

Weird Tales

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$2.50 a year in the United States, \$3.00 a year in Canada. English office: Charles Lavell, 13, Serjeant's Inn, Fleet Street, E. C. 4, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 810 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill.

FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

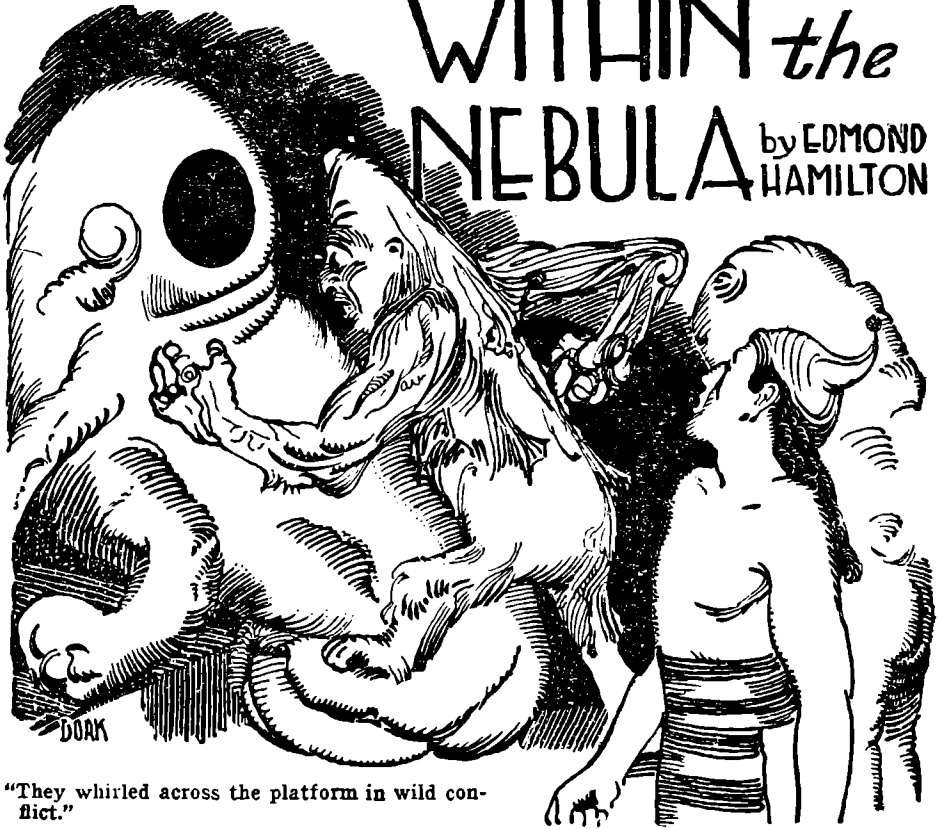
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WITHIN *the* NEBULA by EDMOND HAMILTON



"They whirled across the platform in wild conflict."

STANDING at the controls, beside me, the silent steersman raised his hand for a moment to point forward through the pilot room's transparent wall.

"Canopus at last," he said, and I nodded. Together, and in silence, we gazed ahead.

Before and around us there stretched away the magnificent panorama of interstellar space, familiar enough to our eyes but ever new, a vast reach of deep black sky dotted thickly with the glittering hosts of stars. The blood-red of Antares, the pale green of great Sirius, the warm, golden light of Capella, they flamed in the firmament about us like splendid jewels of light. And dead ahead there shone the one orb that dwarfed and dimmed all the others, a titanic

radiant white sun whose blazing circle seemed to fill the heavens before us, the mighty star of Canopus, vastest of all the Galaxy's thronging suns.

For all that I had visited it many times before, it was with something of awe that I contemplated the great white sun, as our ship flashed on toward it. Its colossal blazing bulk, I knew, was greater far than the whole of our own little solar system, millions of times larger than our own familiar little star, infinitely the most glorious of all the swarming suns. It seemed fitting, indeed, that at Canopus had been located the seat of the great Council of Suns of which I was myself a member, representing our own little solar system in that mighty deliberative body whose members were drawn from every peopled star.

In thoughtful silence I gazed toward the mighty sun ahead, and for a time there was no sound in the bridgeroom except for the deep humming of the ship's generators, whose propulsion-vibrations flung us on through space. Then, against the dazzling glare of the gigantic star ahead, there appeared a tiny black dot, expanding swiftly in size as we raced on toward it. Around and beyond it other dots were coming into view, also, changing as we flashed on to disks, to globes, to huge and swarming planets that spun in vast orbits about their mighty parent sun. And it was toward the largest and inmost of these whirling worlds, the seat of the great Council, that our ship was now slanting swiftly downward.

Beneath us I could see the great planet rapidly expanding and broadening, until its tremendous coppery sphere filled all the heavens below. By that time our velocity had slackened to less than a light-speed, and even this speed decreased still further as we entered the zone of traffic about the great planet. For a few moments we dropped cautiously downward through the swarming masses of interstellar ships which jammed the upper levels, and then had swept past the busy traffic-boats into one of the great descension-lanes, and were moving smoothly down toward the planet's surface.

Around us there swarmed all the myriads of inbound ships that filled the descension-lane, drawn from every quarter of the Galaxy toward Canopus, the center and capital of our universe. Long cargo-ships from far Spica there were, laden with all the strange merchandise of that sun's circling worlds; luxurious passenger-liners from Regulus and Altair, filled with tourists eager for their first sight of great Canopus; swift little boats from the thronging suns and worlds of the great Hercules cluster; battered tramps which owned no sun as home, but cruised eternally through the Galaxy, carrying chance cargoes

from star to star; and here and there among the swarms of alien ships a human-manned craft from our own distant little solar system. All these and a myriad others raced smoothly beside and around us as we shot down toward the mighty world beneath.

Swiftly, though, the traffic about us branched away and thinned as we dropped nearer to the planet's surface. Beneath the light of the immense white sun above, its landscape lay clearly revealed, a far-sweeping panorama of smoothly sloping plains and valleys, parklike in its alternation of lawn and forest. Here and there on the surface of this world sprawled its shining cities, over whose streets and towers our cruiser sped as we flashed on. Then, far ahead, a single mighty gleaming spire became visible against the distant horizon, growing as we sped on toward it into a colossal tower all of two thousand feet square at its base, and which aspired into the radiant sunlight for fully ten thousand feet. On each side of it there branched away a curving line of smaller buildings, huge enough in themselves but dwarfed to toylike dimensions by the looming grandeur of the stupendous tower. And it was down toward the smooth sward at the tower's base that our ship was slanting now, for this was the seat of the great Council of Suns itself.

Down we sped toward the mighty structure's base, down over the great buildings on either side which housed the different departments of the Galaxy's government, down until our ship had come smoothly to rest on the ground a hundred feet from the tower itself. Then the ship's hull-door was clanging open, and a moment later I had stepped onto the ground outside and was striding across the smooth sward toward the mighty tower. Through its high-arched doorway I passed, and down the tremendous corridor inside toward the huge doors at its end, which automatically slid smoothly sidewise as I approached. The next moment I had

passed through them and stood in the Hall of the Council itself.

Involuntarily, as always, I paused on entering, so breath-taking was the immensity of the place. A single vast circular room, with a diameter of near two thousand feet, it covered almost all the mighty tower's first floor. From the edge of the great circle the room's floor sloped gently down toward its center, like a vast shallow bowl, and at the center stood the small black platform of the Council Chief. Out from that platform back clear to the great room's towering walls were ranged the countless rows of seats, just filling now with the great Council's thousands of members.

Beings there were among those thousands from every peopled sun in all the Galaxy's hosts, drawn here like myself each to represent his star in this great Council which ruled our universe. Creatures there were utterly weird and alien in appearance, natives of the whirling worlds of the Galaxy's farthest stars—creatures from Aldebaran, turtle-men of the amphibian races of that star; fur-covered and slow-moving beings from the planets of dying Betelgeuse; great octopus-creatures from mighty Vega; invertebrate insect-men from the races of Procyon; strange, dark-winged bat-folk from the weird worlds of Deneb; these, and a thousand others, were gathered in that vast assemblage, forms utterly different from each other physically, but able to mix and understand each other on the common plane of intelligence.

WITHIN another moment I had passed down the broad aisle and had slipped into my own seat, and now I saw that on the black platform at the room's center there stood silent the Council Chief. A strange enough figure he made, for he was of the races of Canopus, natives of this giant star-system, a great, unhuman head with no body and with but a single staring eye, carrying himself on tiny, pipe-stem limbs. Silently he stood

there, contemplating the gathering members. Within another minute all had taken their seats, and then a sudden hush swept over them as the Council Chief stepped forward and began to speak, in the tongue that has become universal throughout the Galaxy, his strange, high voice carried to every end of the vast room by the great amplifiers which make every whisper in it clearly heard.

