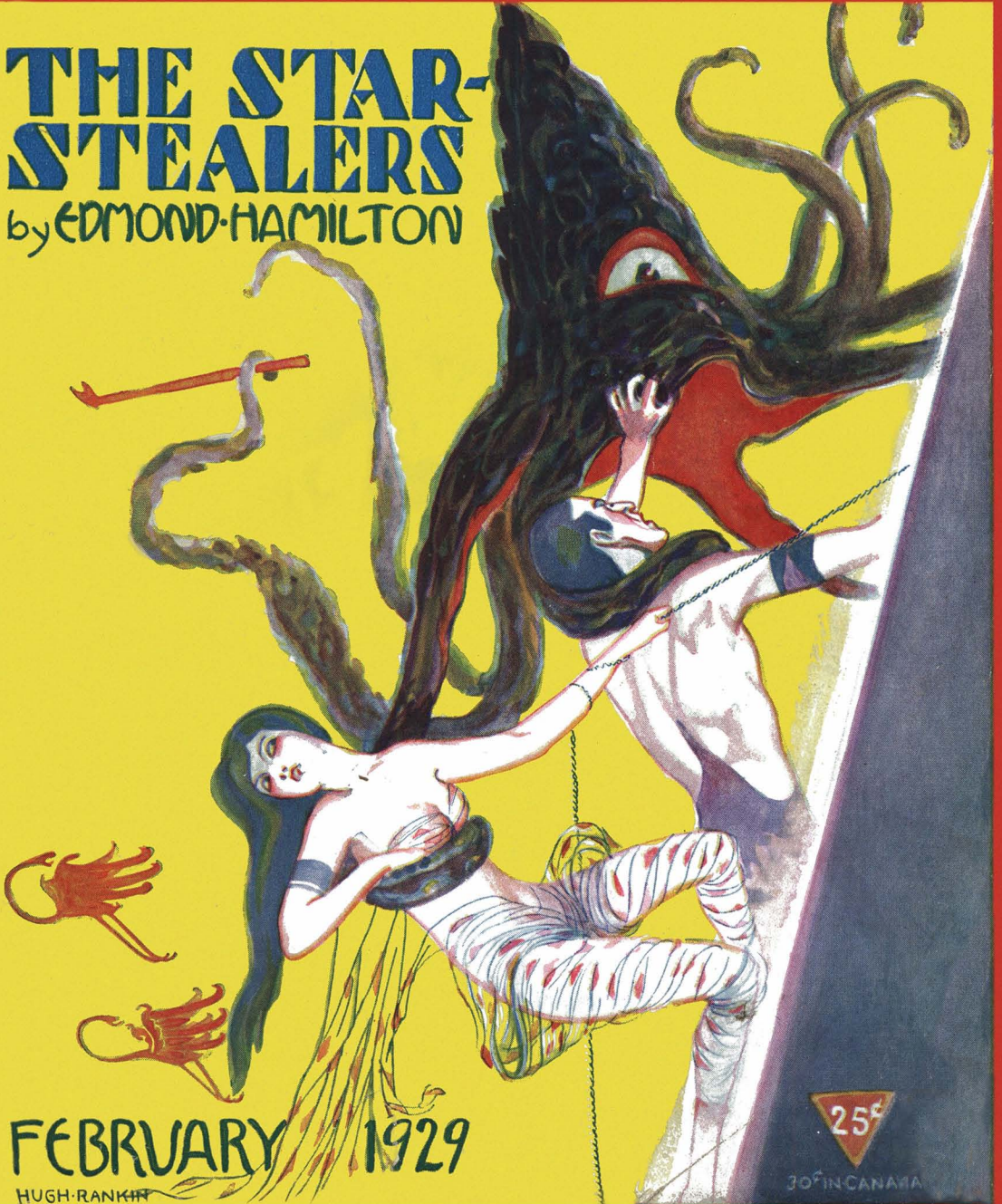


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The Unique Magazine

THE STAR-STEALERS

by EDMOND HAMILTON



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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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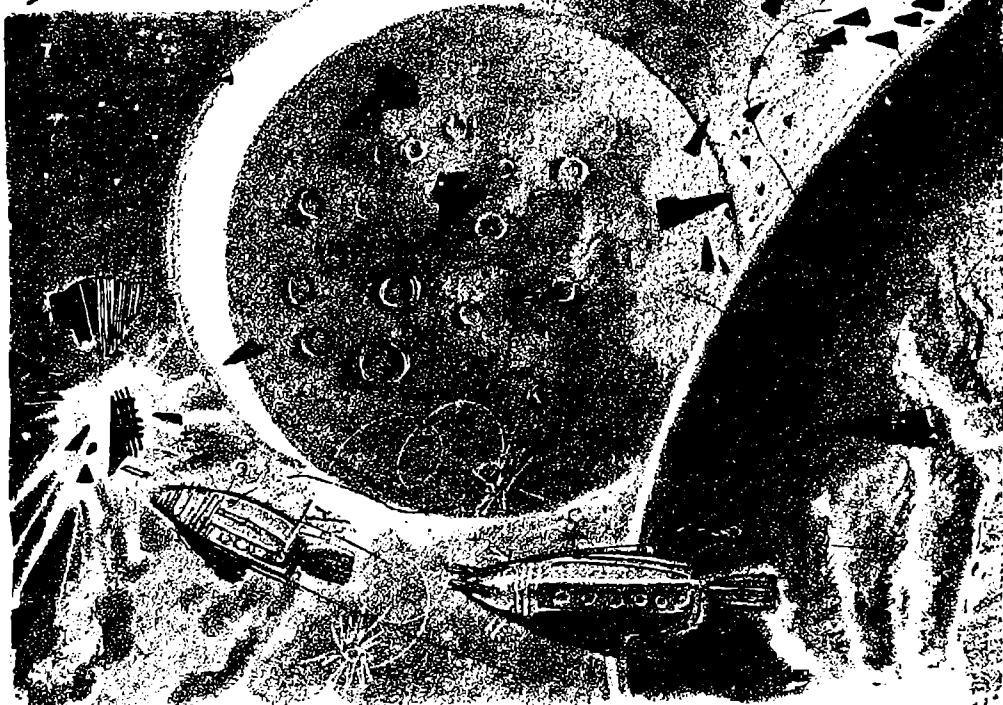
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THE STAR-STEALERS

by EDMOND HAMILTON



"The vast globe stretched from horizon to horizon beneath them."

AS I stepped into the narrow bridgeroom the pilot at the controls there turned toward me, saluting.

"Alpha Centauri dead ahead, sir," he reported.

"Turn thirty degrees outward," I told him, "and throttle down to eighty light-speeds until we've passed the star."

Instantly the shining levers flicked back under his hands, and as I stepped over to his side I saw the arrows of the speed-dials creeping backward with the slowing of our flight. Then, gazing through the broad windows which formed the room's front side, I watched the interstellar panorama ahead shifting side-

wise with the turning of our course.

The narrow bridgeroom lay across the very top of our ship's long, cigar-like hull, and through its windows all the brilliance of the heavens around us lay revealed. Ahead flamed the great double star of Alpha Centauri, two mighty blazing suns which dimmed all else in the heavens, and which crept slowly sidewise as we veered away from them. Toward our right there stretched along the inky skies the far-flung powdered fires of the Galaxy's thronging suns, gemmed with the crimson splendors of Betelgeuse and the clear brilliance of Canopus and the hot white light of Rigel. And straight ahead, now, gleaming out beyond the twin suns we

were passing, shone the clear yellow star that was the sun of our own system.

It was the yellow star that I was watching, now, as our ship fled on toward it at eighty times the speed of light; for more than two years had passed since our cruiser had left it, to become a part of that great navy of the Federation of Stars which maintained peace over all the Galaxy. We had gone far with the fleet, in those two years, cruising with it the length and breadth of the Milky Way, patrolling the space-lanes of the Galaxy and helping to crush the occasional pirate ships which appeared to levy toll on the interstellar commerce. And now that an order flashed from the authorities of our own solar system had recalled us home, it was with an unalloyed eagerness that we looked forward to the moment of our return. The stars we had touched at, the peoples of their worlds, these had been friendly enough toward us, as fellow-members of the great Federation, yet for all their hospitality we had been glad enough to leave them. For though we had long ago become accustomed to the alien and unhuman forms of the different stellar races, from the strange brain-men of Algol to the birdlike people of Sirius, their worlds were not human worlds, not the familiar eight little planets which swung around our own sun, and toward which we were speeding homeward now.

While I mused thus at the window the two circling suns of Alpha Centauri had dropped behind us, and now, with a swift clicking of switches, the pilot beside me turned on our full speed. Within a few minutes our ship was hurtling on at almost a thousand light-speeds, flung forward by the power of our newly invented de-transforming generators, which could produce propulsion-vibrations of almost a thousand times the frequency of the light-vibrations. At this immense velocity, matched by few

other craft in the Galaxy, we were leaping through millions of miles of space each second, yet the gleaming yellow star ahead seemed quite unchanged in size.

Abruptly the door behind me clicked open to admit young Dal Nara, the ship's second-officer, descended from a long line of famous interstellar pilots, who grinned at me openly as she saluted.

"Twelve more hours, sir, and we'll be there," she said.

