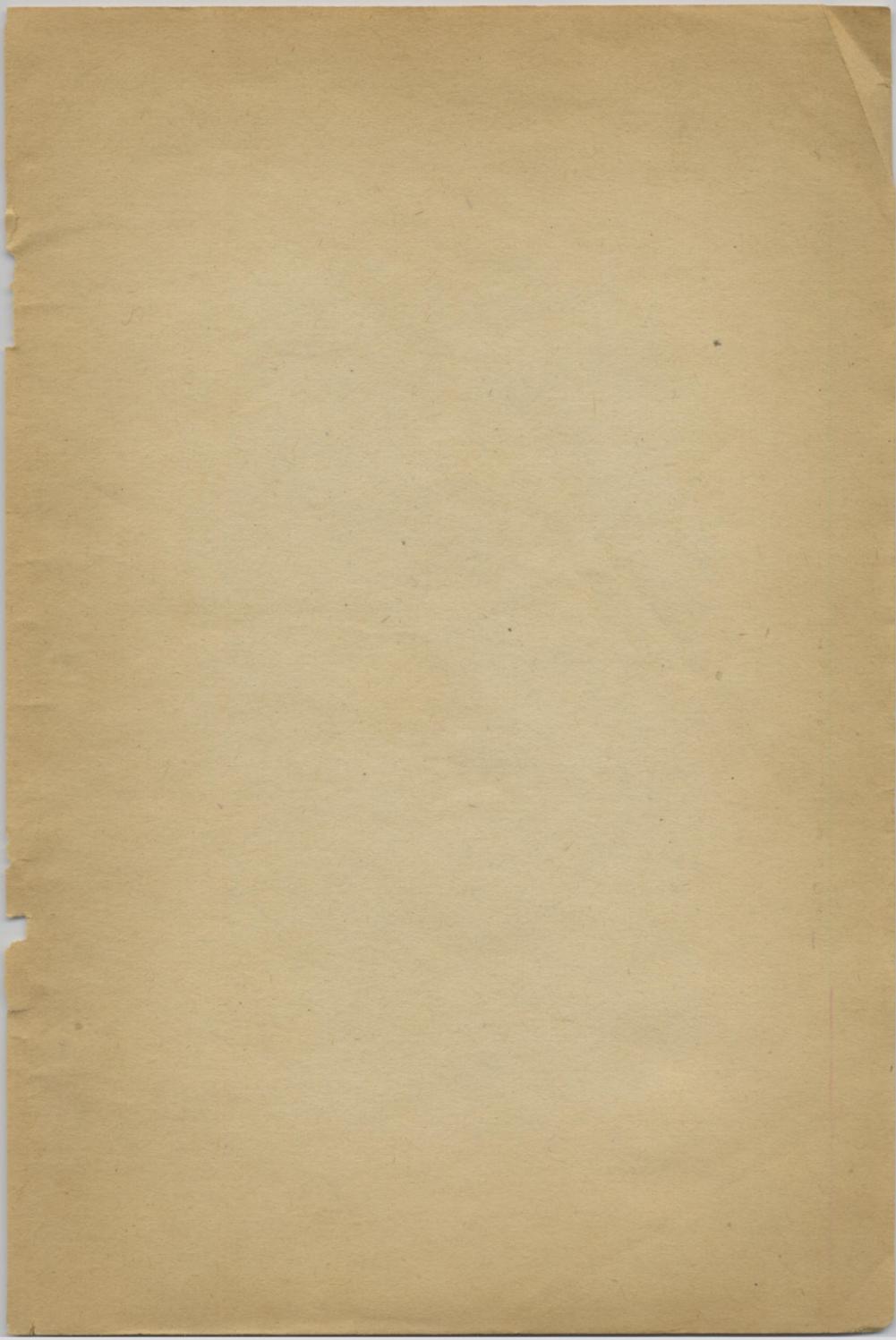


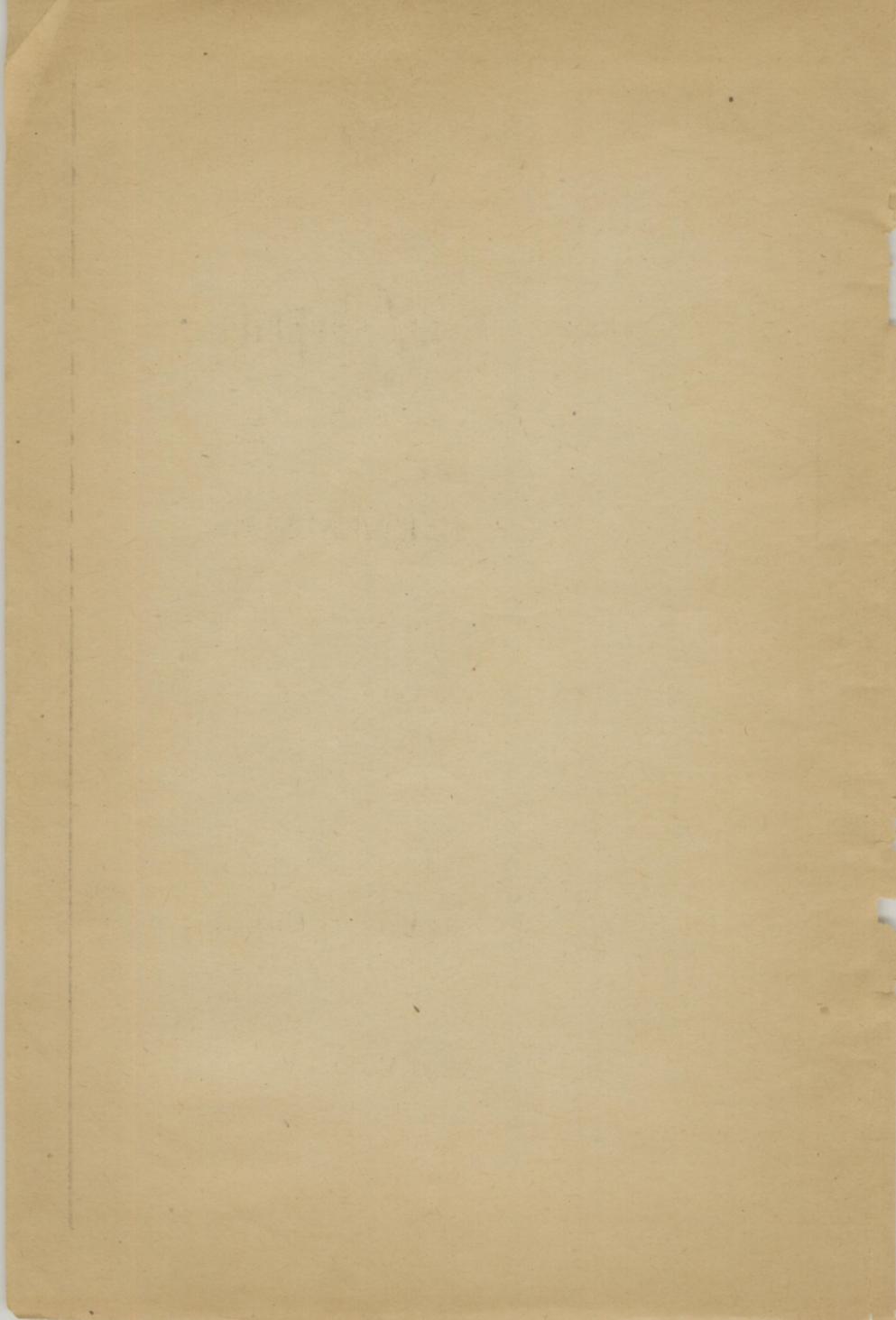
THE LEGION OF SPACE

Galaxy
SCIENCE FICTION
NOVEL NO. 2.
25¢



BY JACK WILLIAMSON





GALAXY Science Fiction Novel No. 2

Legion *of* Space

An Exciting Novel of the Distant Future

BY

JACK WILLIAMSON



The Complete Book Version, Unabridged

WORLD EDITIONS · INC.
NEW YORK, N. Y.

Copyright 1950 by World Editions, Inc.