"Members of the Council," he said, "I have called this meeting, have summoned you here to Canopus, each from his native star, because I have to place before you a matter of the utmost importance. I have summoned you here because there has risen to face us the most vital problem that has yet confronted us in our government of the Galaxy—the greatest and most terrible danger, in fact, that has ever threatened our universe!

"Other dangers, other problems, have faced us in the past, and all these we have overcome, by massing all our knowledge and science, have ruled with more and more power over the inanimate matter of our universe, our Galaxy. We have saved planets and their peoples from extinction, by shifting them from dying old suns to flaming new ones. We have succeeded in breaking up and annihilating some of the great comets whose headlong flights were carrying destruction across the Galaxy. We have even dared to change the course of suns, to prevent collisions between them that would have annihilated their circling worlds. It might seem, indeed, that we, the massed peoples of the Galaxy, have risen to such power that all things in it are subject to our will, obedient to our commands. But we have not. One thing alone in the Galaxy remains beyond our power to change or alter, one thing beside which all our power and our science are as nothing. And that is the nebula.

"A nebula is the vastest thing in all our universe, and the most mysterious. A gigantic mass of glowing gas

that stretches across countless billions of miles of space, its mighty bulk flames in the heavens like a universe of fire. Beside its vast dimensions all the suns of the Galaxy are but as sparks beside a great, consuming blaze. Here and there in our Galaxy lie these mighty mysteries, these flaming nebulae, and mightiest of all is that one which we call the Orion Nebula, that gigantic globe of flaming gas which measures light-years in diameter, burning in giant splendor at the Galaxy's heart. We know that the great nebula is growing slowly smaller, that through the eons it contracts to form new blazing stars, but what its constitution may be, what mysteries it may hide, has never been known, since it would be annihilation for any ship to approach too near to its fiery splendor, and all our interstellar traffic has detoured always far around its flaming mass. Because of that inaccessibility no large attention has ever been paid to the great nebula, nor would there be now, had not something been discovered but now by our scientists regarding it which seems to herald the end of our universe.

"As I have said, this nebula, this gigantic globe of flaming gas, lies practically motionless in space at the heart of our Galaxy. A few weeks ago, however, it was discovered by our astronomers that the great flaming sphere of the nebula had begun slowly to revolve, to spin, and that as the days went by it was spinning faster and faster. Through the weeks since then our astronomers have watched it closely, and ever faster it has spun, until now it is revolving at a terrific rate, a rate that is still steadily increasing. And that accelerating spin of the huge nebula must result, inevitably, in the doom of our universe.

"For our scientists have calculated that within two more weeks the nebula's rate of spin will have become so great that it will no longer be able to hold together, that it will disintegrate, break up, its gigantic masses of incandescent gases flying off in all di-

rections like the pieces of a bursting fly-wheel. And those colossal clouds of flaming gas, flying out through our Galaxy, our universe, will inevitably sweep over and destroy countless thousands of our suns and worlds, annihilating the worlds like midgets in candle-flame, changing the suns into nebulous masses of flaming gas like themselves, smashing gigantically through and across the Galaxy and destroying the gravitational balance of its whirling suns and worlds until in a great chaos of crashing stars and planets our universe ends as a vast, cosmic wreck, our organizations and our civilizations gone forever!"

The Council Chief paused for a moment, and in that moment there was silence over all the great hall, a silence unnatural, terrible, unbroken by any slightest sound. I saw the members about me leaning forward, gazing tensely toward the Council Chief, and when he spoke again his words seemed to come to us through that strained silence as though from some remoteness of distance.

"Terrible as this peril is," he was saying, "we must face it. Flight is impossible, for where could we flee? We have but one chance to save ourselves, our universe, and that is to halt the spinning of the great nebula before the few days left us have passed, before this cosmic cataclysm takes place. Some extraordinary force or forces have set the great nebula to spinning thus, and if we could venture out to the nebula, discover the nature of those forces, we might be able to counteract them, to stop the nebula's spin and save our suns and worlds.

"It is impossible, of course, for any of our ordinary interstellar ships to attempt this, since any that approached the great nebula would perish instantly in its flaming heat. It chances, however, that some of our scientists here have been working for months on the problem of devising new heat-resistant materials, materials capable of resisting temperatures

which would destroy other substances. They have worked on the principle that heat-resistance is a matter of atomic structure. Steel, for instance, resists heat and fire better than wood because its atomic structure, the arrangement of its atoms, is more stable, less easily broken up. And following this principle they have devised a new metallic compound or alloy whose atomic structure is infinitely more stable than that of any material known to us previously, and which is able to resist temperatures of thousands of degrees.

"Of this heat-resistant material an interstellar cruiser was constructed, a cruiser which could venture into regions of heat where other ships would perish instantly. It had been the intention to use this cruiser to explore solar coronas, but at my order it has been brought here to the Council Hall, equipped for action. For it is my intention to use this cruiser to venture out close to the great nebula's flaming fires, which it alone can do, and make a last effort to discover and counteract whatever force or forces there are causing the accelerating spin of the nebula that means doom to us. The cruiser itself is not a large one, and with its present equipment can hold but three for this trip, three on whom must rest all the chances for escape of our universe. And these three I intend to choose now from among you, three whose past careers and interstellar experience make them best fitted for this hazardous and all-important trip."

He paused again, and over the massed members there swept now a whisper of excitement, a low babel of a thousand unlike voices that stilled suddenly as the Council Chief again spoke, his high, clear voice sounding across the great room like a whip-crack.

"Sar Than of Arcturus!"

As he called the name a single figure rose from among the members to my left, a bulbous body supported above the ground by four powerful

thick tentacles of muscle which served both as arms and legs, while set upon the body was the round, neckless head, with its two quick, intelligent eyes and narrow mouth. A moment the Arcturian paused on rising, then stepped out into the aisle and down toward the central platform. And now the voice of the Council Chief cut again across the rising clamor of the members.

"Jor Dahat of Capella!"

Before me now another figure rose, one of the strange plant-men of Capella, of the people who had evolved to intelligence and power from the lower plant-races there; his body an upright cylinder of smooth, fibrous flesh, supported by two short, thick legs and with a pair of powerful upper arms, above which was the conical head whose two green-pupiled eyes and close-set ears and mouth completed the figure. In a moment he too had strode down toward the platform, and then, over the tumultuous shouts of those in the great hall, which had risen now to a steady roar of voices, there came the clear voice of the Council Chief, with the third name.

"Ker Kal of Sun-828!"

For a moment I sat silent, my brain whirling, the words of the Council Chief drumming in my ears, and then heard the excited voices of the members about me, felt myself stumbling to my feet and down the aisle in turn toward the platform. Beating in my dazed ears now was the tremendous shouting clamor of all the gathered members, and beneath that surging thunder of thousands of voices I sensed but dimly the things about me, the Arcturian and Capellan beside me, the figure of the Council Chief on the platform beyond them. Then I saw the latter raise a slender arm, felt the uproar about me swiftly diminishing, until complete silence reigned once more. And then the Council Chief was speaking again, this time to us.

"Sar Than, Jor Dahat and Ker

Kal," he addressed us, "you three are chosen to go where only three can go, to approach the nebula and make a final effort to discover and counteract whatever force or forces there are causing this cataclysm that threatens us. Your cruiser is ready and you will start at once, and to you I have no orders to give, no instructions, no advice. My only word to you is this: If you fail in this mission, where failure seems all but inevitable, indeed, our Galaxy meets its doom, the countless trillions of our races their deaths, the civilizations we have built up in millions of years annihilation. But if you succeed, if you find what forces have caused the spinning of the mighty nebula and are able to halt that spin, then your names shall not die while any in the Galaxy live. For then you will have done what never before was done or dreamed of, will have stayed with your hands a colossal cosmic wreck, will have saved a universe itself from death!"

2

AS THE door of the little pilot room clicked open behind me I half turned from my position at the controls, to see my two companions enter. And as the Arcturian and Capellan stepped over to my side I nodded toward the broad fore-window.

"Two more hours and we'll be there," I said.

Side by side we three gazed ahead. About us once more there stretched the utter blackness of the great void, ablaze with its jeweled suns. Far behind shone the brilliant white star that was Canopus, and to our right the great twin suns of Castor and Pollux, and above and beyond them the yellow spark that was the sun of my own little solar system. On each side and behind us hung the splendid starry canopy, but ahead it was blotted out by a single vast circle of glowing light that filled the heavens before us, titanic, immeasurable, the mighty nebula that was our goal.

For more than ten days we had watched the vast globe of flaming gas largening across the heavens as we raced on toward it, in the heat-resistant cruiser that had been furnished us by the Council. Days they were in which our generators had hummed always at their highest power, propelling our craft forward through space with the swiftness of thought,—almost—long, changeless days in which the alternate watches in the pilot room and the occasional inspection of the throbbing generators had formed our only occupations.