I smiled at her eagerness. "You'll not be sorry to get back to our little sun, will you?" I asked, and she shook her head.

"Not I! It may be just a pin-head beside Canopus and the rest, but there's no place like it in the Galaxy. I'm wondering, though, what made them call us back to the fleet so suddenly."

My own face clouded, at that. "I don't know," I said, slowly. "It's almost unprecedented for any star to call one of its ships back from the Federation fleet, but there must have been some reason——"

"Well," she said cheerfully, turning toward the door, "it doesn't matter what the reason is, so long as it means a trip home. The crew is worse than I am—they're scrapping the generators down in the engine-room to get another light-speed out of them."

I laughed as the door clicked shut behind her, but as I turned back to the window the question she had voiced rose again in my mind, and I gazed thoughtfully toward the yellow star ahead. For as I had told Dal Nara, it was a well-nigh unheard-of thing for any star to recall one of its cruisers from the great fleet of the Federation. Including as it did every peopled star in the Galaxy, the Federation relied entirely upon the fleet to police the interstellar spaces, and to that fleet each star contributed its quota of cruisers. Only a last extremity, I knew, would ever induce

any star to recall one of its ships, yet the message flashed to our ship had ordered us to return to the solar system at full speed and report at the Bureau of Astronomical Knowledge, on Neptune. Whatever was behind the order, I thought, I would learn soon enough, for we were now speeding over the last lap of our homeward journey; so I strove to put the matter from my mind for the time being.

With an odd persistence, though, the question continued to trouble my thoughts in the hours that followed, and when we finally swept in toward the solar system twelve hours later, it was with a certain abstractedness that I watched the slow largening of the yellow star that was our sun. Our velocity had slackened steadily as we approached that star, and we were moving at a bare one light-speed when we finally swept down toward its outermost, far-swinging planet, Neptune, the solar system's point of arrival and departure for all interstellar commerce. Even this speed we reduced still further as we sped past Neptune's single circling moon and down through the crowded shipping-lanes toward the surface of the planet itself.

Fifty miles above its surface all sight of the planet beneath was shut off by the thousands of great ships which hung in dense masses above it—that vast tangle of interstellar traffic which makes the great planet the terror of all inexperienced pilots. From horizon to horizon, it seemed, the ships crowded upon each other, drawn from every quarter of the Galaxy. Huge grain-boats from Betelgeuse, vast, palatial liners from Arcturus and Vega, ship-loads of radium ores from the worlds that circle-giant Antares, long, swift mail-boats from distant Deneb—all these and myriad others swirled and circled in one great mass above the planet, dropping down one by one as the official traffic-directors flashed from their own boats

the brilliant signals which allowed a lucky one to descend. And through occasional rifts in the crowded mass of ships could be glimpsed the interplanetary traffic of the lower levels, a swarm of swift little boats which darted ceaselessly back and forth on their comparatively short journeys, ferrying crowds of passengers to Jupiter and Venus and Earth, seeming like little toy-boats beside the mighty bulks of the great interstellar ships above them.

As our own cruiser drove down toward the mass of traffic, though, it cleared away from before us instantly; for the symbol of the Federation on our bows was known from Canopus to Pomalhaut, and the cruisers of its fleet were respected by all the traffic of the Galaxy. Arrowing down through this suddenly opened lane we sped smoothly down toward the planet's surface, hovering for a moment above its perplexing maze of white buildings and green gardens, and then slanting down toward the mighty flat-roofed building which housed the Bureau of Astronomical Knowledge. As we sped down toward its roof I could not but contrast the warm, sunny green panorama beneath with the icy desert which the planet had been until two hundred thousand years before, when the scientists of the solar system had devised the great heat-transmitters which catch the sun's heat near its blazing surface and fling it out as high-frequency vibrations to the receiving-apparatus on Neptune, to be transformed back into the heat which warms this world. In a moment, though, we were landing gently upon the broad roof, upon which rested scores of other shining cruisers whose crews stood outside them watching our arrival.

Five minutes later I was whirling downward through the building's interior in one of the automatic little cone-elevators, out of which I stepped into a long white corridor. An attendant was awaiting me there, and

I followed him down the corridor's length to a high black door at its end, which he threw open for me, closing it behind me as I stepped inside.

IT WAS an ivory-walled, high-ceilinged room in which I found myself, its whole farther side open to the sunlight and breezes of the green gardens beyond. At a desk across the room was sitting a short-set man with gray-streaked hair and keen, inquiring eyes, and as I entered he sprang up and came toward me.

"Ran Rarak!" he exclaimed. "You've come! For two days, now, we've been expecting you."

"We were delayed off Aldebaran, sir, by generator trouble," I replied, bowing, for I had recognized the speaker as Hurus Hol, chief of the Bureau of Astronomical Knowledge. Now, at a motion from him, I took a chair beside the desk while he resumed his own seat.

A moment he regarded me in silence, and then slowly spoke. "Ran Rarak," he said. "you must have wondered why your ship was ordered back here to the solar system. Well, it was ordered back for a reason which we dared not state in an open message, a reason which, if made public, would plunge the solar system instantly into a chaos of unutterable panic!"

He was silent again for a moment, his eyes on mine, and then went on. "You know, Ran Rarak, that the universe itself is composed of infinite depths of space in which float great clusters of suns, star-clusters which are separated from each other by billions of light-years of space. You know, too, that our own cluster of suns, which we call the Galaxy, is roughly disklike in shape, and that our own particular sun is situated at the very edge of this disk. Beyond lie only those inconceivable leagues of space which separate us from the neighboring star-clusters, or island-

universes, depths of space never yet crossed by our own cruisers or by anything else of which we have record.

"But now, at last, something has crossed those abysses, is crossing them; since over three weeks ago our astronomers discovered that a gigantic dark star is approaching our Galaxy from the depths of infinite space—a titanic, dead sun which their instruments showed to be of a size incredible, since, dark and dead as it is, it is larger than the mightiest blazing suns in our own Galaxy, larger than Canopus or Antares or Betelgeuse—a dark, dead star millions of times larger than our own fiery sun—a gigantic wanderer out of some far realm of infinite space, racing toward our Galaxy at a velocity inconceivable!

"The calculations of our scientists showed that this speeding dark star would not race into our Galaxy but would speed past its edge, and out into infinite space again, passing no closer to our own sun, at that edge, than some fifteen billion miles. There was no possibility of collision or danger from it, therefore; and so though the approach of the dark star is known to all in the solar system, there is no idea of any peril connected with it. But there is something else which has been kept quite secret from the peoples of the solar system, something known only to a few astronomers and officials. And that is that during the last few weeks the path of this speeding dark star has changed from a straight path to a curving one, that it is curving inward toward the edge of our Galaxy and will now pass our own sun, in less than twelve weeks, at a distance of less than three billion miles, instead of fifteen! And when this titanic dead sun passes that close to our own sun there can be but one result. Inevitably our own sun will be caught by the powerful gravitational grip of the giant dark star and carried out with all its

planets into the depths of infinite space, never to return!"

Hurus Hol paused, his face white and set, gazing past me with wide, unseeing eyes. My brain whirling beneath the stunning revelation, I sat rigid, silent, and in a moment he went on.

"If this thing were known to all," he said slowly, "there would be an instant, terrible panic over the solar system, and for that reason only a handful have been told. Flight is impossible, for there are not enough ships in the Galaxy to transport the trillions of the solar system's population to another star in the four weeks that are left to us. There is but one chance—one blind, slender chance—and that is to turn aside this onward-thundering dark star from its present inward-curving path, to cause it to pass our sun and the Galaxy's edge far enough away to be harmless. And it is for this reason that we ordered your return.

"For it is my plan to speed out of the Galaxy into the depths of outer space to meet this approaching dark star, taking all of the scientific apparatus and equipment which might be used to swerve it aside from this curving path it is following. During the last week I have assembled the equipment for the expedition and have gathered together a force of fifty star-cruisers which are even now resting on the roof of this building, manned and ready for the trip. These are only swift mail-cruisers, though, specially equipped for the trip, and it was advisable to have at least one battle-cruiser for flag-ship of the force, and so your own was recalled from the Federation fleet. And although I shall go with the expedition, of course, it was my plan to have you yourself as its captain.

"I know, however, that you have spent the last two years in the service of the Federation fleet; so if you desire, another will be appointed to the post. It is one of danger—greater

danger, I think, than any of us can dream. Yet the command is yours, if you wish to accept it."

Hurus Hol ceased, intently scanning my face. A moment I sat silent, then rose and stepped to the great open window at the room's far side. Outside stretched the greenery of gardens, and beyond them the white roofs of buildings, gleaming beneath the faint sunlight. Instinctively my eyes went up to the source of that light, the tiny sun, small and faint and far; here, but still—the sun. A long moment I gazed up toward it, and then turned back to Hurus Hol.

"I accept, sir," I said.

He came to his feet, his eyes shining. "I knew that you would," he said, simply, and then: "All has been ready for days, Ran Rarak. We start at once."

Ten minutes later we were on the broad roof, and the crews of our fifty ships were rushing to their posts in answer to the sharp alarm of a signal-bell. Another five minutes and Hurus Hol, Dal Nara and I stood in the bridgeroom of my own cruiser, watching the white roof drop behind and beneath as we slanted up from it. In a moment the half-hundred cruisers on that roof had risen and were racing up behind us, arrowing with us toward the zenith, massed in a close, wedge-shaped formation.

