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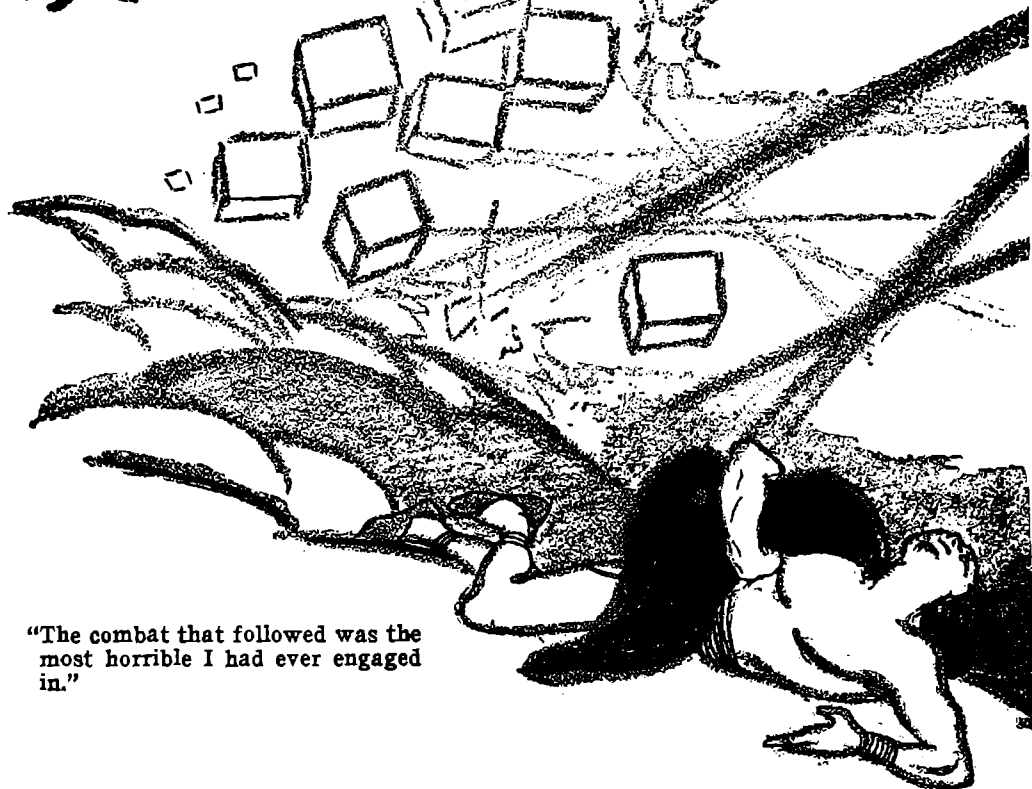
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lives of universes—a weird-scientific novelette*

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The COMET-DRIVERS

by EDMOND HAMILTON



"The combat that followed was the most horrible I had ever engaged in."

"PASSING Rigel on our left, sir," reported the Canopan pilot standing in the control room beside me.

I nodded. "We'll sight the Patrol's cruisers soon, then," I told him. "I ordered them to mass beyond Rigel, just outside the galaxy's edge."

Together we strained our eyes into the impenetrable blackness of space that lay before us. To the left, in that

blackness, there burned the great white sun of Rigel, like a brilliant ball of diamond fire, while to our right and behind us there flamed at a greater distance red Betelgeuse, and blue-white Vega, and Castor's twin golden suns, all the galaxy's gathered suns stretching in a great mass there at our backs. Even then, though, our cruiser was flashing out over the edge of the galaxy's great disk-like swarm of stars, and as white Rigel dropped



behind us to the left there lay before us only the vast, uncharted deeps of outer space.

Gazing forward into those black depths our eyes could make out, faint and inconceivably far, the few little patches of misty light that we knew were remote galaxies of suns like the one behind us, unthinkably distant

universes like our own. In the blackness before us, too, there shone a single great point of crimson light, burning through the blackness of the

outer void like a great red eye. It was toward this crimson point that I and the great-headed, bodiless Canopan pilot beside me were gazing, somberly and silently, as our cruiser hummed on. Then as he shifted his gaze there came from him a low exclamation, and I turned to see that a great swarm of gleaming points had appeared in the blackness close before us, resolving as we flashed on toward them into a far-flung, motionless swarm of long, gleaming cruisers like our own.

Swiftly our cruiser rushed into that hanging swarm of ships, which made way quickly before us as there flashed from our bows the signal that marked my cruiser as that of the Chief of the Interstellar Patrol. Then as we too slowed and hung motionless at the head of the swarm I saw three cruisers among them flashing toward us, slanting up and hovering just beneath our craft. There came the sharp rattle of metal as their space-gangways rose up and connected with our cruiser, and then the clang of our space-doors opening. A moment more and the door of the control room was snapped suddenly aside and three strange and dissimilar figures stepped inside, coming swiftly to attention and saluting me.

"Gor Han! Jurt Tul! Najus Nar!" I greeted them. "You've massed a thousand of the Patrol's cruisers here as I ordered?"

Gor Han bowed in the affirmative. A great Betelgeusan, his big fur-covered shape was typical of the races of that big sun's cold world: a huge barrel-like torso supported by four thick stocky limbs, with four similar upper arms; his dark eyes and other features being set directly into the upper part of that furry torso, which was headless. Jurt Tul, beside him, was as strange a figure, patently of the amphibious peoples of Aldebaran's watery worlds, his great green bulk of shapeless body and powerful

flipper-limbs almost hiding the small bulbous head with its round and lidless eyes. And Najus Nar, who completed the strange trio, was as dissimilar from them as from myself. One of the powerful insect-men of Procyon, his flat, upright body, as tall almost as my own, was dark and hard and shiny in back and of soft white flesh in front, with a half-dozen pairs of short limbs branching from it from bottom to top, and with a blank, faceless head from the sides of which projected the short, flexible stalks that held in their ends his four keen eyes. Strange enough were these three Sub-Chiefs of the great Patrol, yet to me these three lieutenants of mine were so familiar, in appearance, that as they faced me now their strange and dissimilar forms made no impression on my mind.

"Your order was urgent, sir," Gor Han was saying, "that we mass a thousand of the Patrol's cruisers here outside the galaxy's edge, and await your coming."

"Urgent, yes," I repeated somberly, my eyes turning from them to the great point of crimson light that shone in the black depths beyond; "urgent because it is out from the galaxy's edge that we are going with these cruisers, toward that point of red light there in the void that has puzzled all the galaxy since its appearance days ago—out toward that point of crimson light which our astronomers now have discovered to be a gigantic comet that is racing at speed incredible straight toward our galaxy from the depths of outer space!"

The three gazed at me, stunned, silent, and in that moment the only sound in the control room was the low humming of the generators beneath, which sustained our ship in space. Then, gazing out again into the black depths ahead toward that blood-like point, I was speaking on.

"Comets there are in our galaxy, as you know, comets that revolve in

irregular orbits about various of our stars, and which have been familiar to us always. A comet, as you know, consists of the coma or head, the nucleus, and the tail. The coma is simply a great globe of electrical energy, with a hollow space at its center. The nucleus is all the comet's solid matter, a mass of meteoric and other material hanging in the hollow at the coma's center. The great coma blows from its own electrical energy, and is driven through space by the release of some of that energy backward, through the vast tail, which is simply released energy from the coma. It is the great coma that makes a comet deadly to approach, since any matter that enters its terrific sea of electrical energy is converted instantly into electrical energy likewise, changed from matter-vibrations to electrical vibrations, annihilated. Our interstellar navigators have for that reason always avoided the comets of our galaxy, while never has it been dreamed that a comet might exist in empty space outside our galaxy.

"Now, however, our astronomers have found that this crimson spot of light that has appeared in the outer void and has puzzled us for days is in reality a giant crimson comet of size and speed unthinkable, which is racing straight toward our galaxy and will reach it within a few more weeks. *And when it does reach it, it means the galaxy's doom!* For this gigantic comet, greater by far than any of the galaxy's greatest suns, will crash through the galaxy's swarm of stars like a meteor through a swarm of fireflies, annihilating those in its path by absorbing them and their worlds into the terrific electrical energy of its mighty coma; disrupting all the finely balanced celestial mechanism of our universe and sucking its whirling stars into its deadly self as it smashes on; engulfing our suns and worlds in electrical annihilation, and then racing

on into the void, leaving behind it but the drifting fragments of our wrecked and riven universe!