On and on and on we had flashed, past sun after sun, star system after star system. Many times we had swerved from our course as our meteorometers warned us of vast meteor swarms ahead, and more than once we had veered to avoid some thundering dark star which our charts showed near us, but always the prow of our craft had swung back toward the great nebula. Ever onward toward it we had raced, day after day, watching its glowing sphere widen across the heavens, until now at last we were drawing within sight of our journey's end, and were flashing over the last few billions of miles that separated us from our goal.

And now, as we drew thus nearer toward the nebula's fiery mass, we saw it for the first time in all its true grandeur. A vast sphere of glowing light, of incandescent gases, it flamed before us like some inconceivably titanic sun, reaching from horizon to horizon, stunning in its very magnitude. Up and outward from the great fiery globe there soared vast tongues of flaming gas, mighty prominences of incalculable length, leaping out from the gigantic spinning sphere. For the sphere, the nebula, was spinning. We saw that, now, and could mark the turning of its vast surface by the position of those leaping tongues, and though that turning seemed slow to our eyes by reason of the nebula's very vastness, we knew that in reality it was whirling at a terrific rate.

For a long time there was silence in the little pilot room while we three gazed ahead, the glowing light from the vast nebula before us beating in through the broad window and illuminating all about us in its glare. At last Sar Than, beside me, spoke.

"One sees now why no interstellar ship has ever dared to approach the nebula," he said, his eyes on the colossal sea of flame before us.

I nodded at the Areturian's comment. "Only our own ship would dare to come as close as we are now," I told him. "The temperature outside is hundreds of degrees, now." And I pointed toward a dial that recorded the outside heat.

"But how near can we go to it?" asked Jor Dahat. "How much heat can our cruiser stand?"

"Some thousands of degrees," I said, answering the plant-man's last question first. "We can venture within a few thousand miles of the nebula's surface without danger, I think. But if we were to go farther, if we were to plunge into its fires, even our ship could not resist the tremendous heat there for long, and would perish in a few minutes. We will be able, though, to skim above the surface without danger."

"You plan to do that, to search above the nebula's surface for the forces that have set it spinning?" asked the Capellan, and I nodded.

"Yes. There may be great ether-currents of some kind there which are responsible for this spin, or perhaps other forces of which we know nothing. If we can only find what is causing it, there will be at least a chance——" And I was silent, gazing thoughtfully toward the far-flung raging fires ahead.

Now, as our ship raced on toward that mighty ocean of flaming gas, the pointer on the outside-heat dial was creeping steadily forward, though the ship's interior was but slightly warmer, due to the super-insulation of its walls. We were passing into a

region of heat, we knew, that would have destroyed any ship but our own, and that thought held us silent as our humming craft raced on. And now the sky before us, a single vast expanse of glowing flame, was creeping downward across our vision as the cruiser's bow swung up. Minutes more, and the whole vast flaming nebula lay stretched beneath us, instead of before us, and then we were dropping smoothly down toward it.

Down we fell, my hand on the control lever gradually decreasing our speed, now moving at a single light-speed, now at half of that, and still slower and slower, until at last our craft hung motionless a scant thousand miles above the nebula's flaming surface, a tiny atom in size compared to the colossal universe of fire above which it hovered. For from horizon to horizon beneath us, now, stretched the nebula, in terrible grandeur. Its flaming sea, we saw, was traversed by great waves and currents, currents that met here and there in gigantic fiery maelstroms, while far across its surface we saw, now and then, great leaping prominences or geysers of flaming gas, that towered for an instant to immense heights and then rushed back down into the fiery sea beneath. To us, riding above that burning ocean, it seemed at that moment that in all the universe was only flame and gas, so brain-numbing was the fiery nebula's magnitude.

Hanging there in our little cruiser we stared down at it, the awe we felt reflected in each other's eyes. I saw now by the dial that the temperature about us was truly terrific, over a thousand degrees, and what it might be in the raging fires below I could not guess. But nowhere was there any sign of what might have set the great nebula to spinning, for our instruments recorded no ether-disturbances around the surface, nor any other phenomena which might give us a clue. And, looking down, I think that we all felt, indeed, that nothing was in reality capable of affecting in any

way this awesome nebula, the vastest thing in all our universe.

At last I turned to the others. "There's nothing here," I said. "Nothing to show what's caused the nebula's spinning. We must go on, across its surface——"

With the words I reached forward toward the control levers, then abruptly whirled around as there came a sudden cry from Sar Than, at the window.

"Look!" cried the Arcturian, pointing down through the window, his eyes starting. "Below us—look!"

I gazed down, then felt the blood drive from my heart at what I saw. For directly beneath us one of the vast prominences of flaming gas was suddenly shooting up from the nebula's surface, straight toward us, a gigantic tongue of fire beside which our ship was but as a midge beside a great blaze. I shouted, sprang to the controls, but even as I laid hands on the levers there was a tremendous rush of blinding flame all about our ship, and then we three had been flung violently into a corner of the pilot room and the cruiser was being whirled blindly about with lightning speed by the vast current of flaming gas that had gripped it.

All about us was the thunderous roaring of the fires that held us, and now as we sprawled helpless on the room's floor I sensed that our ship was falling, plunging down with the downward-sinking geyser of flame that held it. Struggling to gain my feet, while the pilot room spun dizzily about me, I glimpsed through the shifting fires outside the window the nebula's flaming surface, just below us, a raging sea of fiery gas toward which we were dropping plummetlike. Then, as a fresh gyration of the plunging ship flung me once more to the floor, I heard the thundering roar about us suddenly intensified, terrible beyond expression, while now through the window was visible only a single solid mass of blinding flame, and while our cruiser at the same moment

rocked and whirled crazily beneath the impetus of a dozen different forces. And as understanding of what had happened flashed across my brain I cried out hoarsely to my two companions.

"The nebula!" I cried. "That current that held us has sucked us down into the nebula itself!"

All about us now was only one tremendous sheet of fire, whose heat was rapidly penetrating through even our heat-resistant walls and windows. Swiftly the air in the little pilot room was becoming hot, suffocating, and already the walls were burning to the touch. The ship, I knew, could not stand such heat for many minutes more, yet every moment was taking us farther into the nebula's fiery depths, whirling us wildly on with velocity inconceivable. Born by its mighty interior currents we were sweeping on and on into that universe of flame, its vast fires roaring about us like the thunder of doom, deafening, awful, a cosmic, bellowing clamor that was like the mighty shouting of a universe made vocal.

On and on it roared, about us, and on and on we whirled into the depths of those mighty fires, toward our doom. The air had become stifling, unbreathable, and the walls were beginning to glow dully. Now, with a last effort, I dragged myself from support to support until I had clutched the control levers, opening them to the last notch. Yet though the generators beneath hummed with highest power it was as though they were silent, for in the grip of the nebula's giant fire-currents the cruiser plunged madly on. And as its whirling catapulted me again to the room's corner, where my two companions clung, I felt my lungs scorching with each panting breath, felt my senses leaving me.

Then, through the unconsciousness that was creeping upon me, I heard a grating wrench from somewhere in the cruiser's walls, a loud and ominous cracking, and knew that under

the terrific fires around us those walls were already warping, giving way. Another wrenching crack came, and another, sounding loud in my ears above the thunderous roar of the flames about us. In a moment the walls would give completely, and in the rushing fires of the nebula about us we would meet the end. In a moment—

But what was that? The thunderous clamor about us had suddenly dwindled, ceased, and at the same moment our ship had righted itself, was humming serenely on. Slowly I raised my head, then stared in utter astonishment. The fires outside the windows, the terrific sea of flame about us, had vanished, and we were again flashing on through open space. And now Jor Dahat beside me had seen also, and was rising to his feet.

"We're out of the nebula!" he cried. "That current must have taken us back up to the surface—back out into space again—"

He was at the window now, gazing eagerly out, while I struggled up in turn. And as I did so I saw awe falling upon his face as he gazed, and heard from him a whispered exclamation of utter astonishment. Then I, too, was on my feet, with Sar Than, and we were at the window beside him, staring forth in turn.

MY FIRST impression was of vast space, a colossal reach of space that stretched far away before us, and into which our ship was racing on. And then I saw, with sudden awe and wonder, that this vast space was not the unlimited, unbounded space we were accustomed to, but was limited, was bounded, bounded by a colossal sheet of flowing flame that hemmed it in in all directions. Above and below and before and behind us stretched this mighty wall of flame, a gigantic shell of fire that enclosed within itself the vast space in which our cruiser raced, a space large enough to hold within it a dozen solar systems like my own. Stunned, we

gazed out into that mighty flame-bounded space, and then I flung out a hand toward it in sudden comprehension.

"We're inside the nebula!" I cried. "It's hollow! This vast open space lies at its heart, and those currents carried us down into it!"