Above, the brilliant signals of the traffic-boats flashed swiftly, clearing a wide lane for us, and then we had passed through the jam of traffic and were driving out past the incoming lines of interstellar ships at swiftly mounting speed, still holding the same formation with the massed cruisers behind us.

Behind and around us, now, flamed the great panorama of the Galaxy's blazing stars, but before us lay only darkness—darkness inconceivable, into which our ships were flashing out at greater and greater speed. Neptune had vanished, and far behind lay the single yellow spark

that was all visible of our solar system as we fled out from it. Out—out—out—rocketing, racing on, out past the boundaries of the great Galaxy itself into the lightless void, out into the unplumbed depths of infinite space to save our threatened sun.

2

TWENTY-FOUR hours after our start I stood again in the bridgeroom, alone except for the silent, imperturbable figure of my ever-watchful wheelman, Nal Jak, staring out with him into the black gulf that lay before us. Many an hour we had stood side by side thus, scanning the interstellar spaces from our cruiser's bridgeroom, but never yet had my eyes been confronted by such a lightless void as lay before me now.

Our ship, indeed, seemed to be racing through a region where light was all but non-existent, a darkness inconceivable to anyone who had never experienced it. Behind lay the Galaxy we had left, a great swarm of shining points of light, contracting slowly as we sped away from it. Toward our right, too, several misty little patches of light glowed faintly in the darkness, hardly to be seen; though these, I knew, were other galaxies or star-clusters like our own—titanic conglomerations of thronging suns dimmed to those tiny flickers of light by the inconceivable depths of space which separated them from ourselves.

Except for these, though, we fled on through a cosmic gloom that was soul-shaking in its deepness and extent, an infinite darkness and stillness in which our ship seemed the only moving thing. Behind us, I knew, the formation of our fifty ships was following close on our track, each ship separated from the next by a five hundred mile interval and each flashing on at exactly the same speed as ourselves. But though we knew they followed, our fifty cruisers were nat-

urally quite invisible to us, and as I gazed now into the tenebrous void ahead the loneliness of our position was overpowering.

Abruptly the door behind me snapped open, and I half turned toward it as Hurus Hol entered. He glanced at our speed-dials, and his brows arched in surprize.

"Good enough," he commented. "If the rest of our ships can hold this pace it will bring us to the dark star in six days."

I nodded, gazing thoughtfully ahead. "Perhaps sooner," I estimated. "The dark star is coming toward us at a tremendous velocity, remember. You will notice on the telechart——"

Together we stepped over to the big telechart, a great rectangular plate of smoothly burnished silvery metal which hung at the bridgeroom's end-wall, the one indispensable aid to interstellar navigation. Upon it were accurately reproduced, by means of projected and reflected rays, the positions and progress of all heavenly bodies near the ship. Intently we contemplated it now. At the rectangle's lower edge there gleamed on the smooth metal a score or more of little circles of glowing light, of varying sizes, representing the suns at the edge of the Galaxy behind us. Outermost of these glowed the light-disk that was our own sun, and around this Hurus Hol had drawn a shining line or circle lying more than four billion miles from our sun, on the chart. He had computed that if the approaching dark star came closer than that to our sun its mighty gravitational attraction would inevitably draw the latter out with it into space; so the shining line represented, for us, the danger-line. And creeping down toward that line and toward our sun, farther up on the blank metal of the great chart, there moved a single giant circle of deepest black, an ebon disk a hundred times the diameter of our glowing little sun-circle, which was sweeping

down toward the Galaxy's edge in a great curve.

Hurus Hol gazed thoughtfully at the sinister dark disk, and then shook his head. "There's something very strange about that dark star," he said, slowly. "That curving path it's moving in is contrary to all the laws of celestial mechanics. I wonder if——"

Before he could finish, the words were broken off in his mouth. For at that moment there came a terrific shock, our ship dipped and reeled crazily, and then was whirling blindly about as though caught and shaken by a giant hand. Dal Nara, the pilot, Hurus Hol and I were slammed violently down toward the bridge-room's end with the first crash, and then I clung desperately to the edge of a switch-board as we spun dizzily about. I had a flashing glimpse, through the windows, of our fifty cruisers whirling blindly about like wind-tossed straws, and in another glimpse saw two of them caught and slammed together, both ships smashing like egg-shells beneath the terrific impact, their crews instantly annihilated. Then, as our own ship dipped crazily downward again, I saw Hurus Hol creeping across the floor toward the controls, and in a moment I had slid down beside him. Another instant and we had our hands on the levers, and were slowly pulling them back into position.

Caught and buffeted still by the terrific forces outside, our cruiser slowly steadied to an even keel and then leapt suddenly forward again, the forces that held us seeming to lessen swiftly as we flashed on. There came a harsh, grating sound that brought my heart to my throat as one of the cruisers was hurled past us, grazing us, and then abruptly the mighty grip that held us had suddenly disappeared and we were humming on through the same stillness and silence as before.

I slowed our flight, then, until we

hung motionless, and then we gazed wildly at each other, bruised and panting. Before we could give utterance to the exclamations on our lips, though, the door snapped open and Dal Nara burst into the bridgeroom, bleeding from a cut on her forehead.

"What was that?" she cried, raising a trembling hand to her head. "It caught us there like toys—and the other ships——"

Before any of us could answer her a bell beside me rang sharply and from the diaphragm beneath it came the voice of our message-operator.

"Ships 37, 12, 49 and 44 reported destroyed by collisions, sir," he announced, his own voice tremulous. "The others report that they are again taking up formation behind us."

"Very well," I replied. "Order them to start again in three minutes, on Number One speed-scale."

As I turned back from the instrument I drew a deep breath. "Four ships destroyed in less than a minute," I said. "And by *what*?"

"By a whirlpool of ether-currents, undoubtedly," said Hurus Hol. We stared at him blankly, and he threw out a hand in quick explanation. "You know that there are currents in the ether—that was discovered ages ago—and that those currents are responsible for light-drift and similar phenomena. All such currents in the Galaxy have always been found to be comparatively slow and sluggish, but out here in empty space there must be currents of gigantic size and speed, and apparently we stumbled directly into a great whirlpool or maelstrom of them. We were fortunate to lose but four ships," he added soberly.

I shook my head. "I've sailed from Sirius to Rigel," I said, "and I never met anything like that. And if we meet another——"

The strangeness of our experience, in fact, had unnerved me, for even after we had tended to our bruises and were again racing on through the

void, it was with a new fearfulness that I gazed ahead. At any moment, I knew, we might plunge directly into some similar or even larger maelstrom of ether-currents, yet there was no way by which we could avoid the danger. We must drive blindly ahead at full speed and trust to luck to bring us through, and now I began to understand what perils lay between us and our destination.

As hour followed hour, though, my fearfulness gradually lessened, for we encountered no more of the dread maelstroms in our onward flight. Yet as we hummed on and on and on, a new anxiety came to trouble me, for with the passing of each day we were putting behind us billions of miles of space, and were flashing nearer and nearer toward the mighty dark star that was our goal. And even as we fled on we could see, on the great telechart, the dark disk creeping down to meet us, thundering on toward the Galaxy from which, unless we succeeded, it would steal a star.

Unless we succeeded! But could we succeed? Was there any force in the universe that could turn aside this oncoming dark giant in time to prevent the theft of our sun? More and more, as we sped on, there grew in my mind doubt as to our chance of success. We had gone forth on a blind, desperate venture, on a last slender chance, and now at last I began to see how slender indeed was that chance. Dal Nara felt it, too, and even Hurus Hol, I think, but we spoke no word to each other of our thoughts, standing for hours on end in the bridgeroom together, and gazing silently and broodingly out into the darkness where lay our goal.

ON THE sixth day of our flight we computed, by means of our telechart and flight-log, that we were within less than a billion miles of the great dark star ahead, and had slackened our speed until we were barely creeping forward, attempting

to locate our goal in the dense, unchanging darkness ahead.

Straining against the windows, we three gazed eagerly forward, while beside me Nal Jak, the wheelman, silently regulated the ship's speed to my orders. Minutes passed while we sped on, and still there lay before us only the deep darkness. Could it be that we had missed our way, that our calculations had been wrong? Could it be—and then the wild speculations that had begun to rise in my mind were cut short by a low exclamation from Dal Nara, beside me. Mutely she pointed ahead.

At first I could see nothing, and then slowly became aware of a feeble glow of light in the heavens ahead, an area of strange, subdued light which stretched across the whole sky, it seemed, yet which was so dim as to be hardly visible to our straining eyes. But swiftly, as we watched it, it intensified, strengthened, taking shape as a mighty circle of pale luminescence which filled almost all the heavens ahead. I gave a low-voiced order to the pilot which reduced our speed still further, but even so the light grew visibly stronger as we sped on.