Copyright 1947 by Jack Williamson

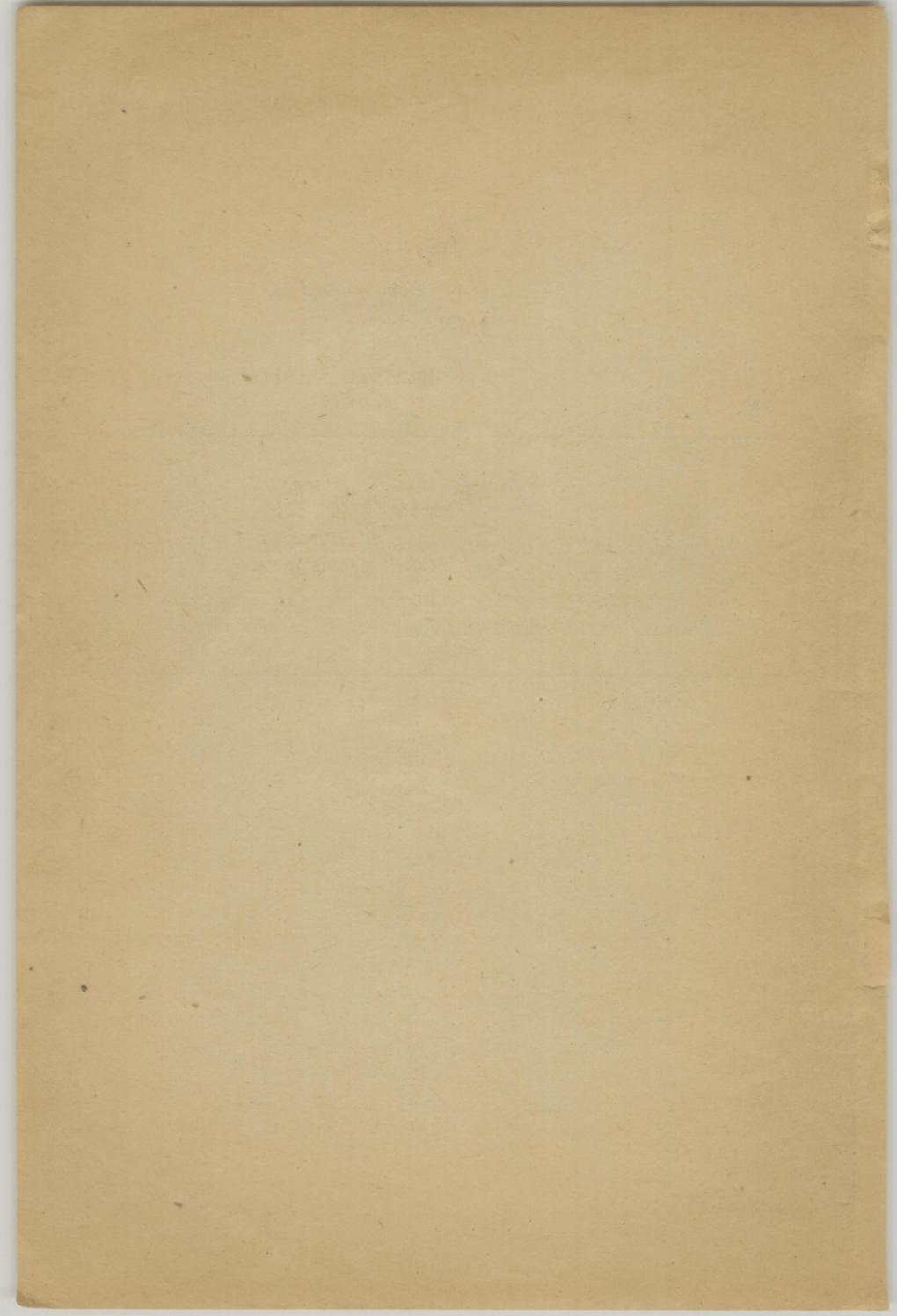
Copyright 1935 by Street & Smith
Publications for Astounding Stories

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

Dedication

To all the readers and the writers
of that new literature called science
fiction, who find mystery, wonder,
and high adventure in the expand-

ing universe of knowledge, and who
sometimes seek to observe and to
forecast the vast impact of science
upon the lives and minds of men.



Prologue

The Man Who Remembered Tomorrow

“WELL, doctor, what's your verdict?"

He sat up on the examination table, with the sheet wrapped around his bent and stringy frame, and firmly commanded my nurse to bring back his clothes. He looked at me, his bright blue eyes sharply curious and yet oddly unafraid—for I knew he expected a sentence of death.

"Acquittal, John," I told him honestly. "You're really indestructable. Remarkable shape, for a man of your age—except for that knee. You'll make me a good patient and a better chess opponent for the next twenty years."

But old John Delmar shook his weatherbeaten head, very seriously.

"No, Doctor." In that same tone of quiet and unexcited certainty, he might have said today was Tuesday. "No, Doctor, I've less than three weeks. I've known for several years that I'm going to die at eleven-seven on the morning of March 23, 1945."

"Nonsense," I told him. "Not likely—unless you jump in front of a truck. That knee may always be a

little stiff, but there's certainly nothing else—"

"I know the date." His thin, old voice had a flat, impersonal conviction. "You see, I read it on a tombstone." He didn't seem to regard that statement as remarkable. "I came in this morning just to see if you can tell me what it is that I'm to die of."

He looked entirely too sane and cool to fall victim to any superstitious notion.

"You can forget the idea of that," I assured him heartily. "Physically, you're sounder than most men twenty years younger. Except for that knee, and a few assorted scars—"

"Please don't think I want to question your diagnosis, but I'm really quite positive." He seemed apologetic, and oddly hesitant. "You see, Doctor, I've an unusual—well, call it a gift. I've meant, sometime, to tell you about it. That is, if you'd care to hear—"

He paused, diffidently.

I had wondered a long time, about old John Delmar. A faded, stiff little

man, with thin gray hair and blue eyes that were curiously bright, strangely young. Still erect and agile, for all the years he owned to, he walked with a slight quick limp from that old bullet wound in his knee.

We had first met when he came home from the war in Spain—he looked me up to bring me word of a friend of mine, not a third his age, who had died beside him, fighting with the Loyalists. I liked him. A lonely old soldier, he didn't talk too much about his campaigns. We discovered a mutual interest in chess, and he made a pleasant companion. He had a youth of heart, an eager and unquenchable vitality, rare in a man so old. My medical interest, besides, was aroused by his durable physique.

For he had endured many things.

HE HAD always been reticent. *H*I was, I believe, his most intimate friend through those last, unwontedly peaceful years, yet he had given me no more than the barest hints of his long and remarkable life. He grew up, he told me, in the frontier West; he rode with a gun in a cattle war when he was only a boy, and somehow he got into the Texas Rangers a little short of the legal age. Later he served in the Rough Riders, and in the Boer War, and under Porfirio Diaz. In 1914 he joined the British Army—to make up, he said, for fighting the British in South Africa. Later he was in

China and in the Rif, in the Gran Chaco and in Spain. It was a Spanish prison camp that stiffened his bad knee. His hard-seasoned body began to fail him at last, and he finally came home, too old to fight again. That was when we met.

I knew, too, that he was busy with some literary project—dropping in at his rather shabby rooms for a pipe and a game of chess, I had noticed his desk piled with closely written pages. Until he came to the office that morning in the spring of 1945, however, I had supposed that he was merely writing the memoirs of his colorful past. I had no inkling that his manuscripts dealt with his recollections of the more wonderful future.

Fortunately, no patient was waiting that morning, and his quiet air of matter-of-fact certainty about the moment of his death piqued my curiosity. When he was dressed again, I made him fill his pipe and told him that I'd be glad to hear.

"It's a good thing that most fighting men are killed before they get too old to fight," he began a little awkwardly, settling back in his chair and easing his knee with thin, quivering hands. "That's what I was thinking, one cold morning, the year this war began.

"You remember when I came home to New York—or I called it coming home. But I found myself a stranger. Most people don't have the time that you do, Doctor, for old fighting men. There was noth-

ing for me to do. I was useless as a worn-out gun. That wet, gusty morning—it was April thirteenth, I remember—I sat down on a bench in Central Park, to think things over. I got cold. And I decided—well, that I'd already lived too long.

"I was just getting up from the bench, to go back to the room and get my old automatic, when I—remembered!

"That's the only word I know. Memory. It seems a little strange, though, to speak of remembering things that haven't happened yet. That won't happen, some of them, for a thousand years and more.

"I've talked to scientists about it, Doctor. A psychologist, first. A behaviorist. He laughed. It didn't fit in, he said, with the concepts of behaviorism. A man, he said, is just a machine. Everything a man does is just mechanical reaction to stimulus.