For I saw now that this was the explanation. Unsuspected by any in the Galaxy the mighty nebula was hollow, its gigantic globe of flaming gas holding at its heart this mighty empty space, a space mighty in extent to our eyes, but small compared to the thickness of the great shell of fire that enclosed it. And down through that fire, that vast ocean of flame, the currents of the nebula had brought us, from its outer surface, down into this great space at its heart of which none had ever dreamed, and into which we had been the first in all the Galaxy to penetrate.

While we gazed across it, stunned, our cruiser was racing on into this vast hollow, away from the wall of flame behind us from which we had just emerged. And now, as we flashed on, Sar Than cried out too, and pointed ahead. There, standing out black against the encircling walls of fire in the distance, was a small round spot, a spot that was growing to a black globe as we hurtled on toward it, a globe that hung motionless at the center of this mighty space, here at the nebula's heart. We were racing straight into the great cavity toward it, and now there came a low exclamation from Jor Dahat, beside me, as his eyes took in the great globe ahead.

"A planet!" he whispered. "A planet here—within the nebula!"

My own eyes were fixed upon it, and slowly I nodded, but made no other answer as we flashed on toward the object of our attention, the black sphere ahead. And now as we swept on we saw that it was a sphere of truly titanic dimensions, larger by far than any of the Galaxy's countless worlds, and that as it hung there, at the nebula's heart, it was

slowly revolving, spinning, as fast or faster than the nebula itself. Black and mighty it hung there, while all around it, millions of miles from it, there flamed the nebula's encircling fires. On and on we raced toward it, and for all those minutes of flashing flight none of us spoke, and there was no sound in the pilot room but the throbbing drone of the generators below. I think that we all felt instinctively that in the grim, colossal globe ahead lay the answer to what we had come to solve, and as we hurtled on toward it we watched it broadening before us in tense silence.

Larger and larger it was becoming, larger until its great black circle filled half the heavens before us. By then I had decreased our speed to a fraction of its former figure, and as we swept in toward the giant world I lessened it still further. Slowly, ever more slowly we moved, and now were circling above the great black planet, were beginning to drop cautiously down toward it. Eagerly we watched as the mighty world's surface changed from convex to concave, and as we dropped on we saw the needle of our atmosphere-pressure dial moving steadily forward, to show that this strange world had air, at least. Then all else was forgotten as our eyes took in the scene below.

I think that we had all half expected to see some evidence of life and civilization on this strange world, some building or group of buildings, at least. But there was none such. Beneath us lay only a smooth black plain, extending from horizon to horizon, devoid of hill or stream or valley, in so far as we could see, unnaturally smooth and level. And as we dropped nearer, ever nearer, the surprize we felt rapidly intensified, until when at last we hung motionless a hundred feet above the surface of this world exclamations of utter astonishment broke from us. For seen thus near, the surface of this mighty planet was as utterly

smooth and level as it had seemed from high above, a black, gleaming plain without an inch-high elevation or depression, an inconceivably strange smooth expanse of black metal, that stretched evenly away in every direction to the horizon, smoothly covering this colossal world.

We looked at each other, a little helplessly, then down again toward the smooth and gleaming surface below. In that surface was no visible opening, no sign of joint or crack, even, nothing but the smooth blank metal. Then with sudden resolution I thrust forward the levers in my hands, sent our cruiser racing low across the surface of the giant, metal-sheathed planet, while we gazed intently across that surface in search of any sign that might explain the enigma of its existence. On we sped, while beneath us flashed back the smooth metal plain, mile after endless mile. Then, gazing ahead, my eyes suddenly narrowed and I raised a pointing hand. For there, far ahead, I had glimpsed an opening in the gleaming surface, a round black opening that was resolving itself into a vast circular pit as our cruiser raced on toward it.

Nearer and nearer we flashed toward it, with Sar Than and Jor Dathat beside me gazing forward, their interest as tense as my own. And now we saw that the pit was of gigantic size, its circular mouth all of five miles in diameter, and that from its center there drove up toward the zenith a flickering beam of pale and ghostlike white light, so pale as hardly to be visible, a livid white ray that stabbed straight up toward the fires of the nebula far above. We were very near to the pale beam, now, flashing above the huge pit straight toward it. I had a glimpse of the great pit's perpendicular black metal walls, dropping down for miles into depths inconceivable, of something in those dusky depths

that burned like a great white star of light, and then Jor Dahat suddenly uttered a choking cry, flinging an arm out toward the livid ray before us.

"That ray!" he cried. "It's not light—it's force! The nebula—stop the ship!"

At that cry my hand flew out to the levers, but a moment too late. For before I could throw them back, could slow or stay our progress, we had raced straight into the great pale beam. The next moment there came a terrific crash, as though we had collided with a solid wall; our ship rocked drunkenly in midair for a single instant, and then was whirling crazily downward into the depths of the mighty pit below us.

3

MY ONLY memory now of that mad plunge downward is of the pilot room spinning about me, and of the whistling roar of winds outside caused by the speed of our fall. The shock of our collision had apparently silenced our generators, and it was moments before I could struggle up to the controls and make an effort to start them. I jerked open the switches and there came a hum of power from beneath; but the next moment with a jarring, grinding shock our cruiser had met the great pit's floor, flinging us once more to the floor.

For a moment we lay motionless there, and in that moment I became aware of sounds outside, soft rustling sounds that were hardly audible, as of soft-footed creatures moving about. The second shock had again silenced the vibration-mechanism, which I had started the moment before our crash, but I had no doubt that it was only that last-minute action on my part that had slowed our fall enough to save our ship and ourselves from annihilation. Now, staggering to my feet, I reached for the switch of the pilot room's little emer-

gency door, sending it sliding back, admitting a rush of warm, fresh air, and then with my two companions behind me stared dazedly forth.

Our battered cruiser was resting now on the great pit's floor, a vast circular plain of smooth metal five miles in diameter, enclosed on all sides by vertical cliffs of gleaming metal that loomed for miles above us. A dusky twilight reigned here at the great shaft's bottom, but we saw now that that bottom was covered with countless great machines, enigmatic, shining mechanisms that covered the pit's floor completely except for a round clearing at its center, at the edge of which our cruiser rested. From each of the massed machines around us ran a slender tube-connection, and all of these tubes, thousands in number, combined to form a thick black metal cable which led into a huge object at the clearing's center. This was a giant squat cylinder of metal, its height no more than fifty feet but its diameter a full thousand, into the side of which the thick black cable led and whose upper surface shone with a vast brilliant white light that half dispelled the shadows here at the vast pit's bottom. It was from this brilliant upper surface of the cylinder that there sprang upward the great livid ray, a flickering beam of pale light that stabbed straight up toward the glowing fires of the nebula far above.

It was not on the great cylinder or on the massed machines around us, though, that our eyes first rested, but on the shapes, the creatures, who had gathered about our cruiser and stood before us. They were creatures of surpassing strangeness and horror, even to ourselves, unlike in form as we were. Each of them was simply a shapeless mass of plastic white flesh, several feet in thickness, a formless thing of pale flesh without limbs or features of any kind, the only distinguishing mark being a

round black spot on the body or mass of each. A dozen or more of them had gathered before us, a dozen shapeless masses of flesh resting on the smooth metal floor there, each with the black spot on his body turned up toward us like some strange eye, which, we knew instinctively, it in reality was.

As we watched them in horror, we saw one of them suddenly move toward us across the smooth metal. A limbless mass of flesh, he glided across the level floor as a snake might glide, the flesh of him flexing and twisting to bear him smoothly forward. Just beneath us he stopped, and there was a moment of tense silence while the whole scene impressed itself indelibly on my brain—the vast, metal-walled pit, the great ghostly ray that clove up through its shadowy dusk toward the nebula far above, the weird white masses of flesh before us. Then up from the creature below us there shot a long, slender arm, an arm that formed itself out of the flesh of his—*body*—like the pseudopod of a jellyfish, reaching swiftly upward toward us.

That sight was enough to break the spell of horror that had held us, and with a strangled cry I fell back from the door, reached toward the controls to send our ship slanting up out of this place of horror. But as I did so there came a shout from my two companions, and I whirled around to see a half-dozen pseudopod arms reach in through the open door, and then by that grip six or more of the weird creatures had drawn themselves up into the pilot room, and were upon us.

I felt cold, boneless arms twine swiftly around my neck and body, struck out in blind rage against the twisting masses of flesh that held me, and then felt my arms gripped also, felt myself being carried toward the door. The next moment I had been swung smoothly down to

the metal floor below and released there, standing panting with my two companions while our strange captors surveyed us. Several of them held in pseudopod arms little square boxes of metal which they held toward us, and one of them, as if for an object lesson, turned his toward a little pile of metal bars not far away, and touched a switch in its handle. Instantly a narrow little jet of what resembled thick blue smoke sprang out of the thing toward the pile of bars, and as it touched them I saw them instantly crumbling and disintegrating like sugar in water, disappearing entirely in a moment. The meaning of the action was plain enough, and with a half-dozen of the deadly things trained full upon us we gave up all thoughts of a dash back to the cruiser.