"Light!" whispered Hurus Hol. "Light on a dark star! It's impossible—and yet——"

And now, in obedience to another order, our ship began to slant sharply up toward the mighty circle's upper limb, followed by the half-hundred ships behind us. And as we lifted higher and higher the circle changed before our eyes into a sphere—a tremendous, faintly glowing sphere of size inconceivable, filling the heavens with its vast bulk, feebly luminous like the ghost of some mighty sun, rushing through space to meet us as we sped up and over it. And now at last we were over it, sweeping above it with our little fleet at a height of a half-million miles, contemplating in

awed silence the titanic dimensions of the faint-glowing sphere beneath us.

For in spite of our great height above it, the vast globe stretched from horizon to horizon beneath us, a single smooth, vastly curving surface, shining with the dim, unfamiliar light whose source we could not guess. It was not the light of fire, or glowing gases, for the sun below was truly a dead one, vast in size as it was. It was a *cold* light, a faint but steady phosphorescence like no other light I had ever seen, a feeble white glow which stretched from horizon to horizon of the mighty world beneath. Dumfoundedly we stared down toward it, and then, at a signal to the pilot, our ship began to drop smoothly downward, trailed by our forty-odd followers behind. Down, down, we sped, slower and slower, until we suddenly started as there came from outside the ship a high-pitched hissing shriek.

"Air!" I cried. "This dark star has an atmosphere! And that light upon it—see!" And I flung a pointing hand toward the surface of the giant world below. For as we dropped swiftly down toward that world we saw at last that the faint light which illuminated it was not artificial light, or reflected light, but light inherent in itself, since all the surface of the mighty sphere glowed with the same phosphorescent light, its plains and hills and valleys alike feebly luminous, with the soft, dim luminosity of radio-active minerals. A shining world, a world glowing eternally with cold white light, a luminous, titanic sphere that rushed through the darkness of infinite space like some pale, gigantic moon. And upon the surface of the glowing plains beneath us rose dense and twisted masses of dark, leafless vegetation, distorted tree-growths and tangles of low shrubs that were all of deepest black in color, springing out of that glowing soil and twisting blackly and grotesquely above its

feeble light, stretching away over plain and hill and valley like the monstrous landscape of some undreamed-of hell!

And now, as our ship slanted down across the surface of the glowing sphere, there gleamed ahead a deepening of that glow, a concentration of that feeble light which grew stronger as we raced on toward it. And it was a city! A city whose mighty buildings were each a truncated pyramid in shape, towering into the air for thousands upon thousands of feet, a city whose every building and street and square glowed with the same faint white light as the ground upon which they stood, a metropolis out of nightmare, the darkness of which was dispelled only by the light of its own great glowing structures and streets. Far away stretched the mass of those structures, a luminous mass which covered square mile upon square mile of the surface of this glowing world, and far beyond them there lifted into the dusky air the shining towers and pyramids of still other cities.

We straightened, trembling, turning toward each other with white faces. And then, before any could speak, Dal Nara had whirled to the window and uttered a hoarse shout. "Look!" she cried, and pointed down and outward toward the titanic, glowing buildings of the city ahead; for from their truncated summits were rising suddenly a swarm of long black shapes, a horde of long black cones which were racing straight up toward us.

I shouted an order to the pilot, and instantly our ship was turning and slanting sharply upward, while around us our cruisers sped up with us. Then, from beneath, there sped up toward us a shining little cylinder of metal which struck a cruiser racing beside our own. It exploded instantly into a great flare of blinding light, enveloping the cruiser it had struck, and then the light had vanished, while with it had vanished the ship it

had enveloped. And from the cones beneath and beyond there leapt toward us other of the metal cylinders, striking our ships now by the dozens, flaring and vanishing with them in great, silent explosions of light.

"Ethereic bombs!" I cried. "And our ship is the only battle-cruiser—the rest have no weapons!"

I turned, cried another order, and in obedience to it our own cruiser halted suddenly and then dipped downward, racing straight into the ascending swarm of attacking cones. Down we flashed, down, down, and toward us sprang a score of the metal cylinders, grazing along our sides. And then, from the sides of our own downward-swooping ship there sprang out brilliant shafts of green light, the deadly de-cohesion ray of the ships of the Federation Fleet. It struck a score of the cones beneath and they flamed with green light for an instant and then flew into pieces, spilling downward in a great shower of tiny fragments as the cohesion of their particles was destroyed by the deadly ray. And now our cruiser had crashed down through the swarm of them and was driving down toward the luminous plain below, then turning and racing sharply upward again while from all the air around us the black cones swarmed to the attack.

Up, up, we sped, and now I saw that our blow had been struck in vain, for the last of our ships above were vanishing beneath the flares of the etheric bombs. One only of our cruisers remained, racing up toward the zenith in headlong flight with a score of the great cones in hot pursuit. A moment only I glimpsed this, and then we had turned once more and were again diving down upon the attacking cones, while all around us the etheric bombs filled the air with the silent, exploding flares. Again as we swooped downward our green rays cut paths of annihilation across the swarming cones beneath; and then I heard a cry from Hurus

Hol, whirled to the window and glimpsed above us a single great cone that was diving headlong down toward us in a resistless, ramming swoop. I shouted to the pilot, sprang to the controls, but was too late to ward off that deadly blow. There was a great crash at the rear of our cruiser; it spun dizzily for a moment in midair, and then was tumbling crazily downward like a falling stone toward the glowing plain a score of miles below.

3

I THINK now that our cruiser's mad downward plunge must have lasted for minutes, at least, yet at the time it seemed over in a single instant. I have a confused memory of the bridgeroom spinning about us as we whirled down, of myself throwing back the controls with a last, instinctive action, and then there came a ripping, rending crash, a violent shock, and I was flung into a corner of the room with terrific force.

Dazed by the swift action of the last few minutes I lay there motionless for a space of seconds, then scrambled to my feet. Hurus Hol and Dal Nara were staggering up likewise, the latter hastening at once down into the cruiser's hull, but Nal Jak, the wheelman, lay motionless against the wall, stunned by the shock. Our first act was to bring him back to consciousness by a few rough first-aid measures, and then we straightened and gazed about us.

Apparently our cruiser's keel was resting upon the ground, but was tilted over at a sharp angle, as the slant of the room's floor attested. Through the broad windows we could see that around our prostrate ship lay a thick, screening grove of black tree-growths which we had glimpsed from above, and into which we had crashed in our mad plunge downward. As I was later to learn, it was only the shock-absorbing qualities of the vegetation into which we had

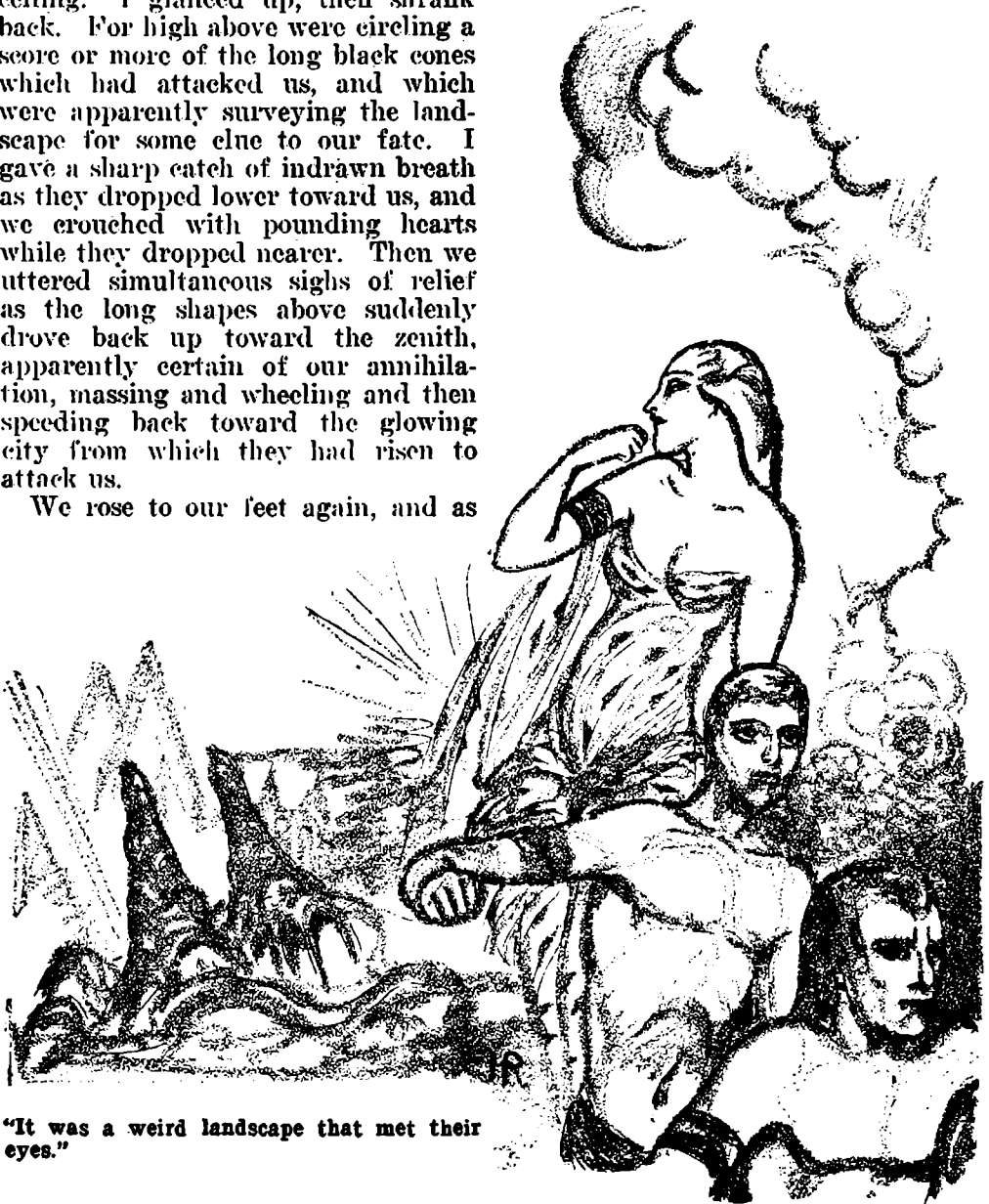
fallen, and my own last-minute rush to the controls, which had slowed our fall enough to save us from annihilation.