"Onward toward our universe this mighty comet is thundering, and but one chance remains for us to turn it aside. The center of this comet, of any comet, is the nucleus at the heart of its coma, which is the only solid matter in it. If we could penetrate through the coma to the great hollow inside it, could turn upon that nucleus the powerful force-beams used by our Patrol cruisers to sweep up meteor-swarms, we could possibly push it aside enough to change its course, to send it past our galaxy's edge instead of through it. But that must be done soon! Our astronomers have calculated that within twelve more days the comet will have reached a point so near the galaxy that it will be too late for anything ever to turn it aside. When the Council of Suns informed me of this I flashed word immediately for you three Sub-Chiefs to mass swiftly a thousand of the Patrol's cruisers here outside the galaxy's edge. And with these thousand ships we are starting at once toward the comet!

"Behind us the Patrol will be massing another five thousand cruisers to send out after us, but these can hardly reach the comet before it is too late. It is on us, and on our thousand cruisers, that the galaxy's fate now hangs. If we can reach the great oncoming comet, can penetrate through its deadly coma to the solid nucleus at its center, can deflect that nucleus with our force-beams before the twelfth day ends, we will have turned the great comet aside, will have saved the galaxy itself from death. If we can not, the galaxy perishes and we perish with it. For we of the Interstellar Patrol, who have defended and guarded the ways of that galaxy for thousands upon tens of thousands of years, go out to the oncoming comet now not to return unless we can turn

that comet aside and save our universe from doom!"

Again in the control room was silence when I had finished, a silence that seemed intensified, as the three strange Sub-Chiefs before me held my eyes. Then, without speaking, they calmly saluted once more, eyes alight. Impulsively I reached hands out toward them, grasped their own. Then they had turned, were striding swiftly out of the control room and through the passages beyond down to the space-doors, and through the closed space-gangways to their own three cruisers. As our space-doors clanged shut once more, the gangways of those cruisers folded down upon them, and then the three craft had smoothly moved back to take up a position just behind my own.

I turned to the round opening of the speech-instrument beside me, spoke a brief order into it, and in answer to that order the thousand cruisers behind us smoothly and quickly massed into space-squadron formation, a long slender wedge with my own cruiser at the apex and those of the three Sub-Chiefs just behind me. Another brief order and the Canopan pilot beside me was opening the controls, our cruiser and the great triangle of massed cruisers behind us moving smoothly forward toward the crimson-gleaming point in the blackness ahead, our generators throbbing louder and louder as we slipped forward at swiftly mounting speed. We were on our way toward the great comet, and our struggle for the life of our universe had begun!

THE voice of Gor Han came clearly from the speech-instrument as I stepped into the control room, days later. "Comet dead ahead, sir," he announced.

But my own eyes were already on the scene ahead. "Yes," I told him, "another hour will bring us to the coma's edge."

For before us now, bulking crimson and mighty and monstrous in the heavens ahead, glowed the giant comet toward which for the last nine days our thousand ships had been flashing. On and on we had rushed toward it at unnumbered light-speeds, through the vast ether-currents that raged here in space outside the galaxy, past regions of strange and deadly force which we but glimpsed and which we gave a wide berth, on into the endless outer void until our galaxy had shrunk to a small swarm of blinking light-points in the darkness behind us. Almost, in those days, we had forgotten the existence of that galaxy, so centered was our attention upon the sinister crimson glory of the comet ahead. Through those days it had largened swiftly to our eyes, from a light-point to a small red disk, and then to a larger disk, and finally to the gigantic circle of crimson-glowing light that loomed before us now, and toward which I and the three Sub-Chiefs in the cruisers just behind my own now gazed.

Tremendous as it was, the great comet's light was not dazzling to our eyes, being a deep crimson, a dusky, lurid red, and gazing forward I could make out its general features. The spherical coma was what lay full before us, a gigantic ball of crimson-glowing electrical energy that I knew, as in all comets, was hollow, holding in the space inside it the solid matter of the nucleus. Behind it, too, I could glimpse the vast faint-glowing tail streaming outward behind the onrushing coma. The light of that tail, I knew, was but faint electrical energy shot back from the terrific coma and propelling that coma forward through space like a great rocket streaming fire behind it. The small comets of our own galaxy, I knew, moved in fixed though irregular orbits about our stars, and thus would often move about a star or sun in the

opposite direction to that in which their tail was pushing them, simply because even the impetus of the tail could not make them leave their fixed orbits. This giant comet of outer space, though, I knew, moved in no orbit whatever through the empty immensities of the outer void, and so would always race through space in a direction opposite to that of its tail, the energy of the mighty coma shot forth in the tail like the powder of a great rocket, propelling it irresistibly forward with terrific momentum and force.

The glowing coma seemed countless millions of miles across, the still vaster tail behind appearing to extend limitlessly backward into the void. Gazing toward it, with something of awe, I was silent for a time, then turned to the speech-instrument. "We'll slant our ships up over the coma," I ordered, "and reconnoiter it for an opening."

Our massed cruisers shot steeply upward at the order, but as they did so the voice of Jurt Tul came doubtfully from the opening before me. "You think we can find an opening through which we can penetrate inside the coma?" he asked.

"We'll have to," I told him. "We've only a few score hours left to get inside and bring our force-beams to bear on the nucleus."

The Aldebaranian's voice came slowly in answer. "That coma," he said; "it seems impossible that we can ever get inside it——"

There was silence as I gazed ahead toward the great comet, whose coma was now indeed a terrific spectacle. An immense lurid sea of crimson light, it seemed to fill all the universe, shifting slowly downward and beneath us as our thousand cruisers hummed up at a steep slant over it. We were racing toward it at a full million miles above its level, the rim of the huge sphere of crimson light creeping across the black void

beneath us as comet and cruisers rushed closer to each other. Gazing down toward the great coma, its lurid crimson light drenching all in the control room, I heard startled exclamations beneath as even the imperturbable members of my cruiser's cosmopolitan crew were awed by the comet's magnitude and terror. Then, when the titanic crimson sphere of the coma seemed squarely beneath our rushing ships, I uttered a word into the instrument before me, and immediately our cruiser and the thousand behind it had halted, had turned squarely about, and then at reduced speed were racing along at the same speed as the comet, hanging above it and accompanying it on its mad rush through the void toward our galaxy.

Below us now lay the giant red-glowing globe of the coma, racing on toward the far swarm of light-points that was our galaxy. And now, gazing intently down into its far-flung glowing mass, I strained my eyes for sight of some opening, some crevice in that mighty body of glowing electrical energy that would permit us to penetrate to the space inside it. Yet no such opening could be seen, no tiniest break in the coma's lurid sphere. A single, unbroken and gigantic globe of crimson luminescence, it hung beneath us, as we rushed through the void, the vast fan-tail of faintest crimson light streaming out behind. Through all our days of tense flight outward toward the comet I had hoped against hope that in its coma would be some break or opening, however small, that would permit us to penetrate inside, but now my last hope, and the galaxy's last hope, was shattered by the glowing, unbroken mass of this gigantic comet's coma. With sinking heart I gazed down toward it as our triangle of ships sped on above it.

Gor Han's deep voice sounded from the instrument before me. "There seems no opening in the coma at all,

Khel Ken," he said. "And it is instant annihilation for anything to venture into that coma's electrical energy!"

"We'll have to drop lower and cruise about the coma's surface," I told the Betelgeusan. "We *must* get inside, somehow!"

With the words our cruiser began to sink smoothly downward, still holding its forward flight above the comet, the massed ships behind following steadily in our course. Down—down—by thousands of miles a moment we sank, down until the giant coma beneath seemed the only thing in all the universe, glowing from horizon to horizon like an awful aurora of crimson death. An inconceivably colossal sea of lurid electrical energy, a giant deadly sphere of glowing force which it were annihilation for anything to touch, it stretched beneath us, broadening still as we came closer toward it. Down—down—

A cry from Najus Nar sounded beside me. "Those cubes!" the insect-man was shouting. "Racing ahead of the comet there!"

