclaimed.

"We'll do our best, anyway," I said grimly.

"The flying-mechanisms are dropping back, sir," reported Jan Allon.

We had risen high above the onrushing dark stars, and the machines that had accompanied us were now descending.

In a short time we were millions of miles above the twenty dead suns, and we soon made contact with our squadron, which had been hovering overhead.

"We return toward the galaxy at full speed immediately," I ordered the ships of our squadron.

As our ships put on speed we soon left the dark stars behind us, outracing them toward the galaxy.

I took the space-phone and after a little difficulty got through to headquarters at Canopus. In a few moments I was talking to the Chief.

Lacq Latus listened with utmost attention as I related what we had discovered concerning the dark stars and the purposes of the machine-things guiding them.

"This is almost incredible!" replied Lacq Latus' voice when I had finished. "Cosmic buccaneers coming from another galaxy to steal suns from our own galaxy!"

"It is incredible but true," I told him. "They will reach our galaxy within a short time and will start dragging away suns."

"You believe that they can do this, Dur Nal?" he asked.

"I am almost sure that they can," I answered. "These machines impressed me as being the most formidable creatures I've ever encountered. Korus Kan is of my opinion also."

"Well, we're not going to stand tamely

by and let them rob us of any of our suns," said Lacq Latus, a steely quality in his voice. "Dur Nal, when you reach the galaxy's edge stand by there with your squadron and keep watch for the coming of these dark stars. I'll call up every cruiser in the Interstellar Patrol and order them to rendezvous off Betelgeuse. We'll join up with you there to combat these machines and their worlds."

"One more thing, sir," I added quickly. "What if we are unable to prevent these machines from taking twenty of our suns?"

"You don't think they will prove too strong for us, do you?" Lacq Latus asked.

"I have been strongly impressed by the powers of these mechanisms," I answered. "I suggest that the worlds of all suns in that section at the galaxy's edge be evacuated of their inhabitants so that if the suns are taken, the inhabitants will be safe."

After a moment's silence he said, "Very well, Dur Nal. I'll give orders for the evacuation to take place."

DURING the next hours our squadron raced at top speed toward the galaxy's edge. The dark stars faded from sight behind us, but we knew that they were still there, still rushing steadily on toward our galaxy.

By the time we reached Betelgeuse the whole galaxy was afame with news of the coming of these cosmic corsairs, who meant to plunder us of part of our suns. Despite this excitement there was no panic.

Lacq Latus was on his way from Canopus with the thousand cruisers of the Interstellar Patrol that had been at headquarters. And in response to his commands, flashed across the whole galaxy, every fighting-ship in the Patrol was making for Betelgeuse.

Yes, from every part of the galaxy they were coming, those lean, long hawks of space, from the great trade-routes between the bigger suns, from lonely regions in uncharted parts of the galaxy. Rushing at reckless speed through the perils of the void, the ships of the Interstellar Patrol came in answer to their Chief's call.

Meanwhile all the worlds of the suns in the threatened section at the galaxy's edge were being swiftly evacuated of their inhabitants. Interstellar liners and freighters in hundreds of thousands swarmed from those worlds to suns back in the galaxy, carrying their whole populations to suns and worlds more safe.

Out beside great Betelgeuse, at the galaxy's very edge, I lay waiting with my squadron. My ships still maintained their triangular formation. We had climbed several light-years above the plane of the threatened suns and now lay in the void, Jhul Din and Korus Kan and I watching intently through our instruments as the dark stars in the outer void rushed toward us. Nearer and nearer they came, still flying on in a compact group.

"They're beginning to slow down," muttered Jhul Din, watching. "If Lacq Larus and the rest of the Patrol don't show up soon, they'll be too late."

"Here they come now!" exclaimed Korus Kan.

We turned and saw racing toward us thousands on thousands of shining points that became cruisers as they neared us. Foremost among them flew the flagship of Lacq Larus, and the Chief's craft drew up close beside our own.