There was a buzz of excited voices from the crew in the hull beneath us, and then I turned at a sudden exclamation from Hurus Hol, to find him pointing up through the observation windows in the bridgeroom's ceiling. I glanced up, then shrank back. For high above were circling a score or more of the long black cones which had attacked us, and which were apparently surveying the landscape for some clue to our fate. I gave a sharp catch of indrawn breath as they dropped lower toward us, and we crouched with pounding hearts while they dropped nearer. Then we uttered simultaneous sighs of relief as the long shapes above suddenly drove back up toward the zenith, apparently certain of our annihilation, massing and wheeling and then speeding back toward the glowing city from which they had risen to attack us.

We rose to our feet again, and as

we did so the door clicked open to admit Dal Nara. She was a bruised, disheveled figure, like the rest of us, but there was something like a grin on her face.

"That cone that rammed us shattered two of our rear vibration-projectors," she announced, "but that was all the damage. And out-



"It was a weird landscape that met their eyes."

side of one man with a broken shoulder the crew is all right."

"Good!" I exclaimed. "It won't take long to replace the broken projectors."

She nodded. "I ordered them to put in two of the spares," she explained. "But what then?"

I considered for a moment. "None of our other cruisers escaped, did they?" I asked.

Dal Nara slowly shook her head. "I don't think so," she said. "Nearly all of them were destroyed in the first few minutes. I saw Ship 16 racing up in an effort to escape, heading back toward the Galaxy, but there were cones hot after it and it couldn't have got away."

The quiet voice of Hurus Hol broke in upon us. "Then we alone can take back word to the Federation of what is happening here," he said. His eyes suddenly flamed. "Two things we know," he exclaimed. "We know that this dark star's curving path through space, which will bring it so fatally near to our own sun in passing, is a path contrary to all the laws of astronomical science. And we know now, too, that upon this dark-star world, in those glowing cities yonder, live beings of some sort who possess, apparently, immense intelligence and power."

My eyes met his. "You mean——" I began, but he interrupted swiftly.

"I mean that in my belief the answer to this riddle lies in that glowing city yonder, and that it is there we must go to find that answer."

"But how?" I asked. "If we take the cruiser near it they'll sight us and annihilate us."

"There is another way," said Hurus Hol. "We can leave the cruiser and its crew hidden here, and approach the city on foot—get as near to it as possible—learn what we can about it."

I think that we all gasped at that suggestion, but as I quickly revolved

it in my mind I saw that it was, in reality, our only chance to secure any information of value to take back to the Federation. So we adopted the idea without further discussion and swiftly laid our plans for the venture. At first it was our plan for only us three to go, but at Dal Nara's insistence we included the pilot in our party, the more quickly because I knew her to be resourceful and quick-witted.

Two hours we spent in sleep, at the suggestion of Hurus Hol, then ate a hasty meal and looked to our weapons, small projectors of the decohesion ray similar to the great ray-tubes of the cruiser. Already the ship's two shattered vibration-projectors had been replaced by spares, and our last order was for the crew and under-officers to await our return without moving beyond the ship in any event. Then the cruiser's hull-door snapped open and we four stepped outside, ready for our venture.

The sandy ground upon which we stood glowed with the feeble white light which seemed to emanate from all rock and soil on this strange world, a weird light which beat upward upon us instead of down. And in this light the twisted, alien forms of the leafless trees around us writhed upward into the dusky air, their smooth black branches tangling and intertwining far above our heads. As we paused there Hurus Hol reached down for a glowing pebble, which he examined intently for a moment.

"Radio-active," he commented. "All this glowing rock and soil." Then he straightened, glanced around, and led the way unhesitatingly through the thicket of black forest into which our ship had fallen.

Silently we followed him, in single file, across the shining soil and beneath the distorted arches of the twisted trees, until at last we emerged from the thicket and found ourselves

upon the open expanse of the glowing plain. It was a weird landscape which met our eyes, a landscape of glowing plains and shallow valleys patched here and there with the sprawling thickets of black forest, a pale, luminous world whose faint light beat feebly upward into the dusky, twilight skies above. In the distance, perhaps two miles ahead, a glow of deeper light flung up against the hovering dusk from the massed buildings of the luminous city, and toward this we tramped steadily onward, over the shining plains and gullies and once over a swift little brook whose waters glowed as they raced like torrents of rushing light. Within an hour we had drawn to within a distance of five hundred feet from the outermost of the city's pyramidal buildings, and crouched in a little clump of dark tree-growths, gazing fascinatedly toward it.

The scene before us was one of unequaled interest and activity. Over the masses of huge, shining buildings were flitting great swarms of the long black cones, moving from roof to roof, while in the shining streets below them moved other hordes of active figures, the people of the city. And as our eyes took in these latter I think that we all felt something of horror, in spite of all the alien forms which we were familiar with in the thronging worlds of the Galaxy.

For in these creatures was no single point of resemblance to anything human, nothing which the appalled intelligence could seize upon as familiar. Imagine an upright cone of black flesh, several feet in diameter and three or more in height, supported by a dozen or more smooth long tentacles which branched from its lower end — supple, boneless octopus-arms which held the cone-body upright and which served both as arms and legs. And near the top of that cone trunk were the only features, the twin tiny orifices which

were the ears and a single round and red-rimmed white eye, set between them. Thus were these beings in appearance, black tentacle-creatures, moving in unending swirling throngs through streets and squares and buildings of their glowing city.

Helplessly we stared upon them, from our place of concealment. To venture into sight, I knew, would be to court swift death. I turned to Hurus Hol, then started as there came from the city ahead a low, waxing sound-note, a deep, powerful tone of immense volume which sounded out over the city like the blast of a deep-pitched horn. Another note joined it, and another, until it seemed that a score of mighty horns were calling across the city, and then they died away. But as we looked now we saw that the shining streets were emptying, suddenly, that the moving swarms of black tentacle-creatures were passing into the pyramidal buildings, that the cones above were slanting down toward the roofs and coming to rest. Within a space of minutes the streets seemed entirely empty and deserted, and the only sign of activity over all the city was the hovering of a few cones that still moved restlessly above it. Astounded, we watched, and then the explanation came suddenly to me.

"It's their sleep-period!" I cried. "Their night! These things must rest, must sleep, like any living thing, and as there's no night on this glowing world those horn-notes must signal the beginning of their sleep-period."

Hurus Hol was on his feet, his eyes suddenly kindling. "It's a chance in a thousand to get inside the city!" he exclaimed.

The next moment we were out of the shelter of our concealing trees and were racing across the stretch of ground which separated us from the city. And five minutes later we were standing in the empty, glowing

streets, hugging closely the mighty sloping walls of the huge buildings along it.

At once Hurus Hol led the way directly down the street toward the heart of the city, and as we hastened on beside him he answered to my question, "We must get to the city's center. There's something there which I glimpsed from our ship, and if it's what I think——"

He had broken into a run, now, and as we raced together down the bare length of the great, shining avenue, I, for one, had an unrecassuring presentiment of what would happen should the huge buildings around us disgorge their occupants before we could get out of the city. Then Hurus Hol had suddenly stopped short, and at a motion from him we shrank swiftly behind the corner of a pyramid's slanting walls. Across the street ahead of us were passing a half-dozen of the tentacle-creatures, gliding smoothly toward the open door of one of the great pyramids. A moment we crouched, holding our breath, and then the things had passed inside the building and the door had slid shut behind them. At once we leapt out and hastened on.

We were approaching the heart of the city, I judged, and ahead the broad, shining street we followed seemed to end in a great open space of some sort. As we sped toward it, between the towering luminous lines of buildings, a faint droning sound came to our ears from ahead, waxing louder as we hastened on. The clear space ahead was looming larger, nearer, now, and then as we raced past the last great building on the street's length we burst suddenly into view of the opening ahead and stopped, staring dumfoundedly toward it.

It was no open plaza or square, but a pit—a shallow, circular pit not more than a hundred feet in

depth but all of a mile in diameter, and we stood at the rim or edge of it. The floor was smooth and flat, and upon that floor there lay a grouped mass of hundreds of half-globes or hemispheres, each fifty feet in diameter, which were resting upon their flat bases with their curving sides uppermost. Each of these hemispheres was shining with light, but it was very different light from the feeble glow of the buildings and streets around us, an intensely brilliant blue radiance which was all but blinding to our eyes. From these massed, radiant hemispheres came the loud droning we had heard, and now we saw, at the pit's farther edge, a cylindrical little room or structure of metal which was supported several hundred feet above the pit's floor by a single slender shaft of smooth round metal, like a great bird-cage. And toward this cage-structure Hurus Hol was pointing now, his eyes flashing.