"But, if that's so, there are stimuli that the behaviorists have never found.

THREE was another man who didn't laugh. A physicist from Oxford, a lecturer on Einstein—relativity. He didn't laugh. He seemed to believe what I told him. He asked questions about my—memories. But there wasn't much I could tell him, then.

"What he told me helped to ease my mind—the thing had had me worried. I wanted to talk about it to you, Doctor. But we were just getting to be good chess-companions,

and I didn't want you to think me too odd.

"Anyhow, this Oxford man told me that Space and Time aren't real, apart. And they aren't really different. They fade one into the other all around us. He spoke of the *continuum* and *two-way time* and a theory of the *serial universe*. I didn't understand it all. But there's no real reason, he said, why we shouldn't remember the future—all of us. In theory, he said, our minds ought to be able to trace *world-lines* into the future, just as easily as into the past.

"Hunches and premonitions and dreams, he believed, are sometimes real memories of things yet to come. I didn't understand all he said, but he did convince me that the thing wasn't—well, insanity. I had been afraid, Doctor.

"He wanted to know more about what I—remembered. But that was years ago. It was just scattered impressions, then, most of them vague and confused. It's a power, I think, that most people have to some degree—it simply happens to be better developed in me. I've always had hunches, some vague sense to warn me of danger—which is probably why I'm still alive. But the first clear memory of the future came that day in the park. And it was many months before I could call them up at will.

"You don't understand it, I suppose. I'll try to describe that first experience, in the park. I slipped on the wet pavement, and fell back on

the bench—I had got cold, sitting there, and I wasn't so long back from Spain then, you know.

"And suddenly I wasn't in the park at all.

"I was still falling, all right. I was in the same position—but no longer on the Earth. All around me was a weird plain. It was blazing with a glare of light, pitted with thousands of craters, ringed with mountains higher than any I had ever seen. The Sun was burning down out of a blue sky dark as midnight, and full of stars. There was another body in the heavens, huge and greenish.

"A fantastic black machine was gliding down over those terrible mountains. It was larger than you'd think a flying machine could be, and utterly strange. It had just hit me with some weapon, and I was reeling back under the agony of the wound. Beside me was a great explosion of red gas. The cloud of it poured over me, and burned my lungs, and blotted out everything.

"It was some time before I realized that I had been on the Moon—or rather that I had picked up the last thoughts of a man dying there. I had never had time for astronomy, but one day I happened to see a photograph of the lunar craters—and recognized them, and knew that the greenish crescent had been the Earth itself.

"And the shock of that discovery only increased my bewilderment. It was nearly a year before I under-

stood that I was developing an ability to recall the future. But that first incident happened in the thirtieth century, in the conquest of the Moon by the Medusæ—the man whose last moments I shared was one of the human colonists they murdered.

"The faculty improved with practice, like any other. It's simply telepathy, I'm convinced, carrying thought across Time and not merely through Space. Just remember that neither Space nor Time is real; they are both just aspects of one reality.

"At first I got contact only with minds under great stress, like that of the dying colonist. Even yet, there are difficulties—or I shouldn't have asked you to examine me this morning, Doctor. But I've managed to follow human history, pretty well, through the next thousand years. That's what I've been writing.

"The history of the future!

"The conquest of space is what thrills me most. Partly because it's the most difficult achievement of human engineering, the most daring and the most dangerous. And partly, I suppose, because my own descendants played a big part in it."

AN EAGER ring of enthusiasm had risen in his voice, and now he paused awkwardly, as if suddenly self-conscious because of it. His sharp blue eyes searched my face. I kept silent until he went on, sure that the least show of doubt would stop him.

"Yes, Doctor, I've a son." His thin brown face showed a wistful pride. "I don't see much of him, because he's a very busy young man. I failed to make a soldier out of him, and I used to think he'd never amount to much. I tried to get him to join up, long before Pearl Harbor, but he wouldn't hear of it."

"No, Don never took to fighting. He's something you call a nuclear physicist, and he's got himself a nice, safe deferment. Now he's on a war job, somewhere out in New Mexico. I'm not even supposed to know where he is, and I can't tell you what he's doing—but the thesis he wrote, at Tech, was something about the metal uranium."

Old John Delmar gave me a proud and wistful smile.

"No, I used to think that Don would never accomplish much, but now I know that he designed the first atomic reaction motor. I used to think he had no guts—but he was man enough to pilot the first manned atomic rocket ever launched."

I must have goggled, for he explained:

"That was 1956, Doctor—the past tense just seems more convenient. With this—this capacity of mine, you see, I shared that flight with Don, until his rocket exploded, outside the stratosphere. He died, of course. But he left a son, to carry on the Delmar name.

"And that grandson of mine reached the Moon, Doctor, in a

military rocket. After uranium was discovered there, he went back to take command of the American outpost—a little camp of air-tight domes, over the mines. But the ghastly atomic wars, in the 1990's, isolated the Moon. My grandson died there, with the rest of his little garrison, and it was nearly two hundred years before human civilization was far enough recovered from the wars to build another space rocket.

"BUT it was a Miles Delmar, late in the 22nd century, who finally went back to the dead mining camps on the Moon, and then set out for Mars. He left too much shielding off his atomic reaction motor, to lighten his ship for that voyage, and the leaking radiations killed him and all his crew. The dead ship carried the bodies on, and crashed in the Syrtis Major.

"Miles's son, Zane Delmar, patented the geodyne—which was a vast advance over the heavy, dangerous atomic reactors. He found the wreck of his father's ship on Mars, and survived an attack from the native Martian beings, and later died of a Venusian jungle-fever. The victory of men over space wasn't easy—quite! But Zane's three sons carried on the war. And they made a huge fortune out of the geodyne.

"In the next century, all the solar system was pretty well explored, as far out as the moon of Neptune. It was fifty years more before a John Ulnar reached Pluto—our family

name was changed, about that time, from Delmar to Ulnar, to fit a new universal identification system.

"His fuel exhausted, so that he couldn't return, John managed to keep himself alive for four years, alone on the Black Planet. He left a diary that his nephew found, twenty years later. A strange document, that diary!

"It was Mary Ulnar—a peculiar Amazon she must have been—who began the conquest of the silica-armored desert life of Mars. And Arthur Ulnar, her brother, who led the first fleet to attack the cold, half-metallic beings which had extended their own rule over the four great moons of Jupiter—he died on Io.

"More battles, however, were fought in the laboratory than in space. Explorers and colonists met terrific, endless difficulties with bacteria, atmospheres, gravitations, chemical dangers. As planetary engineers, the Ulnars contributed a full share to that new science, which, with gravity generators, synthetic atmospheres, and climate-controls, could finally transform a frozen, stony asteroid into a tiny paradise.

"And the Ulnars took a generous reward.

"For a dark chapter of the family history begins with the twenty-sixth century. By then, the conquest of the solar system was finished. The Ulnar family had been the leaders, and they seized the spoils. They had controlled interplanetary commerce since the time of Zane and his geo-

dyne, and they finally dominated the whole System.

"One bold tycoon had himself crowned Eric the First, Emperor of the Sun. For two hundred years his descendants ruled all the planets as absolute despots. Their reign, I'm sorry to say, was savagely oppressive. There were endless outbreaks for liberty, cruelly put down.

"Adam the Third, however, was at last forced to abdicate—his great mistake was an effort to suppress the freedom of scientific research. The scientists overthrew him, and the Green Hall Council launched the first real democracy of history. For the next two centuries, a genuine civilization existed in the System, defended by a small body of picked and well-trained fighting men, the Legion of Space."

WISETFULLY again, old John Delmar shook his lean gray head.

"If I could have lived a thousand years later!" he whispered. "I might have fought with that Legion. For that golden age of peace was broken. Another Eric Ulnar ventured away into space, the first man to circle another star. He reached that strange dwarf sun that astronomers know as Barnard's Runaway Star—the few nearer stars having proved to possess no planets. And he brought back terror and suffering and the shadow of doom to the human planets.

"The mad ambition of that re-

mote descendant of mine brought war between our System and another," that slow old voice said sadly. "War and invasion, treason and terror. Even the Legion was betrayed.

"And then there was an epic achievement by a few loyal men of the Legion of Space—perhaps the most heroic thing that men ever did. One of those few was another Ulnar. John Ulnar. I like to think that his name came down from me."

My office nurse chose that unfortunate moment to announce another patient. And little John Delmar hastily knocked out his pipe, apologetic for having taken so much of my time. He came to his feet, unsteady on his bad knee, and a vision seemed to fade from his oddly bright, *live* blue eyes.