"Almost the whole strength of the Patrol is here, Dur Nal," Lacq Larus told me on the space-phone. "What about the dark stars?"

"They're almost here too," I said grimly. "You can see them out there."

There was silence as Lacq Larus and all the rest in our fleet peered toward those twenty onrushing giant globes.

"They're almost here, sir," I said. "What are your orders for attack?"

"We'll divide into twenty divisions, one to attack each of those dark stars," Lacq Larus ordered. "Each division will descend on its objective and beam everything upon it as heavily as possible, trying especially to destroy the controls of the propulsion-apparatus."

"We will not attack until they actually start dragging away suns. For if they find themselves unable to seize any of our suns as they plan, they will no doubt return to their own galaxy and there will be no need of combat."

We watched, therefore, without making a move as the score of dark stars drew nearer.

The scene was a thrilling one: the hosts of the galaxy's shining suns stretching away behind us; the myriad cruisers of our great fleet lying motionless up there high above the outermost suns; the twenty huge black stars booming nearer on their ruthless mission of intergalactic piracy.

The dark stars were now at the galaxy's edge, and there they separated. Each of them moved toward one of the suns below, and each selected a hot, youthful sun of large or medium size. Directly under my own ship we could see one of the dark stars approaching a blue sun, curving smoothly in toward it.

"It can't be done!" Jhul Din exclaimed tautly. "Nothing can drag a sun away!"

"But they're doing it!" cried Korus Kan. "Look at that!"

The dark star had come very close to the blue sun, and now from its surface a broad, pale beam of immense magnitude stabbed toward the sun.

For a few moments they remained

thus, dark star and sun connected by that beam. Then the dark star began to move slowly away under the influence of its propulsion-apparatus, and the blue sun moved slowly after it!

"They're doing it!" repeated Korus Kan. "They're towing that sun away!"

"And look—all the other dark stars are dragging away suns!" cried the astounded Jhul Din.

IT WAS an astounding, an awful spectacle—those robber dark stars of the machines making away with twenty of our suns.

Lacq Larus' voice snapped at that moment from the space-phone. Our fleet divided into twenty subdivisions, each with one of the dark stars as its objective. Then came the order to attack.

Down, down—like swooping hawks of space our cruisers rushed headlong down through the millions of miles toward the dark stars towing away their helpless prey. And up from each of the dark stars to meet us, as though they had only been awaiting our attack, darted hosts of the disk-like flying-mechanisms.

There was a hell of cosmic struggle then over the twenty dark stars. So appalling was the inferno of that battle that I lost all sense of the individual part our ship took in it.

I was aware of Jhul Din and Korus Kan yelling hoarsely beside me as the beams of our ships stabbed and smashed through the masses of the darting flying-mechanisms. Then I saw brilliant filaments of blue force emitted from the flying-mechanisms toward our cruisers, saw every cruiser touched by them explode instantly into blue light. Ships and flying-mechanisms went to death by hundreds in space all around us. Our cruisers still strove to smash down through the machines to the surface of the dark stars.

For even while this wild combat went on above them, the dark stars were still steadily towing their captive suns on out into space.

The flying-mechanisms outnumbered us two to one, and despite our wild efforts we could not get through them to the worlds beneath. And more and more of our ships were exploding in azure light as the filaments of force found a mark.

Three-quarters of our force had been destroyed and it looked as though the rest of us would be wiped out in a few minutes, when there came an order from the Chief.

"All ships break off fighting and ascend!" ordered Lacq Larus.

What cruisers were left us at once disengaged from the struggle and darted upward.

The flying-mechanisms pursued us but we beamed them so savagely from above that they dropped back.

We climbed two light-years before Lacq Larus gave our shattered forces the order to halt and resume formation.

"The machines have destroyed all but a quarter of our ships," he said. "They outnumber us, and to continue the battle is only to invite complete destruction."

"But, sir, we can't let them take those twenty suns away!" cried one of the captains on the space-phone.