Now the foremost of the creatures seemed to undergo a series of swift changes in shape, his plastic body twisting and changing from one strange form to another with inconceivable rapidity. After a moment of this protean changing his body settled back into its former shapeless mass, but as it did so three of the creatures behind him came forward toward us, as though in answer to a silent command. I was later to learn, what I half guessed at the moment, that it was by these swift changes in bodily shape that the creatures communicated with each other, each such change, however slight, carrying to them as much meaning as a change of accent in spoken speech does to us.

The three that had come forward each held in a pseudopod arm one of the deadly box-weapons, and now they placed themselves around us, one in front and the other two behind us. Then they motioned eloquently toward the left, and after a moment's hesitation we set off in that direction, around the clearing's edge. Past the looming machines

we went, my own eyes intent on the huge cylinder in the clearing beside us, from which arose the great ray of impenetrable force into which our ship had crashed. Through the twilight that reigned about us I saw that only a handful of these nebula-creatures were to be seen on all the pit's floor, and wondered momentarily at the smallness of their numbers. Then my speculations were driven from my mind as our guards suddenly halted us, several hundred feet around the clearing's edge from our cruiser.

Before us there yawned a round, dark opening in the smooth floor, a small, shaftlike pit some ten feet in diameter, its sides disappearing down into a dense darkness. As we stared, the guard before us glided to the shaft's edge and suddenly swung himself over that edge, disappearing from view. And as we stepped closer we saw that he was lowering himself down the shaft's smooth metal wall by means of metal pegs inset every few feet in that wall, dropping from peg to peg in smooth, effortless descent. Now our two remaining guards raised their weapons significantly, motioning toward the shaft. Choice of action there was none, so after a moment's involuntary hesitation I stepped to the edge and grasped the highest peg, swinging myself over the edge and down until I had found a foot-hold on a lower peg, then shifting my grasp to swing down again in the same manner. After me came Jor Dahat, and after him the plant-man Sar Than, who swung easily down by grasping the pegs with all of his four limbs. Then the two guards were swinging down after him, and we were dropping steadily down the line of pegs into the rayless darkness.

I THINK now that of all the journeys in the universe that journey of ours down the shaft was the strangest. Plant-man and human

and Arcturian, three different beings from three far-distant stars, we swung down that dizzy ladder into the dark depths of this strange world at the fiery nebula's heart, guarded above and below by formless beings of weirdness unutterable. Down we clambered, feeling blindly in the darkness for our hand and foot-holds, down until at last, far below, there appeared a faint little spot of white light in the darkness.

The spot of light grew stronger, larger, as we climbed down toward it, until finally we saw that we were nearing the shaft's bottom, at which it gleamed. A few minutes more and we had clambered down the last peg and stood at the bottom of the shaft, a dark, circular well of metal pierced in one side by a doorway through which came the dim white light. Then we were bunched together once more between our guards, and were marched through the door into a long corridor dimly lit by a few globes of lambent white light suspended from its ceiling. As we marched along this long, metal-walled corridor I wondered how far beneath the great pit's floor we were, estimating by the length of our downward climb that it must be thousands of feet, at least. Then my thoughts shifted as there came from ahead a deep humming, beating sound, and a gleam of stronger light.

Before us now lay the end of the corridor, a square of brilliant white light toward which we were marching. We reached it, were passing through it, and then we halted in our tracks in sheer, stunned astonishment. For before us there stretched a vast open space, or cavern, of gigantic dimensions, its floor and sides and ceiling of smooth black metal, brilliantly illuminated by scores of the lambent globes of light. For thousands of feet before and above us stretched the great space, and in it was a scene of clamorous

activity that was stunning after the darkness and silence through which we had come.

Ranged on the mighty cavern's floor were long rows of machines the purposes of which were beyond our speculation, incredibly intricate masses of great arms and cogs and eccentric wheels all working smoothly with a steady beat-beat-beat of power, and tended by countless numbers of the formless nebula-creatures among them. Some seemed to be ventilating-machines of a sort, with great tubes leading upward through the cavern's ceiling; from others streams of white-hot metal gushed out into molds, cooling instantly into wheels and squares and bars; still others appeared to be connected with the great globes of light above; and some there were, like great domed turtles of metal, that moved here and there about the cavern's floor, reaching forth great pincer-arms to grip stacks of bars and plates and carry them from place to place.

Only a moment we stared across that scene of amazing activity before our guards were again motioning us onward, across the cavern's floor. Between the aisles of looming mechanisms we marched, whose formless attendants seemed not to heed us as we passed them. Before and around us glided the great turtle-machines with their burdens, the humming of their operation adding to the medley of sounds about us, only the shapeless nebula-creatures being completely silent. And as we marched on I saw in the great cavern's distant walls doors and corridors leading away to other vast brilliant-lit caverns that I could but vaguely glimpse, extending away in every direction, a great, half-seen vista of mighty white-lit spaces reaching away all about us, stupendous, incredible. And as we went on we saw other narrow shafts in the floor like that down which we

had come, saw swarms of the nebula-creatures rising from and descending into those shafts by the pegs set in their sides, moving ceaselessly up and down from whatever other vast spaces might lie beneath us in this titanic, honeycombed world.

At last we were across the great cavern, had entered the comparative silence of another corridor, and progressed down this until our guards turned us through a doorway in its right wall. We found ourselves in a great hall, or room, smaller by far than any of the vast caverns that honeycombed this world, but unlike them quite silent, and with no humming machines or busy attendants. The great, long hall, perhaps five hundred feet in length, was quite empty except for a low dais at its farther end, toward which our guards conducted us, gliding before and behind us.

As we neared it we saw that on each side of the dais was ranged a double file of guards, each armed with the deadly weapon we had seen demonstrated, while upon the dais itself rested ten of the formless nebula-creatures. Of these ten, nine were like all of the others that we had seen, ranged in a single line across the dais. The tenth, however, who rested in a central position in front of the nine, was like the others in form or formlessness alone, being at least five times larger in size than any of the others we had seen, an enormous mass of white flesh resting there on the dais and contemplating us with his strange eye as we were marched down the hall toward him. I divined instantly, by his strange size and prominent position, that he held some place of power above the others of his race. For weird and alien as his appearance was, there yet reached out from him toward us a strong impression of some strange majesty and power embodied in this monstrous mass of flesh, some awe-inspiring dignity that was truly

regal, and that transcended all differences of mind or shape.

In a moment we had been halted before the dais, and then one of our guards glided forward, the mass of flesh that was his body twisting and changing with lightning-like swiftness in the strange communication of these creatures. I had no doubt that he was explaining our capture, and when he glided back the great creature on the dais contemplated us for a time in motionless silence. Then his own body writhed suddenly in protean change, in silent speech, and instantly one of the nine creatures behind him glided from the dais and through a small door in the wall behind it, reappearing in a moment with a complicated little apparatus in his grasp.

This was a small black box from which slender cords led to two shining little plates of metal. One of the plates he placed upon the body of the great nebula king, directly beneath the strange eye, where it seemed to adhere instantly. Then, after pausing a moment, he glided toward Jor Dahat with the other plate. The plant-man shrank back at his approach, but as the guards around us raised their weapons he subsided, allowing the creature to place the plate upon his own body beneath the head, where it also adhered. This done, the creature moved back to the little box and touched a series of switches upon it.

Instantly a slight whining sound rose from the box while a little globe on its surface flashed into blinding blue light. The great nebula ruler on the dais did not move, nor did Jor Dahat, though I saw his face grow blank, perplexed. For minutes the little mechanism hummed, and then, at a swift writhing order from the monster on the dais the thing was switched off. A moment the nebula king seemed to pause, then gave another silent order, and this time the creature at the box snapped on an-

other series of switches, the globe upon it flashing into yellow light this time.

As it did so I saw Jor Dahat's eyes widening and starting, his whole body reacting as from an electric shock. His whole attitude, as the little apparatus hummed on, was that of one who listens to incredible things, his face a sudden mask of horror. Then suddenly he uttered a strangled cry, tore the metal plate from his body, and before any could guess his intention or prevent him had hurled himself with a mad shout straight at the nebula king!

4

THE moment that followed lives in my memory as one of lightning action. The very unexpectedness of Jor Dahat's mad attack was all that saved him, for before the massed guards about us could turn their deadly weapons on the plant-man he was upon the dais and the great creature there, whirling across the platform with him in wild conflict. Instantly Sar Than and I had leaped up to his side, glimpsing in that moment a half-dozen great pseudopod arms form suddenly out of the monster with whom the plant-man battled, wrapping themselves around him with swift force. Then, before we two could reach his side, we had been gripped ourselves by the guards on either side of us.