Swiftly I gazed down toward the foremost rim of the great, onrushing coma, and saw what he had seen. Racing along a few thousand miles in front of the comet, separated from each other by great spaces, there sped score upon score of mighty metal cubes, glinting in the coma's lurid light! Distant as they were, I could glimpse them clearly through our telescopic windows, extending in a great chain or line around the comet's head, and rushing before it through the deeps of space. And there were openings in the sides of these speeding cubes, transparent openings from which gushed pure white light! For they were ships! Colossal cube-ships flashing on with the great comet on its thundering rush toward our universe!

"Cube-ships!" It was Gor Han's shout that echoed my thought.

"Cube-ships!" Najus Nar too was crying. "Scouting before the comet!"

"And that means that these cube-ships are from the comet's heart!" I cried excitedly; "from its——"

My exclamation had been cut short by simultaneous sharp cries from Gor Han and Jurt Tul.

"The cubes have seen us!" they shouted. "They're coming up toward us!"

For there, far below us, the great chain of mighty cube-ships had suddenly condensed, shortened, and they had all, a hundred or more in number, massed swiftly together as though in answer to some sudden alarm and were driving up toward us! At velocity incredible they shot up toward us, while we gazed stunned; then as they flashed nearer there flashed up from the foremost of them a long, slender shaft of crimson light like that of the comet below, a terrific bolt of electrical energy like that of the coma beneath, which struck one of our cruisers squarely and instantly annihilated it. And as we gazed stupefied toward it in that dazing moment, from the upleaping cubes beneath score upon score of other crimson deadly bolts were stabbing up toward us!

2

"**B**ATTLE formation!"

Even as the deadly crimson bolts had shot up from the cubes toward us I had yelled the order into the instrument before me, and it was all that saved us from disaster in that moment, since in the split-second before the glowing bolts could reach us our cruisers had shifted their formation suddenly, only a score of them being struck by those glowing shafts. In that moment our cruisers had shifted into three long parallel lines, and then, as the massed cubes beneath flashed ever upward toward us, their glowing bolts blasting our cruisers, I

had shouted another order into the speech-instrument above the great din beneath.

"The force-beams!" I cried. "Turn them on these cube-ships—push them down into the coma!"

There came a deep shout from Gor Han at the order, and from Jurt Tul's ship there issued through my instrument the amphibian's cool laugh. The next instant there were shooting downward from all our cruisers the great force-beams, broad beams, not of light but of darkness, of utter blackness and absence of light, of great force that was invisible itself but whose terrific power drove even the light-vibrations from its path and so made the force-beams seem beams of utter blackness. Down toward the uprushing cube-ships the black force-beams stabbed, and as they smote among those cubes those that were struck by them were driven suddenly downward with inconceivable power. Down, down, struggling vainly against the irresistible force-beams that pushed them, down, down until in a moment more those struck had been driven into the crimson sphere of the mighty coma beneath, vanishing in its immense lurid sea and there meeting annihilation instantly in spurts of leaping light!

Thus a full score of the hundred cube-ships below had been forced down to death in the comet in a single moment, but the rest were still leaping toward us and before we could loose more of the deadly force-beams they were just beneath us, among us, their crimson bolts blasting lightning-like about them, leaping from cube to cruiser. High above the titanic thundering comet, like flies above a sun, cubes and cruisers whirled and struck and ran, with crimson bolts and black force-beams stabbing thick through the void about us. I heard the shouts of Gor Han and Jurt Tul and Najus Nar from the instrument before me, screamed my orders into

its opening as my own cruiser soared through the wild mêlée with black beams whirling. I glimpsed one of the cubes rocketing toward us, looming in an instant to immense size, a colossal metal cube thousands of feet square, through the transparent sections of which I could glimpse for a split-second the white-lit interior, a mass of intricate mechanisms among which clung the beings who manned it, black, shapeless masses that I but half glimpsed in that mad moment. Then from the cube's great side a glowing red bolt shot toward us, but a moment too late, since by then our cruiser had shot upward and our black force-beam had smote down upon the cube-ship to drive it into the glowing sea of death below!

About us, too, all our cruisers were speeding upward, in answer to my orders, and before the cubes could check our maneuver we were over them, all our dark force-beams smiting from above. Struck by those beams, all but a scant half-dozen of the remaining cubes drove down to doom in the coma's fiery sea, before they could rise to our level to resume the battle. The half-dozen left seemed to hover motionless a moment, then turned and sped away from us, back over the coma's crimson-glowing sphere toward the great tail of the comet, streaming out behind!

"We've beaten them!" Gor Han was bellowing. "They're trying to get away——"

"After them!" I yelled into the speech-instrument. "They're trying to get back inside the coma—they must have some way of getting inside!"

But my order had been unnecessary, for even as the half-dozen great cubes flashed away, our cruisers, still some eight hundred in number, had turned and were racing after them like unleashed hounds after their prey. Downward and backward we

raced after them, low across the glowing surface of the great comet, over the deadly coma to where the faint, vast tail issued from it. Ahead we could see the six cubes fleeing onward, at a speed equal to our own, and the sight of them caused us to open to the last notch the power of our throbbing generators for that wild pursuit. Within moments, at that tremendous speed, there came into view ahead the rear rim of the coma's colossal glowing sphere, with the fainter glow that marked the currents of the great tail streaming back from the rim into the void of space.

Swift as were the great cubes ahead, though, our great cruisers of the Interstellar Patrol, speediest of all the galaxy's ships, were proving now to be swifter, since slowly, steadily, we had begun to overhaul those fleeing shapes. I heard Gor Han's deep voice, excited as always in battle, from the speech-instruments, heard Jurt Ttl's calm comments as we drove nearer the flying cubes, heard Najus Nar's eager cries. The cubes were passing out now from over the great coma, on over the vast tail, to my puzzlement. I had thought they were striving to gain the interior of the comet, but instead they were racing away from it, while with every moment we were drawing nearer to them. Then, just when it seemed that another moment's flight would bring us upon them, they halted abruptly in space, hovering above the faint, vast-streaming tail, and then plunged straight down into the mighty currents of the tail, and were moving back, *inside* that tail, toward the great coma behind us!

"The tail!" cried Najus Nar. "They're going up the tail itself and into the coma's heart!"

But I too had seen and had understood all in that moment, had understood what I had not dreamed before, that the only opening through the

great coma to the hollow at its heart lay at the coma's rear, and could be reached only by struggling up to it through the awful currents of the tail! These mighty cubes, I saw, had been constructed in that shape especially to resist and endure those terrible, back-sweeping ether-currents set up by the comet's rush through the void, terrific currents glowing with the electrical energy shot backward and dissipated in driving the comet on. The cubes thus specially constructed could brave those colossal currents where weaker craft would be battered to fragments. All this I understood and weighed, in that tense moment, and then had made decision and was shouting back into the instrument before me.

"Down with our ships, too, then!" I cried. "*We're going up the tail after them!*"

I heard an exclamation from Gor Han, an answering shout from Najus Nar, and then my cruiser and all the cruisers behind us were dipping steeply downward, plunging into the vast and faint-glowing tail! The next moment was one of blind, utter confusion, for as we plunged into the terrific currents our cruisers were whirled up and backward as though by gigantic hands, thrown helplessly like leaves in a terrific wind, cruiser smashing against cruiser and destroying each other there by dozens in that wild moment. Then as the pilot beside me clung to the controls, bringing its bows around to face those mighty currents, heading toward the coma, our ship steadied, while those about it steadied likewise. We had lost half a hundred ships in that first terrific plunge, but neither my own nor those of the three Sub-Chiefs had been injured, and now we were moving slowly up the great currents of the tail toward the coma. The tail about us was to the eyes but a great region of faint light, but far ahead of us there glowed like a crimson

wall of light across the heavens the mighty coma, and against it we could make out the dark square shapes of the cube-ships we pursued, likewise fighting their way toward the coma through those terrific currents.

I THINK now that the moments which I followed, as we struggled in pursuit of those cubes, were almost the most terrible I ever experienced, moments in which it seemed impossible that our ships could breast such awful currents and live. About us the currents roared deafeningly, thrilling through every portion of our ships, sweeping against us with titanic power. On and on we struggled, veering to take advantage of weaker currents, blundering into great maelstroms, swaying, plunging, fighting on, with the coma's glowing wall looming ever closer ahead. I heard Gor Han's anxious comments from the instrument before me, glimpsed cruisers here and there behind my own collapsing and sweeping backward, knew that not for long could we fight against those currents and live.