"I'm afraid we'll have to this time," Lacq Larus said. "But they will be coming back for more suns, and the next time we will be ready for them."

"But, sir—" protested another officer, and was cut short by the Chief's grim voice.

"I know how you of the Patrol feel at thus letting them take those suns away. But we can do no good by sacrificing ourselves at this time, and must have all the forces available to meet them when they come again. We will return into the gal-

axy, except for two scouting-divisions which will remain and keep watch along the edge."

Grimly, with bitter thoughts, our shattered forces moved back into the galaxy, leaving the patrolling force behind.

"Beaten!" Jhul Din exclaimed unbelievingly. "The Interstellar Patrol, beaten by those machines!"

"We're not completely beaten, Jhul Din," I told him. "They've won the first round, but when they come back again it will be a different story."

"But we've let them take twenty of our suns away from us," he said, "as easily as though we weren't there at all!"

WHEN our remaining forces re-entered the galaxy we found it in uproar. News of the success of the machine-corsairs in robbing us of twenty suns had already flashed everywhere across it. It was known that the machines would return for more suns, and in view of what had happened it seemed probable that they could loot our galaxy of as many suns as they wished.

Lacq Larus broadcast a statement to allay the general fear.

"The machines greatly outnumbered our forces and for that reason we were unable to prevent them from towing away twenty suns," he stated. "But they will without doubt return to plunder us of more suns, and before then we must construct as many ships as possible with which to meet them. If we have forces enough we should be able to prevent the theft of any more suns."

Preparations were begun almost at once to build up sufficient forces to meet the cosmic corsairs on their return. Thousands on thousands of new Patrol cruisers were hastily laid down to replace those destroyed in the battle. Beams of

greater range and power were installed in them.

It was estimated that we would have twice as many ships to meet the next coming of the corsairs as when we first had combated them. We would be meeting them on something like even terms as to numbers.

"By the suns, we'll blast them out of space when they show up next time!" Jhul Din vowed.

Korus Kan was not so sure. "Their weapons are more powerful than our own," he reminded.

OUR new ships were hardly completed when there came warning of the corsairs' return.

Our astronomers had watched them closely as they towed our score of suns steadily across the void toward their own distant galaxy. Now the astronomers reported that the twenty dark stars were on their way back to our galaxy.

Lacq Larus ordered a patrol far out into space in the direction of the oncoming corsairs. Our main forces remained just inside the galaxy's edge. All worlds of suns there had been evacuated.

Soon came word from the patrol that the dark stars were close. Lacq Larus ordered our scouts not to engage but to keep just ahead of them.

Again Jhul Din and Korus Kan and I looked down from a great height at the oncoming dead suns of the buccaneering machines. They swept steadily, purposefully, toward our galaxy's edge again, but this time Lacq Larus did not wait for them to attach themselves to suns. He ordered the attack at once.

If our first battle with the machines had been wild, our second one was madness. The flying-mechanisms still outnumbered our ships slightly, and they

fought like the machines they were, with cold, relentless purpose.

And as they fought with us, the dark stars on which they had come were being directed smoothly toward our suns, hooking onto a sun each with their great attraction-beams, and starting again to tow these suns out into the void.

At this sight, Lacq Larus flashed an order to us. "Try above all to get down and cripple the propulsion-apparatus of those dark stars! If we don't, they'll get away with these suns too!"

"They're getting away with them now!" groaned Jhul Din. "Curse them, if they were only living creatures instead of machines we might be able to beat them!"

Already a third of our forces were gone, and at Lacq Larus' new order we spent our ships at an appalling rate to wing down and disable the dirigible dark stars.

It was in vain. The flying-mechanisms kept always between us and the dark stars below. And steadily as the wild battle raged above them, those dark stars were dragging away their second capture of suns.

One only did our forces manage to disable. There had been a break in the battle above it for a moment, and through that break two Patrol cruisers cometed down instantly and crashed deliberately into the controls of that world. At once that dark star slowed and drifted rudderless in space, circling aimlessly with the sun it had been towing away. The machines deserted it and darted on to help protect the other nineteen that were dragging their suns onward.