"I must be going, Doctor." And he added, quietly, "Now you see how I know that I'm due to die on the morning of March twenty-third."

"You're sound as a bell," I insisted again. "And much too sane to let any such notion— But this is a very remarkable thing you've told me, John. I wish you had mentioned it before; and now I'd like very much to see those manuscripts. Why don't you publish them?"

"Perhaps," he promised vaguely. "But so few would believe, and I don't like to expose myself to any charge of fraud."

I let him go, reluctantly. I meant to call at his rooms, to hear the rest of his story and read his manu-

scripts. But the urgencies of wartime practice kept me busy all that week—until his landlady phoned me, to say that poor old Mr. Delmar had been down sick with a cold, for the last two days, alone in his rooms.

In two hours, in spite of his feeble protests, he was in the hospital. If I had only made the time to call, a few days before—but yet, perhaps, as he quietly believed, it may be that the future is really already determined, as firmly unchangeable as the past.

INFLUENZA, with pulmonary complications. The outlook seemed good enough, the first few days, and I knew that old John Delmar's fighting heart had pulled him through a hundred more desperate situations. But sulfa and penicillin failed. His old heart surrendered. He knew he was going to die, and he did—quite peacefully, under an oxygen tent, on the morning of March 23. I was standing by his bed, and I looked at my watch.

The time was eleven-seven.

Whatever others may decide, I was well enough convinced, even before the proof of death. John Delmar at first wished to have his manuscripts destroyed, because his splendid scheme of a full history of the next thousand years was far from complete, but I persuaded him to leave the finished sections in my hands. As mere fiction, they would be enormously entertaining. As a

real prevision of future history, they are more than fascinating.

The selection which follows deals with the adventures of John Star—born John Ulnar—who was a young soldier in the Legion of

Space, in the thirtieth century, when human treason sought an alliance with the unearthly Medusæ, and so brought alien horror and black disaster to the unwarned worlds of men.

Chapter One

A Fort on Mars

"I'M REPORTING, Major Stell, for orders."

John Star, lean and trim in his new Legion uniform, stood at attention before the desk where the stern, white-haired officer sat toying with the silver model of a space cruiser. He felt the major's merciless eyes come up from the tiny ship to search out every detail of his small-boned, hard physique. Taut and almost quivering, he endured that probing gaze, burningly anxious to know his first assignment.

"Are you ready, John Ulnar, to accept your first order in the Legion as it should be accepted, to put duty above everything else?"

"I hope so, sir. I believe so."

What would it be?

"I hope so too, John Ulnar."

John Star was then called John Ulnar; the "Star" is a title of distinction given him later by the Green Hall. John Star we shall call him, according to the Green Hall's edict.

This day, one of the first in the thirtieth century, had been the supreme, the most thrilling day of his twenty-one years. It marked the end of his, five arduous years in the Legion Academy, on Catalina Island.

Now the ceremonies were finished. His life in the Legion was about to begin.

Where, he wondered eagerly, would his first tour of duty be? On some cruiser of the Legion Patrol, in the cold wastes of space? At some isolated outpost in the exotic, terrible jungles of Venus? Or perhaps in the Guard of the Green Hall, itself? He strove to conceal his consuming impatience.

"John Ulnar," old Major Stell spoke at last, with maddening deliberation. "I hope you realize the meaning of duty."

"I think I do, sir."

"Because," the officer continued, as slowly, "you are being assigned to a duty that is peculiarly important."

"What is it, sir?"

He could not resist the desire to hasten the satisfaction of his anxious curiosity, but Major Stell refused to hurry. His keen eyes still scanned John Star pitilessly, while his thin fingers continued to turn the silver toy on his desk.

"John Ulnar, you are being given a duty that has previously been entrusted only to seasoned, chosen veterans of the Legion. It surprised me, I may say, that you were selected

for it. Your lack of experience will be a disadvantage to you."

"Not too much of one, I hope, sir."

Why didn't he come to the point?

"The orders for your assignment, John Ulnar, came directly from Commander Ulnar himself. Does it happen that you are related to the Commander of the Legion, and his nephew, Eric Ulnar, the explorer?"

"Yes, sir. Distantly."

"That must explain your orders. But if you fail in this duty, John Ulnar, don't expect any favor of the Commander to save you from the consequences."

"No, sir. Of course not!"

How long could he endure this anxiety?

"The service to which you are assigned, John Ulnar, is not well known. It is in fact secret. But it is the most important that can be entrusted to a soldier of the Legion. Your responsibility will be to the Green Hall itself. Any failure, I may warn you, even if due only to negligence, will mean disgrace and very severe punishment."

"Yes, sir."

What could it be?

"John Ulnar, did you ever hear of AKKA?"

"Akka? Why, I think not, sir."

"It isn't 'akka.' AKKA. It's a symbol."

"Yes, sir. What does it mean?"

At last, was he coming to it?

"Men have given their lives to learn that, John Ulnar. And men

have died for knowing. Only one person in the System knows precisely what those four letters stand for. That person is a young woman. The most important single duty of the Legion is to guard her."

"Yes, sir." A breathless whisper.

"Because, John Ulnar, AKKA is the most precious thing that humanity possesses. I need not tell you what it is. But the loss of it, I may say—the loss of the young woman who knows it—would mean unprecedented disaster to humanity."

"Yes, sir." He waited, painfully.

"I COULD assign you to no duty more important than to join the few trusted men who guard that young woman. And to no duty more perilous! For desperate men know that AKKA exists, know that possession of it would enable them to dictate to the Green Hall—or to destroy it.

"No risk, nor any difficulty, will deter them from attempting to get possession of the young woman, to force the secret from her. You must be unceasingly alert against attempts by stealth or violence. The girl—and AKKA—must be protected at any cost."

"Yes, sir. Where is the girl?"

"That information cannot be given you, until you are out in space. The danger that you might pass it on, unwittingly or otherwise, is too great. The girl's safety depends on her whereabouts being kept secret. If they become known—the whole

Legion fleet might be inadequate to defend her.

"You are assigned, John Ulnar, to join the guard of AKKA. You will report at once, at the Green Hall, to Captain Eric Ulnar, and place yourself under his orders."

"Under Eric Ulnar!"

He was astonished and overjoyed to know that he was to serve under his famous kinsman, the great explorer of space, just returned from his daring voyage beyond the limits of the System, to the far, strange planet of Barnard's Runaway Star.

"Yes. John Ulnar, I hope you never forget the overwhelming importance of the duty before you. . . . That is all."

Queerly, John Star's heart ached at leaving the old campus of the Academy, at parting from his classmates. Queerly, for he was a-thrill with eagerness. Mystery lay ahead, the promise of peril, the adventure of meeting his famous kinsman. With native optimism, he ignored Major Stell's grim hints of the possibility of disastrous failure.

From the ports of the descending strato-flier, that afternoon, he first saw the Green Hall—seat of the Supreme Council of the united planets.

Like a great emerald, it shimmered darkly cool in a waste of sun-baked New Mexico mesa—a colossal marvel of green, translucent glass. Three thousand feet the square central tower leaped up, crowned with the landing-stage to which the strato-plane was dropping. The four

great colonnaded wings spread over a full mile of luxuriantly verdant parkland—a solitary jewel in the desert, under the rugged, mile-high wall of the Sandias.

John Star was a-throb with eagerness to see Eric Ulnar, then in the full radiance of his fame for commanding the first successful expedition beyond the System—if an expedition could be called successful when but a fourth of its members returned, and most of those dying of a fearful malady involving insanity and hideous bodily disfigurement.

Dark chapters, and silent ones, were in the story of the voyage. But the public, like John Star, had ignored them. Honors had been showered on Eric Ulnar, while most of his companions lay forgotten in hospital cells, gibbering of the horrors of that remote solitary planet, while their bodies rotted away unspeakably, beyond the aid or the understanding of medical science.

JOHN STAR found Eric Ulnar waiting for him in a private room in the vast Green Hall. Long golden hair and slender figure made the young officer almost femininely handsome. Burning eyes and haughty airs proclaimed his passion and his insolent pride. Retreating chin and irresolute mouth betrayed the man's fatal weakness.

"John Ulnar, I believe you are a relative of mine."

"I believe I am, sir," said John Star, concealing the stab of disap-

pointment that pierced even through his admiration. He stood at attention, while the arrogant eyes of Eric Ulnar boldly scanned his lean body, hard and capable from the five grinding years of Academy training.