The coma was very near, now, a giant wall of crimson light across the heavens, and now I made out a dark circle within that glowing wall, a circular opening rapidly largening to our eyes and toward which the flying cubes ahead were struggling.

"The opening!" Gor Han was shouting, his voice coming to me even above the awful din of the currents about us.

"Straight toward it after those cubes!" I cried. "Our ships can't stand this much longer!"

Now ahead I could see the cube-ships we pursued struggling toward that opening slower and slower, fighting the currents which were most powerful here where they issued from the mighty coma ahead. A moment more, though, and they had reached it, and vanished inside, while we in turn were fighting through the titanic

sweep of those currents toward it. On—on—the currents that raged against us had become awful in strength, seeming to clutch at us with supreme power at this last moment. The opening loomed larger ahead, now, a dark circular passageway remaining miraculously open and unchanged through that electrical sea whose deadly crimson mass formed its walls. On—on—it seemed that never could we reach it, so terribly did the currents sweep about us. Yard by yard, foot by foot, we crept forward toward it, were on its brink, seemed to hesitate there for an instant before being swept backward and away, and then with a supreme last effort of our throbbing generators we crept forward out of the grip of those gigantic currents and into the open passageway!

Now all about us there raged the glowing electrical sea of the colossal coma, into the deadly mass of which the passage led, a straight passage which I knew could only be artificially made and maintained. Far ahead in that light-walled passage we could glimpse the dark shapes of the cubes, fleeing still before us, and now with humming generators our cruisers leapt forward, through that tunnel of the deadly coma! Above, below, on each side, there raged the coma's electrical sea, which it were annihilation to touch, and the circular passage down which we fled was hardly wide enough to admit three of our ships abreast, yet down it at reckless speed we sped, all thought leaving us now save the wild excitement of the pursuit.

Crimson light from the hell of glowing death that raged all about us beat blood-like upon us as we drove on, yet the cries of Gor Han and Najus Nar and even the cool Jurt Tul mingled with my own from the speech-instrument, as we shot forward in pursuit of the fleeing cubes. Never, surely, was pursuit stranger than that one, the galaxy's hundreds of cruisers,

manned by every dissimilar shape to be found upon its myriad worlds, leaping forward in the narrow opening that led through a comet's deadly mass into its unglimpsed heart, after the strange cube-craft that fled on before us. A single slip of the controls for a fraction of an inch was enough to send any cruiser into the incandescent walls to death, and indeed I glimpsed cruisers among those that followed me blundering into those walls in our wild flight onward and vanishing in wild spurts of light!

Yet on and on we leapt, and shouted now as we saw the cubes ahead shooting out from the passageway into open space beyond. A moment more and we were on their tracks, were flashing out too from the encircling crimson walls of glowing death, that vanished suddenly from about us as we entered into a vast region of open space, the immense open space that lay at the giant comet's heart! Far, far away from us there stretched the walls of the gigantic coma that encompassed this open space, above and below, enclosing all that space within their deadly electrical sea. This, though, we had expected and it was not this that held our attention in that stunning moment. It was the comet's nucleus, hanging at the center of that space. For that nucleus was a mass of smoothly revolving worlds!

Worlds! Worlds there at the comet's heart, worlds that were disk-shaped instead of spherical, a dozen or more of which revolved in a great ring about a single world that was larger than any of the others, and that hung motionless! Over those revolving worlds, down toward that central disk-world the cube-ships ahead of us were fleeing, and as we shot down after them I saw that it and the rim of other disks, though not illuminated by the dusky crimson glow of the encompassing comet, were

bathed in light, pure white light that seemed to emanate from themselves! And as we rushed down toward the surface of that central world I glimpsed upon it smooth dark ways and streets, on each side of which were what seemed great, smooth-sided shallow pits; glimpsed multitudes of dark, shapeless figures that moved to and fro along those streets and ways, tending great mechanisms set up in masses here and there along them; glimpsed a single great circular plaza or smooth-floored clearing set amid those streets and pits and massed mechanisms, at the center of which loomed a great, truncated dark pyramid upon whose flat summit rested some big disk-shaped mechanism. Then in that same flashing glimpse I saw that which drove all else from my mind, saw from the surface of all this mighty world a tremendous swarm of great cube-ships that was driving up toward the ships we pursued, and toward ourselves!

"Cube-ships!" Gor Han was crying. "Cube-ships in thousands, and they're attacking us!"

"Back!" I cried. "Back up and outward! We have no chance against these thousands!"

But before our cruisers could turn, before we could halt and slant back upward, the thousands of leaping cubes from beneath were upon us! Then about us for a wild moment was conflict indescribable, colossal cubes rushing by thousands upon our hundreds of gleaming cruisers, crimson electrical bolts and black force-beams whirling and stabbing in wild destruction. Cubes thronged thick about us as our cruiser leapt upward, and then the thrumming of the force-beams of our ship sounded as they drove paths of instant devastation through the ruck of battle about us. From the speech-instrument there came above the din of battle a wild cry from Gor Han, and I saw that a crimson bolt had grazed past his

cruiser's stern, warping its whole side with its terrific power and sending his craft swirling helplessly down to the world below! I cried out at that sight, then saw Najus Nar's craft slant downward even as my own struggled wildly with the cubes about it, saw the insect-man's cruiser drive right and left with force-beams, as other cubes from beneath rushed up toward it. Then as it shot downward among them to reach Gor Han's falling ship it had crashed glancingly along the side of one of the uprushing cubes, and with its prow a twisted wreck of metal was whirling down also!

"Gor Han! Najus Nar!" I shouted, as I saw them fall; then a deadly bolt of blinding crimson fire flashed past our cruiser's walls, missing us only by inches; I yelled crazily as the cube above that had loosed it was driven smashingly into the battle whirl about us by our swift-leaping force-beam. But about us now our cruisers were swiftly vanishing, as the hordes of cube-ships rushed upon them! They were stabbing out with black beams to the bitter end, driving cubes down to death with those beams, yet they were fast disappearing beneath the withering hail of deadly crimson electrical bolts. But a score of cruisers remained beside me, now but a dozen, as the crimson bolts still flashed thick, Jurt Tul's ship fighting side by side with my own. Then, as but a scant five or six cruisers remained, the target of all the blasting bolts from the massed cubes about us, there penetrated through the deafening roar of battle from the speech-instrument Jurt Tul's great voice.

"Back out of the comet!" he yelled. "It's our only chance, Khel Ken—to get outside until the rest of the Patrol's cruisers arrive!"

I saw, even through my mad blood-lust at that moment, that he was right and that our only chance of further

action lay in winning clear of the comet. "Back, then!" I cried.

With the words our half-dozen cruisers zoomed upward and outward at such tremendous velocity that the deadly bolts from the thousands of cubes beneath fell short of us in our wild upward rush. Up—up—upward from that great central world we shot, and outward. The cube-ships beneath, taken by surprise for the moment, then massed also and leapt up after us. And now, a scant six cruisers remaining of all the thousands that had been our force a few minutes before, we raced out from that central world, toward the darker circle in the distant coma's wall that was the one passage to outside space. Out over the ring of revolving disk-worlds we shot, out toward that opening, out—

But what was that? That swarm of tiny, square shapes, of gleaming little cube-shapes, which even at that distance we could see had darted suddenly from one side across the dark circle of the single opening? Close-massed in a compact swarm, they had shot out from the side to halt across that opening, hanging motionless there. Cube-ships, hundreds in number, that had flashed toward that opening from one side, to hang motionless there across it, while behind us there raced after us in deadly pursuit the other cube-ship thousands! Cube-ships that hung motionless, ready, across that round opening through the great coma, and at sight of which I cried aloud once more.

"They've cut us off—they're ahead of us!" I cried. "*They've barred the one way to outside space and we're trapped here at the comet's heart!*"

3

THE moment that followed, as our ships slowed and hung motionless, with doom ahead and doom behind, was one in which the death that we had dared a score of times since reach-

ing the comet loomed full before us. The cube-ships that barred the way ahead, the thousands racing toward us from behind—these were like death's great jaws closing upon us, and for an instant I felt myself surrendering to utter despair. But then, as my eyes dropped downward, toward the ring of outer smaller disk-worlds over which we had been flashing and above which we now hung, a flicker of hope shot through me and I turned swiftly to the speech-instrument.