We followed those nineteen dark stars and their prey fiercely out into space, never ceasing our attacks. Two-thirds of our force was annihilated before Lacq Larus gave over the attack. The machines

had again had much the best of it and now outnumbered us by an even greater margin.

His voice was heavy as he gave the order that signified our defeat. "All ships return toward the galaxy."

We were silent as our remnant of ships returned.

"It's no good," said Korus Kan finally. "The machines are stronger than we are, and though we'll fight them when they come again, they'll take our suns despite us."

"We'll stop them somehow," Jhul Din asserted. "The Patrol has met a lot of enemies in its time and beaten them, and it will beat these cursed mindless things of metal."

"I confess that I don't see how it can be done," I answered him. "We've met them twice now and each time they've defeated us."

Lacq Larus' voice came to me shortly on the space-phone. "Dur Nal, land your ship on that disabled dark star," he said. "I want to examine it with you."

I GAVE the pilot the order and we detached ourselves from the rest of the fleet and headed toward the dark star. It still drifted aimlessly outside the galaxy's edge, it and the sun it had been towing away when crippled now circling each other.

When we landed on it beside the ship of Lacq Larus and emerged in space-suits we found the dark star's surface held only some wrecks of machines that had been shattered by our beams. No living or moving machine was left upon that world.

Lacq Larus led toward the huge panel and levers the two down-crashing cruisers had wrecked. "I want to examine the controls of this thing," he said.

Jhul Din was looking at the fragments

of machines around us with some little satisfaction. "At least some of them knew they met up with us," he said.

We came to the shattered controls and examined them closely. Korus Kan was especially interested.

"These dark stars are propelled by great generators of propulsion-vibrations, as I thought," he said. "The beams they use to pull suns away are simply attractive rays of immense power released from a huge projector."

"So that's how they do it," Lacq Larus said. "Well, I'm afraid it makes small difference to us how they do it, as long as they continue to do it."

But I clutched Korus Kan's arm. A sudden thought had entered my brain with his words.

"Korus Kan, could the scientists of our galaxy duplicate this propulsion-apparatus and attractive beam?" I cried.

He looked at me, puzzled. "I suppose so. I don't see why not when the principle is clear."

"And we could install them in dark stars just as the machines did?" I pressed.

"Yes, that would not be hard. But why do you ask, Dur Nal?"

"Because I've found a way to get back our stolen suns and whip those machines once and for all!" I cried.

"What do you mean, Dur Nal?" asked Lacq Larus quickly.

Swiftly I explained. "Suppose we take a hundred of the dark stars in our galaxy and fit them with propulsion-apparatus and attraction-beams like this one. Then suppose we sail across space with those hundred dark stars to the galaxy of the machines and—"

"And take our suns back from them!" cried Korus Kan, his eyes blazing. "If we can do it—"

"By the suns, we *can* do it!" cried Jhul

Din. "It's a way to get back our stolen suns and smash the machine-people!"

"Dur Nal, you may have found the right answer," Lacq Larus told me. "The thing you propose is stupendous, but it seems to be the only course open to us to win."

"We'll assemble all the scientists and workers in the galaxy if necessary to get this done," he added.

Within hours, the hastily summoned scientists of our galaxy had pronounced our plan practicable, and preparations had begun.

Swiftly cruisers of the Interstellar Patrol went forth and located a hundred dark stars of the dimensions needed. There are hosts of such dead suns booming along in the galaxy's spaces, and it was not hard to find a hundred of suitable size.

Meanwhile all the scientific ability of the galaxy had been thrown into the manufacture of huge generators and propulsion and attractive vibrations.

In an incredibly short time these were completed and transported to the hundred selected dark stars. They were installed so that the dark stars could be propelled in space at great speed in any direction, and could fasten onto and tow any sun or body of stellar size. Giant defensive beam-batteries were also installed.