"You are under some obligation, I believe, to Adam Ulnar?"

"I am, sir. I am an orphan. It was the Commander of the Legion who got me the Academy appointment. But for that, I might never have been able to enter the Legion."

"Adam Ulnar is my uncle. He had me select you for the duty ahead. I hope you will serve me loyally."

"Of course, sir. Aside from the obligation, you are my superior in the Legion."

Eric Ulnar smiled; for a moment his face was almost attractive, in spite of its weakness and its pride.

"I'm sure we shall get on," he said. "But I may require services of you as a kinsman that I couldn't ask of you as my subordinate in the Legion."

John Star wondered what such services might be. He could not hide the fact that Eric Ulnar was not all he had hoped of the heroic explorer of space. Something about him roused a vague distrust, though the man had been his idol.

"You're ready to start for our post?"

"Of course."

"We shall go aboard the cruiser, then, at once."

"We're leaving the Earth?"

"You'll serve yourself best, John," Eric Ulnar said with an air of cutting superiority, "by obeying orders and asking no questions."

An elevator lifted them to the glittering confusion of the landing stage on the green glass tower. The *Scorpion* was waiting for them there, a swift new space cruiser, taperingly cylindrical, a bare hundred feet long, all silver-white save for black projecting rockets.

Two Legionnaires met them at the air-lock, and came with them aboard. Vors, lean, stringy, rat-faced; Kimpfen, tall, haggard-eyed, wolfish. Both years older than John Star, both he soon learned, veterans of the interstellar expedition—among the few who had escaped that mysterious malady—they displayed for his inexperience a patronizing contempt that annoyed him. It was strange, he thought, that men of their type should have been chosen to guard the infinitely precious AKKA. He would not, he thought, care to trust either of them with the price of a meal.

The *Scorpion* was provisioned, fueled, her crew of ten aboard and at their posts. Her air-lock quickly sealed, her multiple rockets vomiting blue flame, she flashed through the atmosphere into the freedom of the void.

A THOUSAND miles off, safe in the frozen, star-domed vacuum of space, the pilot cut out the rock-

ets. At an order from Eric Ulnar, he set the cruiser's nose for the far red spark of Mars and started the geodyne generators. Quietly humming, their powerful fields reacting against, altering, the curvature of space itself, the geodynes—more technically, electro-magnetic geodesic deflectors—drove the *Scorpion* across the hundred million miles to Mars, with an acceleration and a final velocity that science had once declared impossible.

Forgetting his uneasy mistrust of Vors and Kimpfen, John Star enjoyed the voyage. The eternal miracles of space fascinated him through long hours. Ebon sky; frozen pinpoints of stars, many-colored, motionless; silver clouds of nebulae; the supernal Sun, blue, winged with red coronal fire.

Three meals were served in the narrow galley. After twenty hours, the geodynes—too powerful for safe maneuver in the close vicinity of a planet—were stopped. The *Scorpion* fell, checked by rocket blasts, toward the night side of the planet Mars.

Standing by the navigator, Eric Ulnar gave him directions from some private memorandum. About the whole proceeding was an air of mystery, of secret haste, of daring unknown dangers, that mightily intrigued John Star. Yet he had the sense of something irregular; he was troubled by a little haunting fear that all was not as it ought to be.

On a stony Martian desert they landed, far, apparently, from any

city or inhabited, fertile "canal." Low, dark hills loomed near in the starlight. John Star, with Eric Ulnar and rat-faced Vors and wolfish Kimpfen, disembarked; beside them was lowered their meager baggage and a little pile of freight.

Four Legionnaires came up presently through the darkness, the part of the guard, John Star understood, that they had come to relieve. The four went aboard, after their leader had exchanged some documents with Eric Ulnar; the valve clanged behind them. Blue flames jetted from the rockets; the *Scorpion* roared away, a dwindling blue comet, soon lost amid the blazing Martian stars.

JOHN STAR and the others waited in the desert for daylight. The Sun burst up suddenly, shrunken and blue, after the briefest yellow dawn, flooding the red landscape abruptly with harsh radiance.

Under violet zenith and lemon-green horizons, the ancient planet lay weirdly and grimly desolate. Lonely wastes of ocher drift-sand, rippled with low crescent dunes. Cruel, jutting ridges of red volcanic rock, projecting from yellow sand like broken fangs. Solitary boulders, carved by pitiless, wind-driven sand into grotesque scarlet monsters.

Crouching above the plain were the hills. Low, ancient, worn down by erosion of ages immemorial; like all the mountains of dying Mars. Tumbled masses of red stone; broken palisades of red-black, columnar

rock; ragged, wind-carved precipices.

Sprawling across the hill-top was an ancient, half-ruined fort. Massive walls rambled along the rim of the precipices, studded here and there with square, heavy towers. It was all of the red volcanic stone characteristic of the Martian desert, all crumbling to slow ruin.

THE fortress must date, John Star knew, from the conquest of the weird, silica-armored Martians. It must have been abandoned a full three centuries ago. But it was not now deserted.

A sentry met them when they climbed to the gate, a very fat, short, blue-nosed man in Legion uniform, who had been dozing lazily on a bench in the warm sunlight. He examined Eric Ulnar's documents with a fishy eye.

"Ah, so you're the relief guard?" he wheezed. "'Tis mortal seldom we see a living being, here. Pass on, inside. Captain Otan is in his quarters beyond the court."

Within the crumbling red walls they found a large, open court, surrounded with a gallery, many doors and windows opening upon it. A tiny fountain played in a little garden of vivid flowers. Beyond was a tennis court, from which a man and a slender girl vanished hastily as they entered.

John Star's heart leaped with excitement at sight of the girl. She must be, he felt immediately certain,

keeper of the mysterious AKKA. She was the girl he had been ordered to guard! Recalling Major Stell's warning of desperate, unknown enemies anxious to seize her, John Star had a pang of apprehension. The old fort was no real defense; it was no more than a dwelling. There were, he soon found, only eight men to guard her, all told. They were armed only with hand proton-blast needles. Truly, secrecy was their only defense. Secrecy, and the girl's secret weapon. If those enemies discovered she was here, and sent a modern, armed ship—

During the day he learned no more. Eric Ulnar, Vors, and Kimpfen remained insolently uncommunicative; the four men left of the old guard were oddly distant, cautious in their talk, unmistakably apprehensive. They were busy bringing up the supplies from where the *Scorpion* had landed—provisions, apparently, to last many months.

An hour after dark, John Star was in the individual room he had been assigned, which opened on an ancient court, when he heard a shouted alarm.

"Rockets! Rockets! A strange ship is landing!"

Running into the yard, he saw a greenish flare descending athwart the stars; he heard a thin whistling that increased to a screaming bellow, deafeningly loud. The flame, grown enormous, dropped beyond the east wall; the bellow abruptly ceased. He felt a sharp tremor underfoot.

"A great ship!" cried the sentry. "It landed so near it shook the hill. Its rockets burned green, a thing I never saw before."

Could it be, John Star wondered, with an odd little pause of his heart, that the girl's mysterious enemies had learned where she was? That this ship had come to take her?

Captain Otan, the commander of the tiny garrison, evidently had some such apprehension. An elderly thin man, very much agitated, he called out all the Legionnaires to station them about the old walls and

towers with hand proton guns. For three hours John Star lay on his stomach, watching a crumbling redoubt. But nothing happened; at midnight he was dismissed.

The old officer, however, must still have been alarmed over the strange ship's arrival. He ordered the three others of his own relief—Jay Kalam, Hal Samdu, and Giles Habibula—to remain on guard. From him, John Star caught a sense of terror and impending doom which he was not to escape for many dark and dreadful days.

Chapter Two

An Eye and a Murder

JOHN STAR found himself abruptly sitting bolt upright in his bunk, staring at his open window, beyond which lay the great courtyard. It was no alarm that he could name which had aroused him; rather, a sudden chill of instinctive fear, an intuition of terror.

An eye! It must be, he thought, an eye, staring in at him. But it was fully a foot long, ovoid, all pupil. Thin, ragged black membranes edged it. It was purple, shining in the darkness like a great well of luminescence, somehow infinitely malignant. Mere sight of it shook him with an icy, elemental dread.

For only the briefest instant it gazed at him, unutterably evil, and then it was gone. Trembling, he scrambled out of bed to give the alarm. But the shock of it had left him doubtful of his senses. When he heard one sentry hail another in the court, as if nothing were amiss, he decided that the frightful eye had been no more than nightmare.