"Down to those worlds below!" I cried. "There's a chance that we can hide on one of them until we can get out of the comet!"

Instantly, spurred to greater swiftness by our desperate situation, our half-dozen cruisers were slanting sharply down toward one of those revolving disk-worlds. The surface of that world leapt up with terrific speed toward us as we shot recklessly downward, and I sighted cities of pits and streets and mechanisms like that of the central world upon it, cities though that did not cover all its surface as in the central world, but were scattered about it, the rest of the disk-world's surface being a tumbled mass of mighty mountains and chasmed valleys, all of barren dark rock. It was down toward one of these tremendous chasms, near the disk-world's outer edge, that we were heading, every feature of that world's surface lying plain beneath us in the strange white light that bathed all these revolving worlds. Downward into that awful chasm our cruisers shot, and as they did so I glimpsed, high above, a swarm of tiny dark cube-shapes that had halted their pursuit of us, were circling about and dropping lower as though to discover our whereabouts!

Our lives depended on finding some place of hiding in this tremendous-walled chasm, I knew, and as we arrowed down into its depths, white-lit by the same strange illumination, I

gazed swiftly about for some place of concealment. A moment the search seemed hopeless, there being nothing but the chasm's narrow floor of barren rock, its towering jagged rock sides, and then as we shot along its length I sighted a great crack or crevice in one of them, a long, crack-like opening that was large enough to admit our cruisers, and behind which could be glimpsed the dark depths of some great cavernous hollow in the rock.

"Through that crack!" I ordered swiftly, saw Jurt Tul's cruiser move quickly toward it, scraping against the crack's jagged edges as it pushed through into the dark cavern behind. Another of our cruisers followed, and then the rest, one by one, until my own was scraping inside, just as I saw the cube-ships high above dropping toward us, splitting into divisions of a dozen ships each which were slanting down over all the surface of this world in search of us, one of them heading straight toward the great chasm!

As it slanted down toward us I gazed about me, saw that our six cruisers were hanging in a dark, cavernous abyss that seemed to extend far down into the depths of this disk-world. A rocky shelf just inside the crack-opening, though, seemed large enough for us to rest our ships upon; so instantly we brought them to rest there, cutting off the generators whose humming might betray us. Then, as our space-doors opened with a slight inward hiss from the higher-pressure air of the disk's atmosphere, I stepped quickly out, found Jurt Tul and the other cruiser captains beside me, and then we had all suddenly crouched down inside the great crack's edge as a score of the great cube-ships shot down into the white-lit chasm outside.

Peering out from the cavern's dark depths we saw those cubes hanging there, then moving slowly along the

chasm's length as though in search of us. Down its length they disappeared and we breathed easier for a moment; then they reappeared, coming to rest on the chasm's floor directly beneath the opening in which we crouched, scarce a half-hundred feet below us. Tensely we watched, saw that doors were opening in those cubes' sides, creatures emerging, the comet-creatures of these strange worlds. And at sight of those creatures even our tense situation could not suppress our gasps. For they were — liquid-creatures! Creatures whose bodies were liquid instead of solid, creatures that were each but a pool of thick black liquid, flowing viscously about, in each of which pools floated two round, white blank disks, great white pupilless eyes.

We saw them flowing forth from out their cubes, saw some whose viscous bodies held what seemed tools or weapons, saw the floating eyes turned this way and that about the chasm, as though in search of us. Then a score of the strange creatures did an incomprehensible thing: they flowed together into a single liquid mass, a great black pool in which floated all their eyes, their liquid bodies mingling together! A moment they remained thus, then had separated, each from the others, and were returning to their cubes.

"Conversing!" whispered Jurt Tul beside me. "It's their method of conversing, of exchanging thoughts—to mingle their liquid bodies one with another!"

I knew the amphibian was right, and shuddered involuntarily at the thing we had seen. The cubes' doors had closed now, and the cubes were lifting upward from the chasm's floor. One, more suspicious apparently than the rest, hovered a moment outside the crack within which we crouched, and we shrank back, suddenly tense, but after a moment's inspection it too had driven up after the others, which

passed from sight high above, searching slowly across the disk-world's surface in a strange formation as though following some discussed plan. We breathed easier, then, standing erect, and I turned quickly to Jurt Tul.

"Our only chance is to get out of the comet and wait for the five thousand Patrol cruisers that were to come after us," I told him. "But we can't leave the comet with Gor Han and Najus Nar prisoned in it!"

The great amphibian shook his head. "We could venture back to the comet-city on the central world to attempt to find them," he said, "but in this brilliant white light we'd be seen and destroyed at once."

I was silent, for I knew that it was so, and broodingly I considered that light, whose white illumination filled all the great chasm outside, beating faintly even into the cavern, yet seeming to have no visible source whatever. And then, even as I gazed upon it, that light died! It seemed to gray, to darken, and then had vanished altogether, within a moment, while at the same moment there beat faintly through the air from far away a great clanging note like that of a giant gong. The chasm outside, the world and worlds about us, lay now in dusk, their only illumination the lurid, dark crimson light of the comet's glowing coma, a red disk that gave to the barren rocky world about us an inconceivably weird appearance.

"That gong!" Jurt Tul was saying. "You heard it? It sounded when the light died—it means that these comet-creatures maintain and regulate their own day and night!"

"That white light," I said; "you mean that it's made by them, turned off for their night?"

He nodded quickly. "It must be. They can use the coma's great electrical energy to produce that light at will, just as they use that energy for their crimson bolts. They must turn it off and on at regular intervals, to

produce their day and night, their activity-periods and rest-periods."

"But then we can venture back to the comet-city—back to the central world for Gor Han and Najus Nar!" I exclaimed, and he nodded.

"Yes, but we'd best wait longer, since now the cube-ships' search will be going on, even in this dusk, and we'd have small chance of escaping them."

FOR all my impatience I saw the wisdom of Jurt Tul's suggestion and so composed myself to a longer period of waiting. So hour followed hour while we crouched there in the great crack in the chasm's wall. Far above we could see the crimson coma, against which there came and went now and then divisions of cube-ships, still searching, searching for the fugitives who had escaped them. My thoughts turned to Gor Han and to Najus Nar, prisoned in the comet-city, and then to our own predicament. But hours remained now in which the comet might be turned aside, and unless we could escape from it, could meet the five thousand cruisers that were racing toward it from the galaxy and lead them inside, no power in all space and time could turn the comet aside from the galaxy. And I could not, would not, attempt to escape from the comet without having first learned the fate, at least, of Gor Han and Najus Nar.

At last I stood upright, turned to Jurt Tul. "The cube-ships above seem to have slackened their search," I told him, "and now's the time for our venture. We've had hours now of this dusk, and the light of their day may be turned on at any time."

He nodded, then pointed out that his cruiser had been damaged somewhat in the battle over the central world. So that it might not delay us we transferred his crew from it to the others, Jurt Tul entering my own cruiser with me, while the damaged

one we left there on the cavern's shelf. Then, after we had closed our space-doors, our cruisers moved gently out of the narrow opening, rising swiftly up over the disk-world from the chasm's depths. That disk-world's surface lay beneath us, now, illumined by the coma's far crimson glow alone, a lurid luminescence that picked out streaks and veins of metal here and there in the jagged rock. It was plain, indeed, that these worlds were meteoric in nature, and had been formed and set spinning in this orderly fashion by the comet-creatures themselves.

For the time, though, we heeded not these things, intent on the scene ahead as our five cruisers shot silently through the lurid dusk toward the central world. Far away, now and then, against the coma's baleful glow, we caught sight of cube-ships moving still restlessly about in search of us, and once a party of these seemed to take up our course, to follow us. These, though, veered away in the dusk behind us, and then in a moment more we had passed above that ring of outer disk-worlds, and Jurt Tul and I, gazing forward from the control room, could make out the great, motionless mass of the central world beneath us, the world that was our goal. No light gleamed upon its darkened surface, lying in a weird picture there in the coma's crimson dusk. As we shot down toward it I saw vaguely in that dusk the great, massed machines here and there, the smooth streets, the enigmatic pits about them, and then the great clearing at the flat world's center.