When the first dark star was so equipped I gave it its tests. Standing with Korus Kan and Jhul Din at its controls, and with Lacq Larus watching beside us, I turned on the power.

The huge dead sun moved away through space in perfect answer to its controls. I speeded it up, slowed it, turned sharply and circled it around a few suns to make sure of its tractability.

Then we tried the attractive beam. Korus Kan handled the controls of this,

and with it we hooked onto a medium-size sun. Then as I started our dark star forward through space again we found that we towed the sun steadily along with us.

"It's successful!" Lacq Larus exclaimed. "And all the others will be ready soon!"

"As soon as they're ready we'll start for the galaxy of the machines," he said, "before they've time to come back here again."

Rapidly the others of the hundred dark stars were equipped and tested. Lacq Larus took one as the flagship of the stupendous fleet.

At his order we drove our dark-star chariot outside the galaxy's edge and there the whole hundred massed together.

We formed in columns of ten, the dark star of Lacq Larus taking a position a little ahead of the rest of us.

Then Lacq Larus gave an order on the space-phones which had been fitted to all our worlds, and as one our fleet of a hundred dark stars began to move through space toward the soft, hazy patch of light that was the distant galaxy of the machines. Our caravan was on its way to retrieve our stolen suns, in the mightiest venture yet undertaken by the Interstellar Patrol.

JHUL DIN was exultant. "By the suns, this is better than driving ships!" he exclaimed. "Driving dark stars to battle!"

"There'll be all the battle you want when we reach the galaxy of the machines," I told him grimly.

"You're going to follow out our original plan?" I asked Lacq Larus on the space-phone, and he answered in the affirmative.

"It's a risky one, but I believe it is the best one."

We hurtled on in the void toward the distant galaxy of the machines. Slowly,

very slowly despite our immense speed, it grew in apparent size. It grew from a little patch of light to a cloud of tiny points of light. And as it grew, our own galaxy shrank astern.

Korus Kan and Jhul Din and I relieved each other at the controls of the dark star. We kept our place in the general formation, the dark star of Lacq Larus still leading. There was something magnificent and awful in this cosmic march of our hundred dead suns through space to retrieve our stolen suns and take vengeance on those who had stolen them.

The galaxy of the machine-people grew into a great cloud of stars across the firmament. With eager eyes we surveyed it.

"It seems about the same size as our own galaxy," Lacq Larus commented. "But it has far more dying suns than ours."

Yes, as the machines had told us, this galaxy of theirs contained hosts of dying suns, old, red and cold. They greatly outnumbered the suns still hot with life. Small wonder that the machines had sought for new, young suns to replenish their wan universe!

"I see some of our own suns in there!" Korus Kan exclaimed. "The ones they took from us."

"Yes, I see them," Lacq Larus said. "If all goes well, we'll soon be taking them back."

As we neared the galaxy of the machines, Lacq Larus gave one hundred dark stars their orders.

Thirty-nine of us were assigned to hook onto the stolen suns and tow them back at once toward our own galaxy. The other sixty-one, including Lacq Larus' dark star and my own also, were to wreak all the destruction in their power upon the machines' galaxy.

We drew steadily nearer and soon were very close to the galaxy ahead. There was no sign that any of the machines in it were aware of our approach.

"They can't have seen us coming," Jhul Din commented.

"They've no idea we could come at all," I responded. "They're probably busy placing the last suns they took from us. Our dark stars would be hardly visible to them."

Soon came the voice of Lacq Larus in final orders. "We are now about to enter this galaxy," he said. "Remember your duties and let nothing stop you."

Like rushing spheres of blackness our hundred dark stars raced into the galaxy of the machines. Once inside, we separated. The thirty-nine assigned to retrieve our thirty-nine stolen suns sped directly, each toward one of those suns. The rest of us darted forward on our dark stars after the leading one of Lacq Larus.

Our purpose was to destroy as many of that galaxy's suns as possible by dragging them into one another. Before the machines that peopled their worlds were aware of our presence we had begun.