He wasn't given to nightmares. But after all, he had heard nothing; and the thing had vanished the very instant he glimpsed it. It was sheer impossibility; no creature in the System had eyes a foot long, not even the sea-lizards of Venus. He went back to bed and tried to sleep—unsuccessfully, for the image of that

fearful eye kept haunting him.

He was up before dawn, anxious to know more of the strange ship. Passing the weary sentries in the court, he climbed the spiral stair in the old north tower, and looked out across the crimson landscape just as the sun rose abruptly above the horizon.

Dunes of yellow sand—shattered, weirdly eroded rock—he saw nothing else. But crumbling walls, eastward, shut off his view; the vessel, he thought, might lie beyond them. His curiosity increased. If it were a friendly, Legion ship, why had the rocket-blasts been green? If it carried enemies, why had they not already struck?

The girl was behind him when he turned: she whom he had glimpsed on the tennis court, and guessed to be keeper of AKKA. He saw again that she was very lovely. Slim and straight and cleanly formed; eyes cool gray, sober and honest; hair a lustrous brown that made magic of flame and color in the new sunlight. She wore a simple white tunic; her breast was heaving from the run behind him up the stairs.

It surprised him that the keeper of AKKA should be so young and lovely.

"Why—why, good morning." He felt confused, for Legion cadets have little time for the social graces, yet very delighted and eager to please her.

"It must be very near!" she cried,

breathless. Her voice, he perceived was adorable—and alarmed.

"Beyond the walls, perhaps."

"I think so." Her gray eyes studied him frankly, weighed him—warming, he thought, with approval. She said abruptly, voice lower: "I want to talk to you."

"I'm quite willing." He smiled.

"Please be serious," she appealed, urgently. "You are loyal? Loyal to the Legion? To the Green Hall? To mankind?"

"Why, of course I am. What—"

"I believe you are," she whispered, gray eyes still very intent on his face. "I believe you really are."

"Why should you doubt me?"

"I'll tell you," she said swiftly. "But you must keep this to yourself. Every word. Even from your officer, Captain Ulnar."

HER face, when she spoke the name, tensed with a dislike that was almost hate.

"If you say. Though I don't see—"

"I shall trust you. First, do you know why you're here?"

"I've orders to guard a girl who knows some mysterious secret."

"I'm the girl." Her voice was more deliberate, more confident. "I don't matter. But the secret, AKKA, is the most valuable and the most dangerous thing in the System. I must tell you a little more about it than you seem to know. For AKKA is in terrible danger. You must help us to save it!"

Quietly, then, she asked a question that seemed odd:

"You know the history, I suppose, of the old wars between the Purples and the Greens?"

"Why, I think so. Purple was the color of the Emperors. The Greens were the faction led by the research scientists that revolted and set up the democratic Green Hall. The last Emperor, Adam the Third, abdicated two hundred years ago."

"Do you know why he abdicated?"

"No. No, the books didn't say. I used to wonder."

"I must tell you. It's important. The Emperors, you know, enjoyed despotic power. They were vastly wealthy; they commanded private space fleets, and owned whole planets, outright. They ruled with an iron cruelty. The enemies they didn't liquidate were deported to Pluto.

"An ancestor of mine, Charles Anthar, was shipped out—because of a chance remark in favor of free speech and free research, made to a man he thought a friend! The finest physicist in the System. He spent fourteen years in the cold dungeons of the Black Planet.

"On Pluto, he made a scientific discovery. The theory he worked out in his dungeon by pure mathematics. That took him nine years. Then his fellow prisoners smuggled materials to him, to build the apparatus he had planned. It was very simple, but he was five years finding the parts.

"When it was finished, he destroyed the prison guard. Sitting in his cell, he forced Adam the Third to obey his orders. If the Emperor had refused, Charles Anthar could have wrecked the solar system.

"Since, his discovery has defended the peace of the Green Hall. It is so very dangerous that only one person at a time is permitted to know it. Only this much of it has ever been put in writing—an abbreviation."

SHE showed him, tattooed on a white palm, the letters' AKKA.

"And now you are in danger?" John Star whispered.

"I am. The Purples didn't lose their wealth and influence, you see, and they've always plotted to restore the Empire. The terrible power of AKKA is all that restrains their schemes. They want the secret, but it has always been safely kept for the Green Hall, by the descendants of Charles Anthar.

"My name is Aladoree Anthar. I had the secret from my father, six years ago, before he died. I had to give up the life that I had planned, and make a very solemn promise.

"The Purples, of course, have known about AKKA from the first. Endlessly they have conspired and bribed and murdered to get possession of it for themselves. With it, they'd be supreme, forever. Now I think Eric Ulnar has come to take it!"

"You must trust Eric!" protested

John Star. "Why, he's the famous explorer—and the nephew of the Commander of the Legion!"

"That's why I think we're betrayed."

"Why, I don't see—"

"Ulnar," she said, "was the family name of the Emperors. Eric Ulnar, I believe, is the direct heir, the pretender to the throne. I don't trust him, or his scheming, plotting uncle—"

"Adam Ulnar, scheming, plotting!" John Star was outraged. "You call the Commander that?"

"I do! I think he used his wealth and influence to become Commander, so he could find where I am hidden. He sent Eric here! That ship, last night, brought the traitor reinforcements, and a way to escape with me!"

"Impossible!" gasped John Star. "Vors, perhaps, and Kimplen. But not Eric!"

"He's the leader." Her voice was cold with certainty. "Eric Ulnar slipped out of the fort last night. He was gone two hours. I think he went to communicate with his allies on the ship."

"Eric Ulnar is a hero and an officer of the Legion."

"I would trust no man named Ulnar!"

"My name is Ulnar."

"Your name—Ulnar," she whispered, shocked. "You're kin—"

"I am. I owe my commission to the Commander's generosity."

"Then I see," she said bitterly, "why you are here!"

"You are mistaken about Eric," he insisted.

"Just remember," she whipped out furiously, "that you are a traitor to the Green Hall! That you are destroying all liberty and happiness!"

With that she whirled and ran back down the old stone stairs. He stared after her, breathless and disconcerted. Even though he had defended Eric, he was left with a haunting doubt. Vors and Kimplen he mistrusted deeply. The proximity of the strange ship had alarmed him. And he was very sorry, just now, that he had lost the confidence of Aladoree Anthar. It would make her harder to protect—and, besides, he liked her!

ERIC ULNAR met him when he came back to the court, and told him with a grim, sardonic smile:

"It appears, John, that Captain Otan was murdered during the night. We've just found his body in his room."

Chapter Three

Three Men of the Legion

"STRANGLED, apparently," said Eric Ulnar, pointing to a swollen purple mark. In the soldierly bareness of his quarters, the dead commander lay face upward on his narrow cot, limbs rigid in agony, thin face contorted, eyes protruding, mouth set in an appalling grin of terror and pain.

Bending over the corpse, John Star discovered other strange marks, where the skin was dry, hardened into little greenish scales.

"Look at this," he said. "Like the burn of some chemical. And that bruise—it wasn't made by a human hand. A rope—perhaps—"

"So you're turning detective?" cut in Eric Ulnar, with his thin, superior smile. "I must warn you that curiosity is a very dangerous trait, John. But what's your theory?"

"Last night," he began slowly, "I saw something rather—dreadful. I thought afterwards it was just a nightmare, until now. A huge, purple eye, staring into my window from the court. It must have been a foot long! It was evil—pure evil."

"Something must have come into the court, sir. It looked in my window. And murdered him. And left

those stains. That mark about the throat—no human hand could have made that."

"You aren't going space-happy, are you, John?" There was a little, sharp, angry edge to the amused scorn in Eric Ulnar's voice. "Anyhow, this thing happened while the old guards were on duty. I'm going to hold them for questioning." His narrow face set coldly. "John, you will arrest Kalam and Samdu and Habibula immediately, and lock them in the old cell block under the north tower."

"Arrest them? Don't you think that's extreme, sir, before they've had a chance to speak—"

"You are presuming on our kinship, John. Please remember that I am still your officer—now in sole authority here, since Captain Otan is dead."

"Yes, sir." He subdued his haunting doubt. Aladoree must be wrong.

"Here are the keys to the old prison."