A moment we struggled madly in the remorseless grip of those powerful arms, then desisted as we saw others of the guards grasp Jor Dahat and pull him down from the dais beside us, wrenching him loose from his hold on his opponent. Then we three faced our captors once more, panting and disheveled, while from the dais the great nebula ruler again surveyed us. I looked for instant death as a result of that wild attack upon him, but whether the creature intended to reserve his revenge for later, or whether there was in that

cool and alien mind nothing so human as a desire for revenge, he did not order our deaths at that moment. His body spun again in silent speech, and as it ceased a half-dozen of the guards surrounded us and marched us back down the great hall and into the dim-lit corridor outside.

Instead of conducting us back down that corridor toward the giant cavern through which we had come, though, they led us in the opposite direction. A thousand feet or more we were marched, and then the corridor widened, while on either side of us now we made out holes in its floor, round shafts like that down which we had come from above. In the sides of these shafts, though, were no peg ladders, and we saw that the depth of each was only some twenty-five to thirty feet. While we wondered at their purpose our guards suddenly halted us before one of them, and then, taking a flexible little metal ladder from a recess in the wall, lowered it into the metal wall and motioned us to descend. Slowly we clambered down, and when the three of us had reached the well's bottom the ladder was at once drawn up. Then came the rustling sound of the guards above, gliding back down the corridor, except for a single one apparently left to guard us, who moved ceaselessly back and forth above.

Silently we gazed at each other, then about our strange prison cell. Even in the dim half-light of the corridor we could see that it was quite unescapable, its smooth perpendicular walls without projection of any kind. Even the nebula-creatures themselves, for whom these strange cells must have been designed, could not have escaped them, so there was small enough chance of our doing so. Without speaking we slumped to the floor of our well-prison, and for a time there was a dull silence there, broken only by the rustling glide of the single guard above.

At last the stillness was broken by the voice of Jor Dahat, who had been gazing moodily toward the wall. "Prisoners, here," he said slowly. "The one place of all places from which there is no escape."

I shook my head. "It seems the end," I admitted, dully. "We can't escape from this place, and if we could there's no time left to do anything, now."

The plant-man nodded, glancing at the time-dial on his wrist. "But twelve hours more," he said, "before the end—before the break-up of the nebula, the cosmic cataclysm that will wreck our universe. And these things who are our captors, these shapeless nebula-creatures, responsible for that break-up, that cataclysm——"

We stared at him in amazement, and he was silent for a moment, then speaking slowly on. "I know," he said darkly. "There in the hall of the nebula king I learned—what we came to learn. You saw them put those plates upon him and me, saw that apparatus? Well, it is in reality a thought-transmission apparatus, one which can transfer those vibrations of the brain which we call thought, those mind-pictures, from one mind to another. When it was first turned on I felt my senses leaving me, my brain a blank. I stood there, my knowledge, my memories, my ideas, being pumped out of me like water from a well, into the brain of that monstrous ruler there. He must have learned, in those few moments, all of my own knowledge of the universe outside the nebula, all of our own plans in coming to this place. And then, at his order, the machine was reversed, and thoughts, pictures, flowed through it from his brain to mine.

"It must have been from a sheer desire to overawe and terrify me that the creature sent his thoughts into my brain. I know that the moment it was turned on I became conscious

of ideas, thoughts, pictures, rushing into my mind, of new knowledge springing whole into my brain. Much there was that was blank and dark, ideas, no doubt, for which my own intelligence had no equivalent; but enough came to me so that I realized at last who and what these creatures were, and what their part was in whirling the nebula on to its break-up, and our doom.

"I knew, with never a doubt, that this great open space at the nebula's heart had been formed because the denser portions of its interior had contracted faster than the outer portions. As you know, all nebulae contract with the passage of time, their fiery gases condensing to form great blazing stars, the eon-old cycle of stellar evolution, from fiery nebula to flaming sun. In this cycle this great nebula followed, but because of its vast size the inner, denser portions had contracted with much greater speed than the outer parts, forming a great solid world, in time, while the outer parts were still but fiery gas. This solid world spun at the center of the great space formerly occupied by the gases that had contracted to form it, and it was warmed and lit eternally by the encircling fires of the nebula all around it, and shut off from the outside universe by those fires.

"Light and warmth had this world in plenty, therefore, and with time life had risen on it, crude forms ascending through the channels of evolutionary change into a myriad different species, of which one species, the nebula-creatures we have seen, was the most intelligent. In time they ruled this strange world, wiping out all other species, and climbed to greater and greater science and power with the passage of time, their existence never suspected by any in the universe outside. Back and forth through the Galaxy went the great star-cruisers of the federated suns, but none ever dreamed of

the strange race that had grown to power on this world at the fiery nebula's heart.

"But slowly, inexorably, destruction began to creep upon that race. As I have said, all nebulae contract always, and this one was still doing so, still growing smaller and smaller, its encircling fires closing steadily in upon the spinning world at their heart. Hotter and hotter it became on that world until life was hardly possible on it for the nebula-creatures, accustomed as they were to a milder temperature. They must escape that heat or perish, and since they could not escape to outer space through the prisoning fires around them they did the last thing available, hollowed out vast caverns in the interior of their world and descended into those caverns to live. The whole surface of their world they sheathed with smooth, heat-reflecting metal, and then descended in all their hordes into the countless mighty caverns that honeycombed all their great world, taking up their life again in those cool depths, safe from the nebula's heat.

"Ages passed over them while they lived thus in their world's depths, but still the nebula contracted, closed in upon them, in that vast, remorseless cycle that is nature's law throughout the universe. Closer and closer crept its fires toward the metal-sheathed world of the nebula people, until at last they saw that soon those fires would envelop their world and annihilate it, unless they were turned back in some way. So for a time they bent all their energies toward the problem of turning back the nebula's contracting fires, and at last found a way to do so, one which would take all their strength and science to carry out.

"In the surface of their metal-covered world they sank a vast, metal-walled pit, and in that pit went massed machines capable of generating an atomic ray of terrific power.

From each of the generating-machines led a connection carrying the power produced by it, all these connections combining into the thick cable we saw which leads into the great cylinder-apparatus, generating inside it the mighty ray that stabs up toward the nebula, and into which we crashed. Now the great world here at the nebula's heart is already spinning, revolving, and the purpose of the nebula people was to use the great ray as a connection between their spinning world and the encircling nebula, to set the nebula to spinning also by this means, the ray being equal to a solid connection between the two. And their plan proved a sound one, for after the great ray had been put into operation the vast encircling nebula began to move slowly, to revolve, faster and faster as its turning accelerated under the constant impetus of the great ray.

"When the nebula should reach a certain speed of whirl, the nebula-creatures knew, when it should reach the critical point of its spin, it would be whirling so fast that it would no longer be able to hold its mighty mass together, and it would break up, disintegrate, its fiery mass flying off through the Galaxy in all directions. This would remove all danger from the nebula people, who could then live on without fear in their cavern-honeycombed world, using artificial light and heat. They knew, however, that once started the whirling of the nebula must be kept up until it had reached its critical point and had broken up, since if the whirling were slackened before then, the great ray turned off, the vast, ponderously turning nebula would collapse with the removal of the ray, its collapsing fires annihilating the nebula world inside it. For this reason the great machines in the pit that generated the power for the ray were made completely automatic and certain in operation, needing only a

handful of the nebula-creatures to attend them.

"It was that handful that captured us when we came, our ship falling down to the great pit's floor after crashing into the terrific ray. And after we had been brought down here, after I had learned thus what terrible plan of these creatures it was that was bringing doom to our own universe, I lost my senses, sprang at the nebula king, unconscious of all but what I had just learned. And now you know what it was I learned, what we came here to learn. But we have learned too late, now, for in less than twenty hours the nebula's whirling will have reached its critical point, will have sent its vast flaming mass hurtling out across our universe, our Galaxy, in all directions, to carry destruction and death to all the peoples of our suns and worlds!"

THE silence of our shaft-cell was suddenly heavy and brooding as the voice of Jor Dahat ceased. From above came the soft rustling of the guard there, gliding back and forth along the dim corridor, and faintly to our ears from the distant vast caverns came the clash and hum of the great machines there, with all their clamor of activity. At last, as though from a distance, I heard my own voice break the silence.

"Twelve hours," I said slowly. "Twelve hours—before the end." Then I, too, fell silent, and silently, hopelessly, we stared into each other's eyes.

Through the hours that followed, the same deathly silence hung over us, a silence intensified by the thing in all our thoughts, a silence deafening as the rumble of doom. Always now that scene comes back to me in memory as a strange, dim-lit picture—the dusky little well at the bottom of which we crouched, hardly able to make out each others' faces, the ceaseless humming activity from the great

caverns beyond, the measured glide of our guard above. Hour passed into hour and we moved not, changed not, sitting on in dull, despairing silence. At last, weary as I was, I drifted off into restless sleep, tortured by vague dreams of the horrors through which we had come.