Lacq Larus drove his dark star toward a small white sun at that galaxy's edge, hooked onto it with his attractive beam, and towed it quickly toward a blue sun off to the left.

When near the blue sun he released the one he towed and it rushed on of its own accord, crashed head-on into the blue star. The two colliding suns melted into a cloud of flame that whiffed away the worlds of both of them in an instant.

While Lacq Larus was thus employed, the rest of us were not idle. I had driven our own dark star toward a large red sun some distance inside, and now I yelled for Korus Kan to hook onto it with our attractive beam. He did so, and

as I put on power we dragged the red sun after us toward a double star not far from it.

We cast loose just before we reached the double star. I shot our dark star past it, and the red sun, drifting after us, struck the twin star squarely. The cosmic out-rush of flame from that collision almost reached our own hurtling world before we got out of reach.

OFF to one side three of our dark stars had seized another double star, this one of huge dimensions, and were dragging it toward a great green sun. And further in, one of our forces had got hold of an aged red sun that was almost too big for it to handle, and was tugging it slowly toward its doom.

All around us this stupendous process of wreckage was going on and we were part of it. Space inside that galaxy seemed filled with booming dark stars and suns being dragged to flaming death. I glimpsed some of the thirty-nine of our force assigned to that duty seizing our stolen suns and towing them toward outer space.

From the worlds of the suns we were destroying came clouds of flying-mechanisms rushing to attack us. But the giant beam-batteries installed on our dark stars blasted them out of space as they came near. And still our smashing of suns went on.

Jhul Din and Korus Kan yelled with exultation as we towed still another sun to collision and doom. I saw Lacq Larus' dark star some distance away rapidly stripping the worlds from a sun and towing them into another sun.

Then Korus Kan cried out, pointed. "Look—the dark stars of the machines!"

I made out dim, huge shapes rushing toward us across that galaxy. "The machines' dark stars!"

Through the wild wreckage of crashing and flaring suns and worlds, nineteen dark stars were bearing down on us. They were the dark stars with which the machines had gone across space to steal our suns. Now they were rushing to battle us!

The scene that followed was beyond description. The machines meant to stop our wrecking activities at any cost to themselves and they drove their dark stars straight toward our own.

A half-dozen of them crashed into that many of our dark stars in the first rush. As they collided, dark star and dark star blazed up in hot new life.

Again and again they rushed at us headlong, as we dragged and wrecked their suns. They never hesitated to collide with us. They fought with magnificent, mindless courage to stop our wrecking activities.

But at last the last of them was gone, though more than twenty of our own dark stars had been destroyed in the collisions that had ensued when the machines rammed them. All space around us now seemed filled with the wild flare of collided suns.

"All dark stars retreat back into space!" came Lacq Larus' order. "Our work here is finished."

"Are all our own suns retrieved?" I asked him on the space-phone.

"Yes, our other dark stars towed them out into space and they're all clear."

Quickly I turned my dark star and sent it booming with the others after Lacq Larus, out of that ravaged galaxy.

Outside in space waited the thirty-nine dark stars that had retrieved our thirty-nine stolen suns.

"We got them all back!" cried Jhul Din. "Didn't I tell you that we would, that nothing could beat the Patrol?"

"Head toward our own galaxy," Lacq Larus ordered. "Keep at half-speed, as those of us towing suns can't go so fast."

Slowly, towing our thirty-nine suns with us, we headed away through space toward the dim light-patch of our own galaxy.

Looking back, we saw that the galaxy of the machines was lit in many places by the flaring fire of collided suns.

We stared back for a long time at the stupendous damage which we had done to that universe.

"It'll be a long time before *they* will come buccaneering again for our suns!" predicted Jhul Din.

"And if they ever do come again we can defeat them now that we have powers equal to their own," I added. "We'd rather not war with the machines nor with any one else. But we have fought for our suns, and as long as the Patrol lasts we are going to keep them!"