Each of the men he must arrest occupied a single room opening upon the court. John Star tapped on the first door, and it was opened by the rather handsome, dark-haired Legionnaire whom he had seen on

the tennis court with Aladoree An-thar.

Jay Kalam was in dressing gown and slippers. His gravely thoughtful face showed weariness; yet he smiled at John Star, courteously but silently invited him in, motioned him to a seat.

It was the room of a cultured man, quietly luxurious, reserved in taste. Old-fashioned books. A few select pictures. A case of shining laboratory apparatus. An *optiphone*, now filling the room with soft music, its stereoscopic vision panel aglow with the color and motion of a play.

JAY KALAM returned to his own chair, his attention back on the drama. John Star did not like to arrest such a man for murder, but he took his duty very seriously. He must obey his officer.

"I'm sorry——" he began.

Jay Kalam stopped him with a little gesture.

"Please wait. It will soon be done."

Unable to refuse such a request, John Star sat quietly until the act was ended, and Jay Kalam turned to him with a slow dark smile, reserved and yet attentive.

"Thank you for waiting. A new record that came on the *Scorpion*. I could not resist the temptation to see it before I went to bed. But what do you wish?"

"I'm very sorry——" began John Star. He paused, stammered, and

then, seeing that the thing had to be done, went on swiftly: "Sorry, but I am ordered by Captain Ulnar to place you under arrest."

The dark eyes met his in quick surprise; there was pain in them, as if they saw some dreaded thing.

"May I ask why?" The voice was low and courteous, unsurprised.

"Captain Otan was murdered last night."

Jay Kalam stood up quickly, but did not lose self-possession.

"Murdered?" he repeated quietly, after a time. "I see. So you are taking me to Ulnar?"

"To the cells. I am sorry."

For an instant John Star thought the unarmed man was going to attack him; he stepped back, a hand going to his proton gun. But Jay Kalam smiled a hard brown smile, without amusement, and told him quietly:

"I shall go with you. A moment, to pick up a few articles of clothing. The old dungeons are not famous for comfort."

John Star nodded, and kept his hand near the needle.

Crossing the court, they descended the spiral stair to a hall cut through red volcanic rock. With his pocket light-tube, John Star found the corroded metal door; he tried it with keys Eric Ulnar had given him, and failed to open it.

"I can turn it," offered his prisoner.

John Star gave him the key; he opened the door after a little effort,

gravely returned the key, and stepped through into dank darkness.

"I'm very sorry about all this," apologized John Star. "An unpleasant place, I see. But my orders——"

"Never mind that," said Jay Kalam quickly. "But remember one thing, please!" His tone was urgent. "You are a soldier of the Legion."

JOHN STAR locked the door and went after Hal Samdu.

To his astonishment, this man met him in the dress uniform of a general of the Legion, complete with every decoration ever awarded for heroism or distinction in service. White silk, gold braid, scarlet plume—his splendor was blinding.

"It came on the *Scorpion*," Hal Samdu informed him. "Very good, don't you think? Though the shoulders are not quite——"

"I'm surprised to see you in a general's uniform."

"Of course," Hal Samdu said seriously, "I don't wear it in public—not yet. I had it made, to be ready for promotion."

"I regret it," said John Star, "but I've been ordered to place you under arrest."

"To arrest me?" The broad, red face showed ludicrous amusement. "What for?"

"Captain Otan has been killed."

"The Captain—dead?" He stared in blank incredulity that changed to slow anger. "You think I——"

His great fists knotted. John Star stepped aside, whipped out his proton gun.

"Stop! I'm just obeying orders."

"Well——" The big hands opened and closed convulsively. Hal Samdu looked at the menacing needle, and John Star saw simple contempt of danger in his eyes. But he stopped.

"Well——" he repeated. "If it isn't your fault—I'll go."

The third man, Giles Habibula, did not open the door when John Star knocked, but merely called out for him to enter. The massive, blue-nosed sentry of the day before, he was now sitting, comfortably unbuttoned, before a table burdened with dishes and bottles.

"Ah, come in, lad, come in," he wheezed again. "I was just eating a mortal taste of lunch before I go to bed. A blessed hard night we had, waiting for trouble in the cold."

"But draw up, lad, and have a bite with me. We got new supplies on the *Scorpion*. An agreeable change from these mortal synthetic rations. Baked ham, and preserved candied yams, and some ripe old Dutch cheese—but look it over for yourself, lad."

He nodded at the table, which, John Star thought, bore food enough for six hungry men.

"No, thank you. I've come——"

"If you won't eat, you'll surely drink. We're mortal fortunate, lad, in the matter of drink. A wine cellar left full when the fort was aban-

doned in the old days. Aged—precious well—the best wine, I dare say, in the System. A full cellar—when I found it. Ah——”

“I must tell you that I’ve orders to place you under arrest.”

“Arrest? Why, lad, old Giles Habibula has done no mortal harm to anybody. Not here on Mars, anyhow.”

“Captain Otan has been murdered. You are to be questioned.”

“You aren’t jesting with poor old Giles, lad?”

“Of course not.”

“Murdered!” He shook his head. “I told him he should drink with me. He lived a Spartan life, lad. Ah, it must be terrible to be cut off so! But you don’t think I did it, lad?”

“NOT I, surely. But my orders are to lock you in the cells.”

“Those old dungeons are mortal cold and musty, lad.”

“My orders——”

“I’ll go with you, lad. Keep your hand away from that proton gun. Old Giles Habibula wouldn’t make trouble for anybody.”

“Come.”

“May I eat a bite first, lad? And finish my wine?”

John Star somehow liked old Giles Habibula, for all his grossness. So he sat and watched until the dishes were clean and the three bottles empty. And then they went together to the dungeons.

Aladoree Anthar met him as he returned to the court, her face

shadowed with worry and alarm.

“John Ulnar,” she greeted him, and winced at the name, “where are my three loyal men?”

“I have locked Samdu and Kalam and Habibula in the old prison.”

Her face was white with scorn.

“Do you think they are murderers?”

“No, I really doubt their guilt.”

“Then why lock them up?”

“I must obey orders.”

“Don’t you see what you have done? All my loyal guard are murdered or locked up. I’m at the mercy of Ulnar—and he’s your real murderer! AKKA is betrayed!”

“Eric Ulnar a murderer! You misjudge——”

“Come! I’ll show him to you, a murderer and worse. He has just slipped out again. He’s going back to that ship that landed last night—to his fellow traitors.”

“You’re mistaken. Surely——”

“Come!” she cried urgently. “Don’t be blind to him.”

She led him swiftly along ramps and parapets to the eastern flank of the old fortress, up to a tower platform.

“Look! The ship—where it came from, I don’t understand. And Eric Ulnar, your hero of the Legion!”

Age-worn precipices and tumbled red boulder-fields fell away from the foot of the wall to the lurid plain. There, not a mile from them, lay the strange ship.

John Star had seen nothing like it. Colossal, so vast it stunned his

mind. Intricate and strange. All shining, jet-black metal.

The familiar space-craft of the System were all spindle-shaped, trimly tapering; all of them silvered mirror-like to reduce heat radiation and absorption in space; all comparatively small, the largest liners not four hundred feet long.

THIS machine had a spidery con-fusion of projecting parts—beams, braced surfaces, vast, wing-like vanes, massive, jointed metal levers—all jutting from the hull, which was a gigantic black globe. It was incredibly huge; the metal skids on which it rested lay along the red

desert for a full half mile, the sphere was a thousand feet thick.

"The ship!" whispered the girl. "And Eric Ulnar, the traitor!"

She pointed, and John Star saw the man's tiny figure, scrambling down the slope—dwarfed to the merest insect in the shadow of that machine, so huge and strange and queerly black.

"Now do you believe?"

"Something is wrong," he admitted reluctantly. "Something . . . I'm going after him! I can overtake him, make him tell me what's going on. Even if he is my officer."

He plunged recklessly down the stairway from the old tower.

Chapter Four

"Well, John, I am a Traitor!"

THE black mass of the strange flier filled the eastern sky, the central globe looming like a dark moon fallen in the red desert. The black skids, lying for half a mile upon the débris of boulders they had crushed, were like tall metal walls. In the shadow of that incredible machine, the toiling man ahead was shrunken to the merest human atom.

Midway to the black hull—almost under the top of the dark wing that covered an eighth of the sky—he

still had not looked back. John Star was within forty yards of him, breathing so hard he feared the other would hear. He gripped his proton gun, shouting:

"Halt! I want to talk to you."