When I opened my eyes again it was to find Jor Dahat gently shaking me, crouched there beside me. As he saw me wake he bent his head to my ear. "Sar Than has a plan," he whispered to me. "We've hardly more than an hour left but he thinks that we have a chance that way to get out—a million to one chance. If we could——"

But by that time I was crawling over to the Arcturian's side, and eagerly we listened while in whispers he outlined his project for escaping from our pit-cell. Small enough chance there seemed that we could carry it out, and even were we to escape from our well-prison there seemed nothing but death awaiting us farther on, but we were of one mind that it would be better to meet our end thus than wait in the shaft tamely for death. Therefore, crouching against the wall, we waited tensely for the guard above to pass our shaft.

Pass he did, in a moment more, his monstrous shapeless body gliding to the shaft's edge and peering down there at us in passing, as usual. Then he was gone, gliding on down the corridor, and instantly we sprang to our feet. At once Jor Dahat stepped over to the wall, standing with his back against it and his feet braced widely on the floor. Then Sar Than climbed nimbly up over the plant-man's body until two of his four limbs rested on the shoulders of Jor Dahat, who now grasped those two limbs in his own hands and raised them as high as he could reach, holding the Arcturian above him by the sheer force of his powerful muscles.

With his other two limbs Sar Than also was reaching upward and now I

clambered up in turn, over the plant-man and the Arcturian, until the latter, grasping my own feet, had raised me in turn as high as he could reach. Thus upheld I was just able to reach the shaft's rim above with my upstretched hands, and there, in that precarious position, we awaited the return of the guard.

It could hardly have been more than a minute, at most, that we waited, but to ourselves, balancing there with muscles strained to the utmost, it seemed an eternity. I heard the rustling glide of the guard's approach, now, but at the same time felt the Arcturian's hold giving, beneath me, heard the great muscles of the plant-man cracking beneath the weight of both of us. I knew that my two companions could hold out for but a moment longer, and then, just as the Arcturian's grip on my feet began to slip, the returning guard had reached the pit's edge, pausing there, directly above me, to peer down as usual. The next moment I had reached up with a last effort and had gripped him, and then we four were tumbling down into the well, pulling the guard down with us.

As we fell I had heard his weapon rattle on the floor above, knocked from his grasp, but as we reached the well's floor he had already gripped us with a half-dozen pseudopod-arms that formed themselves lightninglike out of the shapeless mass of flesh that was his body. Then we were plunging about the floor of the well in a mad, weird battle, as silent as it was deadly.

The thing could not cry out for help, but for the moment it seemed to us that alone it might conquer us, its suddenly formed arms coiling swiftly about us, great tentacles of muscle that were like to have choked us in the first moment of combat. Strike and grasp as we would there seemed no vulnerable spot on the creature's slippery body, and weary as we were the outcome of the struggle was for a

time extremely doubtful. I heard Sar Than utter a strangled cry as a thick arm noosed itself about his body, felt another striving for a hold on my own head, and then saw Jor Dahat suddenly grasp two of the slippery arms and literally tear the thing's shapeless body into half with those two holds. There was a soft ripping sound and then the creature had slumped to the floor, a limp mass of dead flesh.

A moment we stared breathlessly at each other over the dead thing, then without speaking sprang to the wall, where Jor Dahat braced himself to repeat our former procedure. In a moment he had raised the Arcturian above him, and within another moment Sar Than was raising me likewise until I had again gained a grip on the rim of the shaft above. A fierce struggling effort and I had pulled myself up to the floor of the dim-lit corridor, where I lay panting for a moment, then leapt to my feet and over to the recess in the wall from which I had seen the flexible ladder taken. A moment I pawed frantically in the recess, then uttered a sob as my fingers encountered the cold metal of the ladder. It was but the work of an instant to lower it into the well for my two companions to climb up, and then we gazed tensely about us.

The long, dim-lit corridor was quite empty for the moment, though away down its length we glimpsed the square of white light that marked the point where it debouched into the great caverns. That was our path, we knew; so down the corridor we ran, between the rows of shaft-cells on either side, until we were just passing between the last two of those shafts and were reaching the point where the corridor narrowed once more. And then we suddenly stopped short, stood motionless; for, not a hundred yards ahead, a double file of the nebula guards had suddenly issued from a door in the corridor's

wall, and were gliding straight down its length toward us!

5

FOR a single moment death stared us in the face, and we stood there motionless, stupefied with terror. As yet the guards approaching us seemed not to have glimpsed us, owing to the corridor's dim light, but with every moment they were drawing nearer and it was but a matter of seconds before we would be seen and slain. Then, before we had recovered from our stupefaction, Sar Than had jerked us sidewise toward one of the last shaft-cells in the floor that we had just passed.

"Down here!" he cried, pointing into its dark depths. "Down here until they pass!"

In a flash we saw that his idea was indeed our last chance, and at once lowered ourselves over the dark shaft's rim, hanging from its edge with hands gripped on that edge.

We had not been too soon; for a few seconds later there came the rustling sound of the guards passing above, gliding down the corridor past our place of concealment. As they glided by we hung in an agony of suspense, hoping against hope that they would not glimpse our hands on the pit's rim, or notice the absence of the creature left to guard us. There was a long, tense minute of waiting, and then they were past. We hung for a few moments longer, with aching muscles, then drew ourselves up to the corridor's floor once more and started down its length toward the square of white brilliance in the distance.

Down the dim-lit corridor we ran, past open doors in its walls through which we glimpsed great halls and branching passageways, all seeming for the moment deserted. A few moments later we had reached the corridor's end, and were peering out into the gigantic, white-lit space that lay beyond, a space alive and clamorous with the same multifarious activ-

ity as when we had come through it. To venture out into that great place of humming machines and thronging nebula-creatures was to court instant death, we knew, yet it must be crossed to gain the single shaft that led upward. Then, while we still hesitated, I uttered a whispered exclamation and pointed to something in the shadows beside us, something big and round that lay just inside the broad corridor's dusk, and that gleamed faintly in the dim light. In a moment we were beside it, and found it to be one of the great turtle-machines that swarmed across the floors of the vast caverns beyond us, though this one was unoccupied, its round door open to expose the hollow interior of the dome.

"There's our way out!" I cried. "There's room in it for the three of us!"

Within another moment we were inside it, crouching together in the cramped space of the interior and swinging shut the little door. I found that a narrow slit running around the dome allowed us to look forth, and that a little circle of switches grouped around a single large lever were evidently its controls. Swiftly I pressed these switches in a series of combinations, and then there came a welcome hum of power from beneath and we were gliding smoothly out of the shadowy corridor into the full glare of the thronging, white-lit cavern, my hand on the central lever guiding our progress.

Tensely we crouched in our humming vehicle as it moved smoothly across the cavern, between the rows of great machines, toward the corridor opening in the opposite wall. The thronging nebula-creatures about us paid us no attention whatever, taking us for but one of the scores of turtle-machines that were busy about us. Hearts beating high with our success we glided on toward the dark wall-opening that was our goal. A score of feet from it we suddenly held

our breath as another of the turtle-machines collided suddenly with our own, but in a moment it had glided away and in another moment we were again in the shadows of a dim-lit corridor, gliding down its length toward the shaft that led upward.

We reached the corridor's end, sprang out of our machine and through the door into the well-like bottom of the shaft. At once the plant-man was clambering up the peg-ladder, followed by the Arcturian with myself last. Up, up we climbed, putting all our strength into the effort, for we knew that not many minutes remained for action. Then suddenly as I looked down I stopped and breathed an exclamation; for standing at the bottom of the shaft were two of the nebula-creatures, not more than a hundred feet below us—two white masses of flesh that were staring up toward us.

A moment we hung motionless on the pegs, while the two weird beings gazed up, and then we saw one of them glide back into the corridor, racing back to the great caverns to sound the alarm, we knew. The other gazed up at us once more and then, to our horror, began to climb swiftly up after us.

I THINK NOW that of all that befell us there in the nebula world the moments that followed were the most agonizing. Swinging ourselves up by sheer muscular power, from peg to peg, we clambered up that giddy ladder, through a darkness impossible of description. Somewhere in that darkness below me, I knew, the nebula-creature that pursued us was swinging up after me, and I knew that to such a creature the negotiating of this dizzy ladder was child's play. Yet, spurred on by deadly fear, I struggled upward with superhuman speed, a hundred feet, another hundred, until a hope flashed across my brain that the thing that pursued us might have given up that pursuit.

Then above us I glimpsed a little dot of glowing light, knew it for the shaft's mouth far above. And at the same moment that I glimpsed it, I felt a tug on my ankles, a powerful arm fasten round my body, and knew that the pursuing creature had reached me.