"That clearing!" I whispered to Jurt Tul. "It was near it that Gor Han's and Najus Nar's ships fell—we'll land near it."

Our cruisers now were arrowing smoothly down toward one of the broader streets some distance from the clearing, since we could see now

that on all the world below there moved only an occasional dark liquid-creature, the throngs we had seen before having unaccountably disappeared. Here and there above it moved a cube-ship, but none of these glimpsed us through the dusk, and in a moment more our cruisers had landed gently upon one of the smooth streets. There Jurt Tul and I swiftly stepped forth, for we had decided that we two alone could explore the comet-city more silently than a larger party. At once the cruisers swept back to wait for us in the dusk above, ready to make an attempt at escape from the comet should we be discovered. Then the amphibian and I moved swiftly along that silent street toward the great central plaza.

On each side of us loomed great massed machines at which we merely glanced as we hurried on. As we passed one of the pits that had puzzled me, though, I stepped to its edge, gazed down, then shrank back in horror! For in that shallow, smooth-walled pit there lay what seemed a great pool of thick black liquid unguessably deep, a pool formed by the liquid bodies of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of the liquid comet-creatures that had poured into it! I could glimpse the white eyes floating in it, here and there, but there was no other sign of life or movement in the mass, and as I saw that and thought of the rows upon rows of other similar pits that extended across the comet-city, I understood, and turned swiftly to Jurt Tul.

"Sleeping!" I exclaimed. "In their night, their rest-period, they must all pour into these pits together—mingling their liquid bodies!"

Swiftly we shrank back from the great pit, moved on toward the clearing. Massed machines, grim and gleaming and towering, loomed all about us, half seen in the crimson dusk, and we passed scores of the great, liquid-filled pits in which slept

the comet-creatures, but there was no sign of our two friends. Had they been destroyed? Dread filled me, dread intensified because I realized that soon the comet-creatures would be ending their night, and turning on their white light of day, discovering us there on their world. Then, abruptly, Jurt Tul jerked me back from my forward stride, crouching silently with me upon the street, behind a mass of great mechanisms. For out of the darkness to our right had come the sound of something moving, something approaching us! Silently, tensely, we crouched there, and saw a dark shape moving stealthily down one of the branching streets toward us. It had turned from us, toward the great clearing ahead, when unexpectedly, as we crouched, my arm had brushed against the great machine beside us and touched something that moved beneath the touch, with a loud metallic clinking. Instantly that dark shape ahead had turned, and then was leaping straight toward us!

Before we could rise to meet it the rush of it had borne us downward, and as it did so I realized with a wild thrill that it was *not* a liquid-creature but a great and warm and fur-covered being, many-limbed, that had attacked us! Even as that fact penetrated into my brain our struggle had abruptly ceased, and we were staggering erect, Jurt Tul and I grasping the other.

"Gor Han!" I exclaimed. "It's you!"

The great Betelgeusan's fur-covered body and strange features were clearly visible to us now as he grasped our own hands, his eyes wide.

"Khel Ken! Jurt Tul!" he whispered. "I thought you destroyed in the battle!"

"We hid—escaped," I explained to him swiftly. "But you, Gor Han—how have you escaped?—and where's Najus Nar?"

He was silent a moment, then suddenly dragged us down into the deeper shadow of the great machines beside us. There, with the lurid light of the coma on his strange features, he spoke swiftly.

"Najus Nar is—living," he said, "but I will tell you what came upon us. You saw our ships fall in the battle over the city here, crashing down into it. At once these liquid comet-creatures were upon us, most of our crews having been killed in the crash, and but a few were left; but these being injured, too, they annihilated them with crimson bolts before we realized it, leaving but Najus Nar and myself, whom they wished, apparently, to question. Us they secured by metal bonds to one of the great machines, then came to us with little metal models, made of what seemed plastic gleaming metal, which could change instantaneously through a myriad different forms at their operation, and which they used for a rough communication with us. And through these and the things they explained to us, we learned, Najus Nar and I, something of the purpose and the past of these comet-creatures.

"Eons they had dwelt upon the central worlds of this giant comet that roamed the outer void, shaping those worlds to their will as it flashed on. They had used the coma's electrical energy for their own weapons, and had used it to produce light-vibrations, a white light which they turned on and off for their day and night. The coma's energy, indeed, was the source of all their world's activities, but as their giant comet plunged on through space, that energy, ever shot backward in the tail that drove the comet on, was dissipated faster and faster, the coma waning and dying as all comets wane and die in time. But one thing could save them: to absorb into the coma vast quantities of matter, which would be converted instantly into electrical energy to replenish

the coma. Not far from the great comet at that time loomed a vast universe of suns, and if the comet were to crash through the universe its suns and worlds would replenish their waning coma and save their comet from death. They needed but to change the comet's course, to send it toward the universe instead of passing it, and to do this they set up a great comet-control.

"This comet-control was set on the top of a truncated pyramid in a clearing at the central world's center. It was a great horizontal disk, set parallel to their disk world, with a pointer that could be moved at will around the disk-dial. The position of the pointer, by means of great projectors to which it was connected, controlled the position of the comet's tail. If the pointer was at the dial's rear the tail would be shot forth from the great coma's rear also, driving it forward through space. If they turned the pointer to the left the tail would shoot from the coma's left, driving the comet to the right. They could thus, by means of the comet-control and the great projectors which controlled the tail's position, drive the comet in any direction at will. The only thing they could not do with it was to reverse the comet-control, to shoot out a new tail opposite to the old one, since the momentum of the old one and the opposite momentum or pressure of the new one would crush and annihilate the coma and its worlds between their great pressures. They could drive the comet to right or left at will, though, which was all that they needed, since now they drove it toward the universe of suns near them.

"Onward the giant comet drove to that universe, and soon crashed through it, its suns and worlds being sucked into the gigantic coma and annihilated there, converted instantly into electrical energy which restored the waning coma's glory. So onward through space with renewed power it

flashed, through the great void between the galaxies, until ages later when its coma was again waning they drove it toward another universe, crashed through it likewise. And so through the eons, as ever the comet's glory, the coma's power, has waned, they have driven it through another universe, destroying that universe to restore it. On through the limitless void of outer space they have driven it, a cosmic vampire looting the life of universes to restore its own! And now, when the comet's glory has again waned, they have turned it toward our own galaxy, to destroy it as they have done countless others. And within less than a scant half-dozen hours now the comet will have thundered so close to our galaxy that no power in existence can turn it aside!

"All this we heard from the comet-creatures' communication with us, and then they proposed that we cast in our lot with them, forgetting our doomed universe, and help them build great cruisers and force-beam apparatus like those with which we had fought them. I refused, of course, not wishing to live under any conditions after our galaxy's death, but to my horror Najus Nar accepted the proposal! He joined them, not listening to my frantic words, and went away with them, leaving me in despair. Then when the gong sounded across their worlds that marked the end of the white light and the beginning of this night, I began to work frantically with the metal bonds that held me to the great machine, twisting and untwisting them until at last, but minutes ago, I managed to break them. They had counted on the bonds holding me, and had left no guard over me, so at once I started off toward the central clearing, toward the great comet-control, for a desperate last attempt at turning the comet aside with it. I heard you crouching there, thought you

comet-creatures and sprang at you, and the rest you know."

WHEN Gor Han's deep whisper had ceased we were silent a moment, and surely never did stranger trio crouch in stranger place than we three, earth-man and amphibian Aldebaranian and great fur-clad Betelgeusan, there in the crimson dusk of the comet-city, all about us the pits that held its countless liquid-creatures and above us the glowing red coma which encompassed this world and was driving on toward our galaxy's doom. At last I broke the silence.

"Najus Nar with the comet-creatures!" I whispered. "It's impossible! In all its record there have been no traitors in the Interstellar Patrol!"

Gor Han looked steadily, compassionately, at me. "It is so, Khel Ken," he said. "I would not believe it had I not seen it myself."

"Najus Nar!" I repeated, again, then gathered myself. "There's but one thing to do," I said swiftly, "and that's for us three to make the attempt you planned, Gor Han, to get to the comet-control in the clearing and turn it, then destroy it before they can turn it back!"