"It's the switch-board of the thing!" he cried. "And these brilliant hemispheres—the unheard-of space-path of this dark star—it's all clear now! All——"

He broke off, suddenly, as Nal Jak sprang back, uttering a cry and pointing upward. For the moment we had forgotten the hovering cones above the city, and now one of them was slanting swiftly downward, straight toward us.

We turned, ran back, and the next moment an ethereal bomb crashed down upon the spot where we had stood, exploding silently in a great flare of light. Another bomb fell and flared, nearer, and then I turned with sudden fierce anger and aimed the little ray-projector in my hand at the hovering cone above. The brilliant little beam cut across the dark shape; the black cone hovered still for a moment, then crashed down into the street to destruction. But now, from above and beyond, other cones were slanting swiftly down toward us,

while from the pyramidal buildings beside us hordes of the black tentacle-creatures were pouring out in answer to the alarm.

In a solid, resistless swarm they rushed upon us. I heard a yell of defiance from Dal Nara, beside me, the hiss of our rays as they clove through the black masses in terrible destruction, and then they were upon us. A single moment we whirled about in a wild mêlée of men and cone-creatures, of striking human arms and coiling tentacles; then there was a shout of warning from one of my friends, something hard descended upon my head with crushing force, and all went black before me.

4

FAINT light was filtering through my eyelids when I came back to consciousness. As I opened them I sat weakly up, then fell back. Dazedly I gazed about me. I was lying in a small, square room lit only by its own glowing walls and floor and ceiling, a room whose one side slanted steeply upward and inward, pierced by a small barred window that was the only opening: Opposite me I discerned a low door of metal bars, or grating, beyond which lay a long, glowing-walled corridor. Then all these things were suddenly blotted out by the anxious face of Hurus Hol, bending down toward me.

"You're awake!" he exclaimed, his face alight. "You know me, Ran Rarak?"

For answer I struggled again to a sitting position, aided by the arm of Dal Nara, who had appeared beside me. I felt strangely weak, exhausted, my head throbbing with racing fires.

"Where are we?" I asked, at last. "The fight in the city—I remember that—but where are we now? And where's Nal Jak?"

The eyes of my two friends met and glanced away, while I looked

anxiously toward them. Then Hurus Hol spoke slowly.

"We are imprisoned in this little room in one of the great pyramids of the glowing city," he said. "And in this room you have lain for weeks, Ran Rarak."

"Weeks?" I gasped, and he nodded. "It's been almost ten weeks since we were captured there in the city outside," he said, "and for all that time you've lain here out of your head from that blow you received, sometimes delirious and raving, sometimes completely unconscious. And in all that time this dark star, this world, has been plunging on through space toward our Galaxy, and our sun, and the theft and doom of that sun. Ten more days and it passes our sun, stealing it from the Galaxy. And I, who have learned at last what forces are behind it all, lie prisoned here.

"It was after we four were brought to this cell, after our capture, that I was summoned before our captors, before a council of those strange tentacle-creatures which was made up, I think, of their own scientists. They examined me, my clothing, all about me, then sought to communicate with me. They do not speak—communicating with each other by telepathy—but they strove to enter into communication with me by a projection of pictures on a smooth wall, pictures of their dark star world, pictures of our own Galaxy, our own sun—picture after picture, until at last I began to understand the drift of them, the history and the purpose of these strange beings and their stranger world.

"For ages, I learned, for countless eons, their mighty sun had flashed through the infinities of space, alone except for its numerous planets upon which had risen these races of tentacle-creatures. Their sun was flaming with life, then, and on their circling planets they had attained to

immense science, immense power, as their system rolled on, a single wandering star, through the depths of uncharted space. But as the slow eons passed, the mighty sun began to cool, and their planets to grow colder and colder. At last it had cooled so far that to revive its dying fires they dislodged one of their own planets from its orbit and sent it crashing into their sun, feeding its waning flames. And when more centuries had passed and it was again cooling they followed the same course, sending another planet into it, and so on through the ages, staving off the death of their sun by sacrificing their worlds, until at last but one planet was left to them. And still their sun was cooling, darkening, dying.

“For further ages, though, they managed to preserve a precarious existence on their single planet by means of artificial heat-production, until at last their great sun had cooled and solidified to such a point that life was possible upon its dark, dead surface. That surface, because of the solidified radio-active elements in it, shone always with pale light, and to it the races of the tentacle-creatures now moved. By means of great air-current projectors they transferred the atmosphere of their planet to the dark star itself and then cast loose their planet to wander off into space by itself, for its orbit had become erratic and they feared that it would crash into their own great dark star world, about which it had revolved. But on the warm, shining surface of the great dark star they now spread out and multiplied, raising their cities from its glowing rock and clinging to its surface as it hurtled on and on and on through the dark infinities of trackless space.

“But at last, after further ages of such existence, the tentacle-races saw that again they were menaced with extinction, since in obedience to the inexorable laws of nature their dark

star was cooling still further, the molten fires at its center which warmed its surface gradually dying down, while that surface became colder and colder. In a little while, they knew, the fires at its center would be completely dead, and their great world would be a bitter, frozen waste, unless they devised some plan by which to keep warm its surface.

“At this moment their astronomers came forward with the announcement that their dark-star world, plunging on through empty space, would soon pass a great star-cluster or Galaxy of suns at a distance of some fifteen billion miles. They could not invade the worlds of this Galaxy, they knew, for they had discovered that upon those worlds lived countless trillions of intelligent inhabitants who would be able to repel their own invasion, if they attempted it. There was but one expedient left, therefore, and that was to attempt to jerk a sun out of this Galaxy as they passed by it, to steal a star from it to take out with them into space, which would revolve around their own mighty dark world and supply it with the heat they needed.

“The sun which they fixed on to steal was one at the Galaxy’s very edge, our own sun. If they passed this at fifteen billion miles, as their course then would cause them to do, they could do nothing. But if they could change their dark star’s course, could curve inward to pass this sun at some three billion miles instead of fifteen, then the powerful gravitational grip of their own gigantic world would grasp this sun and carry it out with it into space. The sun’s planets, too, would be carried out, but these they planned to crash into the fires of the sun itself, to increase its size and splendor. All that was needed, therefore, was some method of curving their world’s course inward, and for this they had recourse to the great gravity-condensers which they

had already used to shift their own planets.

"You know that it is gravitational force alone which keeps the suns and planets to their courses, and you know that the gravitational force of any body, sun or planet, is radiated out from it in all directions, tending to pull all things toward that body. In the same way there is radiated outward perpetually from the Galaxy the combined attractive gravitational force of all its swarming suns, and a tiny fraction of this outward-radiating force, of course, struck the dark star, pulling it weakly toward the Galaxy. If more of that outward-radiating force could strike the dark star, it would be pulled toward the Galaxy with more power, would be pulled nearer toward the Galaxy's edge, as it passed.

"It was just that which their gravity-condenser accomplished. In a low pit at the heart of one of their cities—this city, in fact—they placed the condenser, a mass of brilliant hemispherical ray-attracters which caused more of the Galaxy's outward-shooting attractive force to fall upon the dark star, which condensed and concentrated that radiating force upon the dark star, thereby pulling the dark star inward toward the Galaxy's edge in a great curve. When they reached a distance of three billion miles from the Galaxy's edge they planned to turn off the great condenser, and their dark star would then shoot past the Galaxy's edge, jerking out our sun with it, from that edge, by its own terrific gravitational grip. If the condenser were turned off before they came that close, however, they would pass the sun at a distance too far to pull it out with them, and would then speed on out into space alone, toward the freezing of their world and their own extinction. For that reason the condenser, and the great cage-switch of the condenser, were guarded always

by hovering cones, to prevent its being turned off before the right moment.

"Since then they have kept the great gravity-condenser in unceasing operation, and their dark star has swept in toward the Galaxy's edge in a great curve. Back in our own solar system I saw and understood what would be the result of that inward curve, and so we came here—and were captured. And in those weeks since we were captured, while you have lain here unconscious and raving, this dark star has been plunging nearer and nearer toward our Galaxy and toward our sun. Ten more days and it passes that sun, carrying it out with it into the darkness of boundless space, unless the great condenser is turned off before then. Ten more days, and we lie here, powerless to warn any of what forces work toward the doom of our sun!"

THERE was a long silence when Hurus Hol's voice had ceased—a whispering, brain-crushing silence which I broke at last with a single question.

"But Nal Jak——?" I asked, and the faces of my two companions became suddenly strange, while Dal Nara turned away. At last Hurus Hol spoke.

"It was after the tentacle-scientists had examined me," he said gently, "that they brought Nal Jak down to examine. I think that they spared me for the time being because of my apparently greater knowledge, but Nal Jak they—vivisected."