I cried out involuntarily as I felt my feet twitched off the pegs on which they had rested, and dangled for a moment there by my hands while the creature below me tightened his grip on my feet and began to pull me steadily downward. All his force he must have put into that effort, and I felt my hands slipping on the peg which they held, knew that once I lost my hand-grip the creature below would release my feet also and send me hurtling down to death on the shaft's floor far below. In a deathly silence I hung there, striving against that deadly pull, and then felt one of my hands torn from its grip, felt the fingers of the other slipping on the peg they held, felt my will relaxing—

Then someone had suddenly swung down past me from above, and I glanced down to glimpse in the dim light from above Sar Than, swinging swiftly down past me and hanging by one of his powerful limbs while with the other three he grasped the creature below me. Instantly the latter's grip on my feet relaxed, there was an instant of swift scuffling below me, and then I glimpsed the shapeless body of the nebula-creature forced from its hold on the pegs, hurtling down into the darkness to strike the floor far below with a smacking thud. The next instant Sar Than was up to me and was pulling me up until I again clung safely to the pegs. Only the Areturian, with his four strange limbs, could ever have successfully battled the nebula-creature thus on that giddy ladder of pegs.

But now we were again clambering up, calling on all our strength to bear us on, watching the little circle of dim

light above broadening as we climbed up toward it. Below us, we knew, the alarm had been given, and within a few minutes now a horde of the nebula-creatures would be rushing up the shaft. And but minutes were left for us to act in, so that we put every effort into a mad burst of speed that within a few more minutes had brought us up to the shaft's mouth.

JOR DAHAT, above us, was the first to reach its level, and I saw the plant-man raise his head and peer cautiously forth, then beckon us upward. Silently, stealthily, we climbed up, crept over the shaft's edge until we crouched on the smooth metal floor. The scene about us was the same as before, the vast, metal-walled pit, the massed machines around us, the great cylinder at the clearing's center from which arose the livid ray, the long shape of our battered cruiser lying beyond it. A half-dozen of the nebula-creatures were gathered near the great cylinder, and we saw their bodies twisting in their silent speech, but their strange eyes were not turned in our direction.

In a moment Jor Dahat crept silently to one side, where lay a mass of tools, and came back with three heavy, axlike implements of metal in his grasp, long-handled and broad-bladed. Silently he handed one of these to each of us, and then without words we crawled silently toward the gathered nebula-creatures, on hands and knees. Inch by inch, foot by foot, we crept toward them. I looked up, once, saw the glowing fires of the nebula far above us, knew that within minutes those fires would be flying out through our universe in flaming destruction unless we could act. My grip tightened on my weapon as we crawled on through the shadowy dusk, and then suddenly one of the creatures before us had turned and was gazing straight toward us.

Before he could turn to his companions in warning, before he could
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Within the Nebula

(Continued from page 618)

do more than merely glimpse us, we had sprung to our feet and were leaping toward the creatures with up-raised axes. The next moment we were upon them, our heavy weapons flashing right and left in swift destruction, and when we lowered them only masses of dead flesh lay at our feet. Wildly we looked about, but there seemed no other of the nebula-creatures on all the great pit's floor, nothing but the silent, automatic machines, and the great cylinder of the ray. Now we leapt toward that cylinder, then halted. A half-dozen pseudopod arms were reaching up from the shaft up which we had come, a half-dozen of the creatures pulling themselves up there. It was the pursuit from beneath!

Jor Dahat cried out, raced toward the shaft's mouth with the Arcturian. "Cut the cable, Ker Kal!" he shouted. "The cable that runs into the cylinder—Sar Than and I will hold them in the shaft!"

I saw the two of them reach the shaft's mouth just as a mass of the nebula-creatures were emerging from it, saw their two great axes flash down and send the shapeless beings hurtling down to death. Then I had leapt myself to the great, foot-thick cable of black metal that ran into the cylinder's side, carrying into it the power from all the machines about us which generated the mighty ray. I raised my ax, brought it down with all my force on the cable, but on the hard metal it made only a shallow cut. Again I swung it, and again, with all my force, while at the shaft's mouth I glimpsed the axes of my two friends flashing in the dim light like brands of lightning, falling in swift death upon the shapeless nebula-creatures as they sought to emerge from the shaft. I heard the puff of jets of the deadly blue smoke leaping up-

ward, but knew that so long as they were held inside the shaft they could not reach the Arcturian and the plant-man with their annihilating jets.

Fiercely I swung my own ax down upon the black metal of the thick cable, in one swift blow after another, severing its twisted strands one after the other. The last minutes were speeding, I knew, and like some soulless automaton I wielded the great ax in blow after blow, scarcely conscious in that mad moment of anything but the thick length of metal below me. I was half through it, now, had cut through half its strands, and knew that another dozen of blows would sever it. And even as hope flamed up in my brain there was a cry from Jor Dahat, I saw a sudden resistless wave of the nebula-creatures pour up from the shaft and force my two companions back toward me, and then they were raising their deadly weapons to send annihilation upon us.

For a single moment the whole scene seemed as motionless as a set tableau. Then with a wild shout I whirled the great ax high above my head, swung it for an instant in a flashing circle, and then brought it down with the last mad remnant of my force upon the half-severed cable below, a powerful blow that clove through its twisted strands as a knife might cut through cords. There was a flash of light as the cable parted, and then the brilliance of the great cylinder's upper surface had snapped out, and the mighty ray that sprang from it had vanished!

The next instant there was utter silence, a thick, terrific silence in which we, and all the nebula-creatures that had crowded up onto the pit's floor, gazed up toward the mighty nebula's fires, far above us. Seconds, minutes, that awful silence reigned, and then I saw the weapons of the nebula-creatures before us dropping from their grasp, saw them rushing

wildly about as though in mad, frenzied terror, heard a great cry from Jor Dahat, beside me.

"The nebula!" he cried hoarsely, pointing up toward the glowing fires above. "The nebula—*collapsing!*"

I looked up, dazedly, saw the vast fires moving now, slowly, majestically, gigantically, moving down toward us, toward the nebula world, the whole vast turning nebula collapsing into the great space at its center with the removal of the ray that had whirled it on, its mighty, crowding fires rushing down upon us. Then I had sunk to the floor, felt the arms of my two friends about me, dimly felt myself dragged across the floor through the crazily rushing hordes of nebula-creatures into our cruiser, felt it lifting up out of the great pit with the plant-man at the controls, as the fires above rushed down upon us.

Then there was a thunderous roaring of titanic fires about us, a vast, interminable rushing of colossal currents of flaming gas all around us as we plunged upward through the collapsing nebula. More and more dimly to my ears came that mighty roar of flame as consciousness began to leave me, but at last, through my darkening senses, I felt that it had ceased, that we were humming through space once more. With a last effort I staggered to the window with my two companions, gazed down dazedly toward the terrific ocean of boiling flame that stretched gigantically beneath us, saw that still its fires were drawing together, collapsing, contracting, condensing. Then suddenly up from the collapsing nebula there leapt a single mighty tongue of fire, as from some titanic conflagration, a vast rush of flame that towered up toward the stars, and then dwindled and sank and died.

It was the end forever of the world within the nebula.

6

IT WAS more than two weeks later that with all the thousands of the great Council of Suns we passed out of the mighty tower into the starlit night. They were still shouting, those thousands, for it was but hours before that our battered cruiser had swung down toward the tower out of the void of space, to meet such a reception as never yet had been equaled in this universe. And now that the Council's tumultuous meeting had closed at last, and each of its members made ready to depart for his own sun, the shouting applause about us was redoubled.

At last from out of the darkness a great star-cruiser swept toward us, paused, and then the member from Antares had entered it and it was speeding up into the darkness. Another drew up before us, entered by the strange representative from Rigel, and then it too had vanished and still others were sweeping toward us. Out of the darkness they came, star-cruiser after star-cruiser, and into each went one of the members, flashing out to his own star once more. One by one, we watched them go, watched the great ships lift into the darkness, starting out to Polaris and Pomalhaut and Algol, starting out on long journeys to suns far out at the Galaxy's edge. One by one they went, until at last there remained only we three of all the members, with the three cruisers waiting before us that would carry us back to our own stars.

We paused, then, with a common impulse gazing upward. Across the heavens gleamed the hosts of suns, points of brilliant light in a field of deepest black. Moments we gazed up toward them, and toward three among them that were far distant from each other across the heavens—the magnificent golden splendor of great Capella, to the left, and the fiery red brilliance of Arcturus, to the right, and above us and between them a

smaller star of deep yellow, that little spark of light toward which the eyes and hearts of men shall turn until the end of time, though they roam the limits of the universe. A moment we gazed up, up toward the three orbs, and then Jor Dahat raised his hand, pointing to another star low above the horizon, a great, soft-glowing one that was like a little ball of misty light.

“Look,” he said softly. “The nebula!”

Silently we gazed out toward it for a long moment, a moment in which our thoughts leapt out across the gulf toward the glowing thing at which we gazed, toward that mighty realm of fire where we had struggled for our universe, in the strange world inside it which we three had plunged to its doom. Then, silent still, we gripped hands, and turned toward our waiting cruisers.

Then they, too, were driving up into the darkness, out from Canopus once more into the gulf of space, into the eternal silence of the changeless void, each toward its star.