We rose, paused. "There are comet-guards at the pyramid's base and summit, I know," said Gor Han, "but if we can overcome them before this night-period ends we'll succeed!"

Swiftly we moved forward, now, down the street through the dusk toward the great clearing. Mighty machines looming in the red dusk on each side of us, dark pits yawning between them in which the comet-hordes lay silent, glowing crimson coma that swung above—these made an inconceivably weird scene about us through which we three, a weird and dissimilar enough trio in that lurid dusk, moved rapidly on.

Once we saw a few of the liquid-creatures flowing across one of the streets ahead, shrank back until they had disappeared, then moved swiftly on. One or two cube-ships slid by above, too, but these did not spy us, and in a few minutes more we had emerged from the mass of machines and pits into the great flat-floored circular plaza at the city's center, the truncated pyramid rising vaguely from it in the crimson dusk.

"The guards!" whispered Gor Han. "There at the pyramid's base!"

I gazed, saw that a great notched stair or flight of narrow steps ran up the pyramid's side, and that at its foot were some four dark liquid-shapes, lying motionless, but with weapons of some sort, bolt-containers I did not doubt, held in the grasp of their viscous fluid bodies. A moment we hesitated, then crept out across the clearing toward them. They seemed not aware of our approach, and still nearer we crept stealthily, approaching them from a side, until just when we were within yards, within feet of them, one seemed to flow swiftly toward us for an instant, then back, at the same time training his deadly weapon upon us! Before he could loose the crashing bolts from it, though, we had sprung upon them!

The combat that followed at the pyramid's base was the most horrible, I think, that ever I engaged in. I had grasped at the body of one of the things but instantly felt the viscous liquid body withdraw from my grasp, flow away from me, while I struggled in vain for some hold upon it. Then I glimpsed Gor Han with his four great arms gripping one of the viscous things and hurling it against the pyramid's side before it could evade his grasp, shattering it into liquid black splashes there. The thing I struggled with had gripped me in turn, now, and was like fluid steel in the strength with which it

held me. I felt a powerful viscous arm tightening about my neck, while others pinioned my arms, felt that grasp tightening, strangling me, and then it was abruptly torn from me as Gor Han lifted and flung it likewise! I rose, staggering, to see that of the four comet-creatures only black splashes here and there about us remained, Gor Han and Jurt Tul having annihilated them with their mighty limbs.

"Up to the pyramid's summit!" I choked, stumbling toward the stair's base. "We've a chance to win yet!"

The others were rushing toward the stair with me, and then suddenly, as we set foot upon it, we stopped short. For in the air about us, sounding out across all the central world and the worlds about it, had clanged the note of a mighty gong! I heard Gor Han and Jurt Tul cry out at that sound, but in the next instant brilliant white light had sprung into being about us, the light of the comet-creatures' day, suddenly turned on, bathing all things in their world in its revealing glare! And as we staggered there almost blinded by that brilliance, from the streets about us comet-creatures were flowing into the great clearing, liquid black comet-creatures in countless hordes from the pits of the mighty city. Even as they poured into the clearing they saw us, those on the pyramid's summit had also glimpsed us, and then from above and from all about the comet-creatures in countless thousands were rushing upon us!

4

THERE was a wild cry from Gor Han. "They've come out—it's the end of their night! And the end for us!"

The end for us! It seemed so in that instant, the great hordes of comet-creatures flowing in toward us from all the clearing's sides, from the pyramid's summit down toward us,

the suddenly aroused cube-ships darting across the city toward us from far away. Then, even in that split-second of terror, I saw rushing toward us among those liquid-hordes a figure at sight of which I forgot even the doom that was upon us, an erect, many-limbed, familiar insect-figure as tall almost as myself, at sight of which I uttered a great cry.

"Najus Nar!" My great shout reached him even across the wild confusion and din of that moment, and I saw him gaze full toward us, his strange face expressionless, then rush on toward us without sign of recognition, one with the hordes of comet-creatures about him! I heard a gasp of unbelief as Jurt Tul beside me saw also, heard the crazy yell of great Gor Han as with eyes crimson he stepped forward to throw himself against those onrushing comet-creatures, then was conscious that great dark shapes had swooped down from behind us, hovering momentarily beside us. They were our five cruisers!

Their space-doors were already wide, and in the next instant, just before the comet-creatures were upon us, we had tumbled inside, were rocketing upward above the city pursued by scores of brilliant crimson bolts, two of which found their marks and sent two of our ships into flaring death. The cruiser into which we three had rushed, though, and the other two remaining ones, were racing up now above the white-lit central world, with the countless cubes rising swiftly after us, forming in a great crescent-formation behind us as they flashed after us across the ringed worlds toward the coma's wall!

"They're going to drive us straight into the coma itself!" cried Gor Han above the din of our generators as we flung madly on.

I saw in the same moment that it was so, that the great crescent of thousands of cube-ships that had risen to destroy us were not overhauling us,

behind, but were driving us onward without chance of escape sidewise or downward, this time. The glowing wall loomed before us, and the single circular opening in that wall was guarded still by hundreds of other cube-ships, hanging in a solid mass across it. We could not escape through that opening, even had we desired escape, nor could we evade the relentless pursuit behind us, and inevitably within seconds more we would be driven into instant annihilation! Driven to our own deaths by the cubes behind us! This I saw, and in that instant of cold despair could have plunged on into that annihilating death, but then wild anger surged up in me and I whirled to Gor Han and Jurt Tul and the pilot beside them.

"Drive straight toward the opening!" I shouted. "Straight into the cube-ships there! If this is the end we'll take some of them, at least, with us!"

A fierce cry from the Betelgeusan, a reckless laugh from the amphibian, answered me as our three ships shot forward in that moment like things of light toward the cube-ships massed across the opening. Nearer we flashed toward them, nearer toward the hundreds of crimson bolts which in another moment would blast us, nearer—but look! look! Those hundreds of waiting ships had turned suddenly from us, had turned about and disregarding us were loosing their crimson bolts into the great passage-opening through the coma behind them, were falling back toward us from that opening, with red bolts blasting toward it! And then out of that opening after them came the things at which they fired, mass upon mass of long, shining shapes, of great, long *cruisers*, that burst forth from the opening in hundreds, in thousands, loosing upon the battling cubes a myriad of black shafts of the force-beams which in a moment more had

driven them down and back in shattered masses of wreckage!

"Cruisers! Cruisers of the Interstellar Patrol!"

We were all shouting madly, then. Cruisers, the five thousand cruisers that had been sent out after our own thousand and that now, at the last, had found their way inside the comet in time to save us! They were shooting toward our own, massing about us, and then as from our bows flashed the signal that was mine as Chief of the Patrol, they were massing swiftly behind us, battle-formation again in long parallel lines, with our own ship at their head!

"Back to the central world!" I cried, my eyes upon the time dial set before me. "We've minutes left yet to get to that comet-control!"

Cruisers massed together, we were leaping back, now, back toward the spinning worlds, and toward the great crescent-formation of cube-ships that faced us now. Before those thousands of cube-ships had grasped what had happened, before they could turn, could change their formation, our compact mass had driven into them. Then cruiser thousands and cube-ship thousands were spinning and striking and mingling together, smiting with black force-beams and crimson bolts in titanic battle inside the tremendous electrical coma, whirling and stabbing in awful combat, the comet-creatures for their comet and we for our universe! Comet and galaxy had come to grips at last as those two huge fleets caught and struck at each other!

Cubes and cruisers swirled and ran about us as our own cruiser struggled through the wild ruck of the battle, our own black beams stabbing to smash back cubes before and beside us, while through the speech-instruments before me I cried orders to my mighty fleet, directing the masses of cruisers that leapt and struck and soared at the great square cubes

about us. All space outside seemed a single giant mass of struggling cubes and cruisers, cut across by blasting crimson bolt and ebon beam, yet ever we were forcing the cube-ships back, back over their ring of revolving disk-worlds, back over their mighty central world, and then down toward it as they fought fiercely against our black beams which drove great paths of destruction through them!