There was a longer hush than before, one in which the brave, quiet figure of the wheelman, a companion in all my service with the fleet, seemed to rise before my suddenly blurring eyes. Then abruptly I swung down from the narrow bunk on which I lay, clutched dizzily at my companions for support, and walked

unsteadily to the square, barred little window. Outside and beneath me lay the city of the dark-star people, a mighty mass of pyramidal, glowing buildings, streets thronged with their dark, gliding figures, above them the swarms of the racing cones. From our little window the glowing wall of the great pyramid which held us slanted steeply down for fully five hundred feet, and upward above us for twice that distance. And as I raised my eyes upward I saw, clear and bright above, a great, far-flung field of stars—the stars of our own Galaxy toward which this world was plunging. And burning out clearest among these the star that was nearest of all, the shining yellow star that was our own sun.

I think now that it was the sight of that yellow star, largening steadily as our dark star swept on toward it, which filled us with such utter despair in the hours, the days, that followed. Out beyond the city our cruiser lay hidden in the black forest, we knew, and could we escape we might yet carry word back to the Federation of what was at hand, but escape was impossible. And so, through the long days, days measurable only by our own time-dials, we waxed deeper into an apathy of dull despair.

Rapidly my strength came back to me, though the strange food supplied us once a day by our captors was almost uncatable. But as the days fled by, my spirits sank lower and lower, and less and less we spoke to each other as the doom of our sun approached, the only change in any thing around us being the moment each twenty-four hours when the signal-horns called across the city, summoning the hordes in its streets to their four-hour sleep-period. At last, though, we woke suddenly to realization of the fact that nine days had passed since my awakening, and that upon the next day the dark star

would be plunging past the burning yellow star above us and jerking it into its grip. Then, at last, all our apathy dropped from us, and we raged against the walls of our cells with insensate fury. And then, with startling abruptness, came the means of our deliverance.

FOR hours there had been a busy clanging of tools and machines somewhere in the great building above us, and numbers of the tentacle-creatures had been passing our barred door carrying tools and instruments toward some work being carried out overhead. We had come to pay but little attention to them, in time, but as one passed there came a sudden rattle and clang from outside, and turning to the door we saw that one of the passing creatures had dropped a thick coil of slender metal chain upon the floor and had passed on without noticing his loss.

In an instant we were at the door and reaching through its bars toward the coil, but though we each strained our arms in turn toward it the thing lay a few tantalizing inches beyond our grasp. A moment we surveyed it, baffled, fearing the return at any moment of the creature who had dropped it, and then Dal Nara, with a sudden inspiration, lay flat upon the floor, thrusting her leg out through the grating. In a moment she had caught the coil with her foot, and in another moment we had it inside, examining it.

We found that though it was as slender as my smallest finger the chain was of incredible strength, and when we roughly estimated the extent of its thick-coiled length we discovered that it would be more than long enough to reach from our window to the street below. At once, therefore, we secreted the thing in a corner of the room and impatiently awaited the sleep-period, when we could work without fear of interruption.

At last, after what seemed measureless hours of waiting, the great horns blared forth across the city outside, and swiftly its streets emptied, the sounds in our building quieting until all was silence, except for the humming of a few watchful cones above the great condenser, and the deep droning of the condenser itself in the distance. At once we set to work at the bars of our window.

Frantically we chipped at the rock at the base of one of the metal bars, using the few odd bits of metal at our command, but at the end of two hours had done no more than scratch away a bare inch of the glowing stone. Another hour and we had laid bare from the rock the lower end of the bar, but now we knew that within minutes the sleep-period of the city outside would be ending, and into its streets would be swarming its gliding throngs, making impossible all attempts at escape. Furiously we worked, dripping now with sweat, until at last when our time-dials showed that less than half an hour remained to us I gave over the chipping at the rock and wrapped our chain firmly around the lower end of the bar we had loosened. Then stepping back into the cell and bracing ourselves against the wall below the window, we pulled backward with all our strength.

A tense moment we strained thus, the thick bar holding fast, and then abruptly it gave and fell from its socket in the wall to the floor, with a loud, ringing clang. We lay in a heap on the floor, panting and listening for any sound of alarm, then rose and swiftly fastened the chain's end to one of the remaining bars. The chain itself we dropped out of the window, watching it uncoil its length down the mighty building's glowing side until its end trailed on the empty glowing street far below. At once I motioned Hurus Hol to the window, and in a moment he had squeezed through its bars and was sliding

slowly down the chain, hand under hand. Before he was ten feet down Dal Nara was out and creeping downward likewise, and then I too squeezed through the window and followed them, downward, the three of us crawling down the chain along the huge building's steeply sloping side like three flies.

I was ten feet down from the window, now, twenty feet, and glanced down toward the glowing, empty street, five hundred feet below, and seeming five thousand. Then, at a sudden sound from above me, I looked sharply up, and as I did so the most sickening sensation of fear I had ever experienced swept over me. For at the window we had just left, twenty feet above me, one of the tentacle-creatures was leaning out, brought to our cell, I doubted not, by the metal bar's ringing fall, his white, red-rimmed eye turned full upon me.

I heard sighs of horror from my two companions beneath me, and for a single moment we hung motionless along the chain's length, swinging along the huge pyramid's glowing side at a height of hundreds of feet above the shining streets below. Then the creature raised one of its tentacles, a metal tool in its grasp, which he brought down in a sharp blow on the chain at the window's edge. Again he repeated the blow, and again.

He was cutting the chain!

5

FOR a space of seconds I hung motionless there, and then as the tool in the grasp of the creature, above came down on the chain in another sharp blow the sound galvanized me into sudden action.

"Slide on down!" I cried. They didn't, however, but followed me up the chain, though Dal Nara and I alone came to grips with the horrible dead-star creature. I gripped the

links with frantic hands, pulling myself upward toward the window and the creature at the window, twenty feet above me.

Three times the tool in his hand came down upon the chain while I struggled up toward him, and each time I expected the strand to sever and send us down to death, but the hard metal withstood the blows for the moment, and before he could strike at it again I was up to the level of the window and reaching up toward him.

As I did so, swift black tentacles thrust out and gripped Dal Nara and me, while another of the snaky arms swept up with the tool in its grasp for a blow on my head. Before it could fall, though, I had reached out with my right hand, holding to the chain with my left, and had grasped the body of the thing inside the window, pulling him outside before he had time to resist. As I did so my own hold slipped a little, so that we hung a few feet below the window, both clinging to the slender chain and both striking futilely at each other, he with the metal tool and I with my clenched fist.

A moment we hung there, swaying hundreds of feet above the luminous stone street, and then the creature's tentacles coiled swiftly around my neck, tightening, choking me. Hanging precariously to our slender strand with one hand I struck out blindly with the other, but felt consciousness leaving me as that remorseless grip tightened. Then with a last effort I gripped the chain firmly with both hands, doubled my feet under me, and kicked out with all my strength. The kick caught the cone-body of my opponent squarely, tearing him loose from his own hold on the chain, and then there was a sudden wrench at my neck and I was free of him, while beneath Dal Nara and I glimpsed his dark body whirling down toward the street below, twisting and turning in

its fall along the building's slanting side and then crashing finally down upon the smooth, shining street below, where it lay a black little huddled mass.

Hanging there I looked down, panting, and saw that Hurus Hol had reached the chain's bottom and was standing in the empty street, awaiting us. Glancing up I saw that the blows of the creature I had fought had half severed one of the links above me, but there was no time to readjust it; so with a prayer that it might hold a few moments longer Dal Nara and I began our slipping, sliding progress downward.

The sharp links tore our hands cruelly as we slid downward, and once it seemed to me that the chain gave a little beneath our weight. Apprehensively I looked upward, then down to where Hurus Hol was waving encouragement. Down, down we slid, not daring to look beneath again, not knowing how near we might be to the bottom. Then there was another slight give in the chain, a sudden grating catch, and abruptly the weakened link above snapped and we dropped headlong downward—ten feet into the arms of Hurus Hol.

A moment we sprawled in a little heap there on the glowing street and then staggered to our feet. "Out of the city!" cried Hurus Hol. "We could never get to the condenser-switch on foot—but in the cruiser there's a chance. And we have but a few minutes now before the sleep-period ends!"

Down the broad street we ran, now, through squares and avenues of glowing, mighty pyramids, crouching down once as the ever-hovering cones swept by above, and then racing on. At any moment, I knew, the great horns might blare across the city, bringing its swarming thousands into its streets, and our only chance was to win free of it before that happened.

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The Star-Stealers

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At last we were speeding down the street by which we had entered the city, and before us lay that street's end, with beyond it the vista of black forest and glowing plain over which we had come. And now we were racing over that glowing plain, a quarter-mile, a half, a mile. . . .

Abruptly from far behind came the calling, crescendo notes of the mighty horns, marking the sleep-period's end, bringing back into the streets the city's tentacle-people. It could be but moments now, we knew, before our escape was discovered, and as we panted on at our highest speed we listened for the sounding of the alarm behind us.

It came! When we had drawn to within a half-mile of the black forest where our cruiser lay hidden, another great tumult of horn-notes burst out over the glowing city behind, high and shrill and raging. And glancing back we saw swarms of the black cones rising from the pyramidal buildings' summits, circling, searching, speeding out over the glowing plains around the city, a compact mass of them racing straight toward us.

"On!" cried Hurus Hol. "It's our last chance—to get to the cruiser!"