The surface of that world was looming clearer beneath us, bathed in white revealing light, as the giant battle swung lower down toward it. I glimpsed the great circular clearing, the pyramid with the mechanism and comet-guards on its summit, knew by the dial before me that but minutes still remained to turn aside with it the colossal on-thundering comet. Lower we swung toward the clearing, and as we did so the cubes beneath stiffened against us, their uprushing hail of deadly red bolts stabbing like an upward-falling rain of crimson death! But still more deadly were the black beams that drove down through them from our ships, and they were giving a little before us, sinking lower still, when suddenly from the surface of the world below there rose up among them another cube, one vastly greater than any of the others, one that moved ponderously up to the center of the cube-ship fleet and then glowed suddenly with a brilliant light. And as it did so the thousands of cube-ships beneath us suddenly vanished! Disappeared from sight as though they had never been, leaving below us only the spot of brilliant light that marked the greater cube!

"That great cube!" Jurt Tul was crying. "It's a vibration-projector of some kind, one whose vibrations make invisible all the cube-ships around it and leave our ships and all else visible! And they're attacking now!"

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The Comet-Drivers

(Continued from page 192)

For even at that moment, as we stared dumfounded toward the place where the cube-ship fleet had vanished, there had come from beneath and beside us hundreds upon hundreds of crimson bolts, bolts that flashed seemingly out of empty space annihilating scores, hundreds, of our bewildered ships, bolts from the cube-ships which we could not see, but which were circling about us now loosing their terrific shafts of death upon us! A battle to the death between two mighty fleets, one invisible, the other a plain target! Out in all directions our black beams were wildly whirling, but we could loose them only by chance, while our own ships, a perfect target to the invisible cubes about us, were flaring in annihilation in ever-increasing numbers!

"That great projector-cube!" I shouted to Gor Han. "Our only chance is to get to it—destroy it!"

I pointed down toward the spot of brilliant light beneath, which marked the position of the great cube that was projecting the vibrations that made our enemies invisible. But even as I did so a half hundred cruisers of our fleet had massed together, shooting downward in a great wedge, through a withering hail of crimson bolts, down through invisible cubes through which they crashed, down until an instant later the score remaining of them had crashed squarely into the spot of brilliant light below, meeting annihilation with it in that collision. But the light vanished as they crashed, leaving but wreckage of cube and cruisers, and at the same moment the mass of cube-ships beneath us had suddenly flashed into full view once more!

OUR great fleet was gathering itself now for a last final rush downward through those opposing cube-ships toward the comet-control. I could hear the wild victorious shouts of Gor Han and Jurt Tul and the crew beneath loud in my ears, could see the pyramid's summit, the great control, close beneath, as I turned to the speech-instrument to shout the word that would send our fleet thundering down. But before ever my lips opened I had stiffened, stood motionless. For from the time-dial before me had come the low, metallic note of the passing hour, marking the end of the last moment in which the comet could have been turned aside! Marking the end for our universe, sounding in my stunned ears like a titanic knell of doom across the infinite for our galaxy! Nothing now in all the universe could turn the giant comet aside from that galaxy enough to save it! Motionless there, Gor Han and Jurt Tul and I heard echoing away that muted note that had struck for the galaxy's doom!

"Lost!" Gor Han was saying it, strangely, slowly, uncomprehendingly. "We've lost!"

Lost! The galaxy—our suns—our myriad peopled worlds—all lost, all doomed to annihilation by the gigantic comet about us that was thundering on now irrevocably! It seemed, in that instant, that all things in existence, the cruisers about us, the cube-ships beneath us, the comet-creature hordes on the surface of the white-lit world below, had paused for one moment breathless, a moment that marked a galaxy's doom. Then suddenly Gor Han was pointing downward, eyes starting, point-

ing to the comet-creature hordes on that world below, which were suddenly rushing crazily toward the pyramid beneath us, the cube-ships also racing wildly down toward the pyramid's summit! For on that summit from the stair on the pyramid's side a dark, erect figure had suddenly rushed, and before the comet-guards had glimpsed him had rushed to the great disk-dial and pointer of the comet-control! An erect, many-limbed dark figure who had seized the pointer in his grasp!

"*Najus Nar!*" Gor Han's great scream held within it all our renewed faith, our sudden comprehension.

For the insect-man had grasped the pointer, the pointer that controlled the position of the giant comet's tail, and had swung it half around the disk from the dial's rear to its front! As he did so he straightened, arms upflung toward us in a last great gesture toward the distant opening through the coma, and then the comet-guards were upon him, the blasting crimson bolts from the darting cubes above had reached him, annihilating the pyramid's summit, while in all the city beneath us liquid comet-creatures and great cubes were rushing crazily toward that pyramid, rushing too late toward the control which they had themselves built for their comet and which now had destroyed them!

For Najus Nar had reversed the comet-control!

Even as the bolts had blasted the pyramid's top our cruisers had shot with the velocity of thousands of light-speeds out from the central world and those about it, out across the comet's heart toward the circular opening through the coma, through that passage of crimson death at awful speed and out into space behind the comet as the passage closed behind us, as the tail behind the comet waned swiftly! And as our cruisers shot up above the mighty comet, we saw that it had halted in space, the awful momentum with which the old tail

at the rear had driven it on balanced, opposed, by the new tail shot from its front, toward the galaxy, when Najus Nar had reversed the control! Caught between the two cosmic pressures, between the momentum and terrific speed with which the old tail drove it forward and the power with which the new tail drove it backward, the mighty coma beneath us was bulging, was spreading! Bulging outward above and below, to right and to left, its giant crimson-glowing coma dilating and breaking up between the terrific pressures from front and rear! Changing from a great sphere to a gigantic shapeless crimson mass of electrical energy, bulging out in all directions, great flashes of leaping light inside it marking the end of the great comet-worlds caught and annihilated inside its tortured mass! Out—out—it swelled, our cruisers hanging far above it, watching it grow swiftly greater, *thinner*, until in moments more where the colossal crimson comet had been was nothing but a vast, far-flung cloud of faint electrical radiance, the concentrated electrical energy that had been the giant comet and its worlds dispersed out into that huge, faint-shining cloud!

The cosmic vampire that had threatened the life of our universe was gone forever! The comet-drivers had driven their comet and its worlds, at last, to death!

5

SWEEPING in toward the galaxy's gathered suns, days later, our great cruiser fleet slowed, halted, hung motionless outside the galaxy's edge once more. Before us flamed great white Rigel, as it had flamed—how long it seemed before!—when Gor Han and Jurt Tul and Najus Nar had gathered in the control room of my cruiser, at the start of our mad journey toward the comet. Now that comet was but a vast, faint cloud of

radiance far in the void behind us. And now, too, it was Gor Han and Jurt Tul that stood before me, in the cruiser's silent control room.

The cruisers about us had massed into two great divisions, since here at the galaxy's edge Gor Han and Jurt Tul were to leave me, taking up once more their duties in the ceaseless watch of the Interstellar Patrol, with for me my work as Chief in the headquarters at Canopus. The frantic joy that would be shaking the galaxy's peoples to see the shadow of doom thus lifted from them, the frantic gratitude that we might claim—in these we had no interest now, wanting only to take up once more the great Patrol's endless work. So now the cruisers of my two friends hung waiting beneath my own, as we paused in silence at the moment of parting.

Gor Han's deep voice broke the silence at last. "The end of the journey, for us," he said. "And for Najus Nar——?"

"For Najus Nar, too," I said. "He dared and died, for the galaxy—pretending to join the comet-creatures that he might thwart their plans at the last—and he would have wished no other end."

Jurt Tul nodded slowly. "Najus Nar would have wished it," he said. "Yet strange it seems, that we four of the Patrol are three, at last."

Silent we stood again, at that, and then Gor Han and Jurt Tul reached forth, Betelgeusan and Aldebaranian and earth-man clasping hands in a moment's grip. Then they had turned, had saluted sharply, and were striding down through the cruiser toward their own ships, which with a clang of metal moved away from beneath my own. Gor Han's to the right, Jurt Tul's to the left, they moved, heading each the massed cruisers there, and then those cruisers were moving away, to right and left along the galaxy's edge, passing and vanishing. My single cruiser hung alone

in the void, the pilot beside me with hands on its controls, but for a moment I paused still, gazing back through the blackness of the great void toward a far, faint-shining cloud that glimmered in the blackness. A long moment I gazed toward it, then turned. And then our cruiser too was moving, in over the galaxy's edge, in toward great Canopus through its gathered, flaming suns.