STAGGERING, stumbling, with the last of our strength we sped on, over the glowing soil and rocks, toward the rim of the black forest which lay now a scant quarter-mile ahead. Then suddenly Hurus Hol stumbled, tripped and fell. I halted, turned toward him, then turned again as Dal Nara shouted thickly and pointed upward. We had been sighted by the speeding cones above and two of them were driving straight down toward us.

A moment we stood there, rigid, while the great cones dipped toward us, waiting for the death that would

crash down upon us from them. Then suddenly a great dark shape loomed in the air above and behind us, from which sprang out swift shafts of brilliant green light, the dazzling decohesion ray, striking the two swooping cones and sending them down in twin torrents of shattered wreckage. And now the mighty bulk behind us swept swiftly down upon us, and we saw that it was our cruiser.

Smoothly it shot down to the ground, and we stumbled to its side, through the waiting open door. As I staggered up to the bridgeroom the third officer was shouting in my ear. "We sighted you from the forest," he was crying. "Came out in the cruiser to get you——"

But now I was in the bridgeroom, brushing the wheelman from the controls, sending our ship slanting sharply up toward the zenith. Hurus Hol was at my side, now, pointing toward the great telechart and shouting something in my ear. I glanced over, and my heart stood still. For the great dark disk on the chart had swept down to within an inch of the shining line around our sun-circle, the danger-line.

"The condenser!" I shouted. "We must get to that switch—turn it off! It's our only chance!"

We were racing through the air toward the luminous city, now, and ahead a mighty swarm of the cones was gathering and forming to meet us, while from behind and from each side came other swarms, driving on toward us. Then the door clicked open and Dal Nara burst into the bridgeroom.

"The ship's ray-tubes are useless!" she cried. "They've used the last charge in the ray-tanks!"

At that cry the controls quivered under my hands, the ship slowed, stopped. Silence filled the bridgeroom, filled all the cruiser, the last silence of despair. We had failed. Weaponless our ship hung there, motionless, while toward it from all di-

rections leaped the swift and swarming cones, in dozens, in scores, in hundreds, leaping toward us, long black messengers of death, while on the great telechart the mighty dark star leapt closer toward the shining circle that was our sun, toward the fateful line around it. We had failed, and death was upon us.

And now the black swarms of the cones were very near us, and were slowing a little, as though fearing some ruse on our part, were slowing but moving closer, closer, while we awaited them in a last utter stupor of despair. Closer they came, closer, closer. . . .

A ringing, exultant cry suddenly sounded from somewhere in the cruiser beneath me, taken up by a sudden babel of voices, and then Dal Nara cried out hoarsely, beside me, and pointed up through our upper observation-windows toward a long, shining, slender shape that was driving down toward us out of the upper air, while behind it drove a vast swarm of other and larger shapes, long and black and mighty.

"It's our own ship!" Dal Nara was shouting, insanely. "It's Ship 16! They escaped, got back to the Galaxy—and look there—behind them—it's the fleet, the Federation fleet!"

There was a wild singing of blood in my ears as I looked up, saw the mighty swarm of black shapes that were speeding down upon us behind the shining cruiser, the five thousand mighty battle-cruisers of the Federation fleet.

The fleet! The massed fighting-ships of the Galaxy, cruisers from Antares and Sirius and Regulus and Spica, the keepers of the Milky Way patrol, the picked fighters of a universe! Ships with which I had cruised from Arcturus to Deneb, beside which I had battled in many an interstellar fight. The fleet! They were straightening, wheeling, hovering, high above us, and then they were driving down upon the massed

swarms of cones around us in one titanic, simultaneous swoop.

Then around us the air flashed brilliant with green ray and bursting flares, as de-cohesion rays and etheric bombs crashed and burst from ship to ship. Weaponless our cruiser hung there, at the center of that gigantic battle, while around us the mighty cruisers of the Galaxy and the long black cones of the tentacle-people crashed and whirled and flared, swooping and dipping and racing upon each other, whirling down to the glowing world below in scores of shattered wrecks, vanishing in silent flares of blinding light. From far away across the surface of the luminous world beneath, the great swarms of cones drove on toward the battle, from the shining towers of cities far away, racing fearlessly to the attack, sinking and falling and crumbling beneath the terrible rays of the leaping ships above, ramming and crashing with them to the ground in sacrificial plunges. But swiftly, now, the cones were vanishing beneath the brilliant rays.

Then Hurus Hol was at my side, shouting and pointing down toward the glowing city below. "The condenser!" he cried, pointing to where its blue radiance still flared on. "The dark star—look!" He flung a hand toward the telechart, where the dark star disk was but a scant half-inch from the shining line around our sun-circle, a tiny gap that was swiftly closing. I glanced toward the battle that raged around us, where the Federation cruisers were sending the cones down to destruction by swarms, now, but unheeding of the condenser below. A bare half-mile beneath us lay that condenser, and its cage-pillar switch, which a single shaft of the green ray would have destroyed instantly. And our ray-tubes were useless!

Then wild resolve flared up in my brain and I slammed down the levers in my hands, sent our ship racing

down toward the condenser and its upheld cage like a released thunderbolt of hurtling metal. "*Hold tight!*" I screamed as we thundered down. "*I'm going to ram the switch!*"

And now up toward us were rushing the brilliant blue hemispheres of the pit, the great pillar and upheld cage beside them, toward which we flashed with the speed of lightning. *Crash!*—and a tremendous shock shook the cruiser from stem to stern as its prow tore through the upheld metal cage, ripping it from its supporting pillar and sending it crashing to the ground. Our cruiser spun, hovered for a moment as though to whirl down to destruction, then steadied, while we at the window gazed downward, shouting.

For beneath us the blinding radiance of the massed hemispheres had suddenly snapped out! Around and above us the great battle had died, the last of the cones tumbling to the ground beneath the rays of the mighty fleet, and now we turned swiftly to the telechart. Tensely we scanned it. Upon it the great dark-star disk was creeping still toward the line around our sun-circle, creeping slower and slower toward it but still moving on, on, on. . . . Had we lost, at the last moment? Now the black disk, hardly moving, was all but touching the shining line, separated from it by only a hair's-breadth gap. A single moment we watched while it hovered thus, a moment in which was settled the destiny of a sun. And then a babel of incoherent cries came from our lips. For the tiny gap was *widening!*

The black disk was moving back, was curving outward again from our sun and from the Galaxy's edge, curving out once more into the blank depths of space whence it had come, without the star it had planned to steal. Out, out, out—and we knew, at last, that we had won.

And the mighty fleet of ships around us knew, from their own tele-

charts. They were massing around us and hanging motionless while beneath us the palely glowing gigantic dark star swept on, out into the darkness of trackless space until it hung like a titanic feeble moon in the heavens before us, retreating farther and farther from the shining stars of our Galaxy, carrying with it the glowing cities and the hordes of the tentacle-peoples, never to return. There in the bridgroom, with our massed ships around us, we three watched it go, then turned back toward our own yellow star, serene and far and benignant, that yellow star around which swung our own eight little worlds. And then Dal Nara flung out a hand toward it, half weeping now.

"The sun!" she cried. "The sun! The good old sun, that we fought for and saved! *Our sun, till the end of time!*"

6

IT WAS on a night a week later that Dal Nara and I said farewell to Hurus Hol, standing on the roof of that same great building on Neptune from which we had started with our fifty cruisers weeks before. We had learned, in that week, how the only survivor of those cruisers, Ship 16, had managed to shake off the pursuing cones in that first fierce attack and had sped back to the Galaxy to give the alarm, of how the mighty Federation fleet had raced through the Galaxy from beyond Antares in answer to that alarm, speeding out toward the approaching dark star and reaching it just in time to save our own ship, and our sun.

The other events of that week, the honors which had been loaded upon us, I shall not attempt to describe. There was little in the solar system which we three could not have had for the asking, but Hurus Hol was content to follow the science that was his life-work, while Dal Nara, after the manner of her sex through all the ages, sought a beauty parlor, and I

asked only to continue with our cruiser in the service of the Federation fleet. The solar system was home to us, would always be home to us, but never, I knew, would either of us be able to break away from the fascination of the great fleet's interstellar patrol, the flashing from sun to sun, the long silent hours in cosmic night and stellar glare. We would be star-rovers, she and I, until the end.

So now, ready to rejoin the fleet, I stood on the great building's roof, the mighty black bulk of our cruiser behind us and the stupendous canopy of the Galaxy's glittering suns over our heads. In the streets below, too, were other lights, brilliant flares, where thronging crowds still celebrated the escape of their worlds. And now Hurus Hol was speaking, more moved than ever I had seen him.

"If Nal Jak were here——" he said, and we were all silent for a moment. Then his hand came out toward us and silently we wrung it, turning toward the cruiser's door.

As it slammed shut behind us we were ascending to the bridgeroom, and from there we glimpsed now the great roof dropping away beneath us as we slanted up from it once more, the dark figure of Hurus Hol outlined for a moment at its edge against the lights below, then vanishing. And the world beneath us was shrinking, vanishing once more, until at last of all the solar system behind us there was visible only the single yellow spark that was our sun.

Then about our outward-racing cruiser was darkness, the infinite void's eternal night—night and the unchanging, glittering hosts of wheeling, flaming stars.