Eric Ulnar stopped, looking back in astonishment. He made a slight movement as if to draw the weapon in his own belt, but stopped when he saw John Star's face.

"Come here," John Star ordered. He waited, getting his breath, and trying to control the nervous tremor of his weapon, while his famous kinsman walked slowly back, with

sharp annoyance on that narrow, weak, and handsome face.

"Well, John." Eric Ulnar gave him a tolerant, superior smile. "You're exceeding your duty again. I'm afraid you're too zealous to make a successful Legionnaire. My uncle will be sorry to hear of your failure."

"Eric," said John Star, surprised a little at his own deadly calm, "I'm going to ask you some questions. If I don't like the answers, I'm afraid I'll have to kill you."

White fury mounted to Eric Ulnar's girlish, passionate face.

"John, you'll be court-martialed for this!"

"Probably I shall. But now I want to know where this ship came from. And why you are slipping out here."

"How should I know where it's from? Nothing like it was ever seen in the System before. Simple curiosity was enough, John, to bring me out here."

Eric Ulnar tossed his bare, golden head, and smiled mockingly.

"I'm afraid, Eric, that you are planning treason to the Green Hall," said John Star quietly. "I think you know why this flier came, and why Captain Otan was killed. Unless you can convince me that I am wrong, I'm going to kill you, release the three men I locked up, and defend the girl. What have you to say?"

ERIC ULNAR looked up at the great black vane above them, and smiled again, insolently bold.

"Well, John," he said deliberately, "I am a traitor."

"Eric!" John Star was dazed with shock and anger. "You admit it!"

"Of course, John. I've never planned to be anything else—if you call it treason to take what is mine by right. I suppose you don't know you have imperial blood in your veins, John—your education seems to have been neglected. But you have."

"I am the rightful Emperor of the Sun, John. In a very short time I shall take possession of my throne. As a prince of the blood, I had hoped that you might claim a high place under me. But I doubt, John, that you will live to enjoy the rewards of the revolution. You are too independent."

"Just what have you done?" demanded John Star. "And where did this flier come from?"

He kept his eyes, and his menacing weapon, fixed on the other.

"That ship came from the planet of Barnard's Star, John. You've heard, I suppose, of the dying men we brought back from the expedition? Heard what they babble of? They aren't as insane as men think they are, John. Most of the things they talk about are real. Those things are going to help me crush the Green Hall, John."

"You brought back—allies?"

Eric Ulnar smiled mockingly at the horror in his tone.

"I did, John. You see, the masters of the planet we found—they

are as intelligent as men, though not at all human—the things we found need iron. It doesn't occur on their world—and it's priceless to them—for magnetic instruments, electrical equipment, alloys, a thousand and one things.

"So I made an alliance with them, John. . . .

"They sent this ship, with some of their weapons—they have fighting machines that would surprise you, John; their scientific achievements are really remarkable. They sent this ship to help crush the Green Hall, and restore the Empire. In return, we agreed to load the ship with iron.

"Iron is cheap. We may do it. But I rather think we'll wipe them out, after we have AKKA, and the Purple Hall is safely in power again. They're not too pleasant to have about. Worse than you might imagine. Those insane men—yes, John, I'm sure we should destroy them, after we get the secret weapon.

"The girl must have told you about AKKA, John?"

"She did! And I thought—I trusted you, Eric!"

"So she suspects, already! Then we must get the chains on her, before she has a chance to use AKKA. But I suppose Vors and Kimplen have her safe, by now."

"You . . . traitor!" whispered John Star.

"Of course, John. We're taking her away. I suppose we'll have to kill her, after she's told us about

her little secret gadget. Too bad she's such a luscious beauty."

JOHN STAR stood paralyzed with unbelieving shock, and Eric Ulnar smiled.

"I'm a traitor, John—by your definition. But you're something worse. You are a fool, John. I brought you along because I had to have a fourth man, to complete the guard. And because my uncle insisted that you must have a chance in life. He appears to have an exaggerated idea of your ability."

A sudden, high-pitched, girlish giggle burst from Eric Ulnar.

"You've been a fool, John. If you want to know how big a fool, just look up above you." And the handsome golden head made a mocking little bow.

John Star had kept his eyes on the other, expecting some ruse to distract him. Glancing warily upward now, he saw his danger. Some fifty feet above him swung a sort of gondola, a car of bright black metal suspended on cables from a great, jointed boom that reached out of the flier's confusion of titanic ebon mechanisms.

Inside it, he glimpsed—*something!*

Beyond the black sides of the gondola he could not see it clearly. But the little he did see made the short hair rise on his neck. It sent up his spine the cold, electric tingle of involuntary horror. His breath was checked, his heart pounding,

his whole body tense and quivering. The merest glimpse of the thing set off all his danger-instincts—the very presence of it roused primeval horror.

Yet, in the shadows of the queer black car, he could see little enough. A bulging, glistening surface, translucently greenish, wet, slimy, palpitating with sluggish life—the body surface of something gross and vast and utterly strange.

Staring malignly from behind the shielding plates, he met—an eye! Long, ovoid, shining. A well of cold purple flame, veiled with ancient wisdom, baleful with pure evil.

And that was all. That bulging, torpidly heaving green surface. And that monstrous eye. He could see no more. But that was enough to set off in him every reaction of primal fear.

Fear held him frozen. It stopped his breath and squeezed his heart. It poured the choking dust of terror down his throat. It washed his rigid limbs with icy sweat. He broke free at last and threw up his weapon.

But the half-seen thing in the gondola struck first. Reddish vapor puffed from the side of the swinging car. Something brushed his shoulder, a mere cold breath. And then a red avalanche of unendurable pain hurled him to the sand. Black oblivion brought mercy.

WHEN consciousness came back, he contrived to sit up. He was miserably sick, his body trembling

and wet with perspiration, his arm and shoulder still paralyzed and aflame with scarlet agony. Dizzy, still half-blinded, he looked anxiously about.

Eric Ulnar had vanished, and at first he couldn't find that black gondola. But the Cyclopean ship still loomed monstrous against the greenish Martian sky. He searched its maze of vanes and struts and levers, until at last he saw the swinging car.

That tianic boom had reached out, over the fort. The car was just rising above the red walls when he found it. Swiftly the cables were drawn in. The mile-long lever telescoped itself, and the gondola was swallowed through a huge valve in that black, spherical hull.

It must have picked up Eric Ulnar, he thought, and then swung over the fort to take aboard Vors and Kimpfen, with Aladoree. The girl, he realized, heart utterly sick, was already taken inside the enemy machine.

Very soon it rose. Cataracts of green flame thundered from cavernous jets. Endless ebon wings tilted and spread to catch the tenuous air of Mars. The ground trembled under him as those vast black skids lifted their burden from the yellow desert. A monstrous, evil bird, the black machine lifted obliquely across the greenish sky, into the violet zenith.

The noise of it beat about him, mauled him with raging seas of sound. A furnace-hot wind whipped

up curtains of yellow sand, dried his sweat, stung his eyes and burned his skin.

He watched it shrink to a grotesque black insect. The green flame faded; the thunder died. It dwindled, grew dim with distance, at last was lost.

He lay in the sand, ill, agonized, and bitter with self-reproach. It was late afternoon before he could rise, still weak and faint. His shoulder and upper arm, he found, were strangely burned, as if some mordant fluid had been squirted on them. The skin was stiff, lifeless, covered with hard, greenish scales.

The corpse of Captain Otan had been marked like that. And the eye of that greenish, heaving monster in the black gondola—it was like the

nightmare eye that had stared through his window! Yes, *something* from the ship had killed Otan.

Driven by a faint spark of irrational hope, he staggered back up the hill to the old fort, to search the inhabited section. It was silent, utterly deserted. Aladoree was really gone, and AKKA lost. Aladoree, so freshly lovely, was in the hands of Eric Ulnar and those monstrous beings from the dark planet of Barnard's Star.

Only black self-accusation remained to haunt him. Admiration of his famous kinsman had blinded him too long. A misplaced sense of a Legionnaire's duty had driven him to actual treason. However unwittingly, he had helped betray the Green Hall and the Legion.

Chapter Five

"**A**H, LAD, it's time you thought of us!" wheezed Giles Habibula plaintively from the gloom behind the bars of the old prison. "Here we've been, life knows how long, locked up in the cold and dark of a mortal tomb! My old bones will ache with this wicked damp, lad.

"Ah, but I'm famishing, lad. Faint with mortal hunger. How could you leave us so long, lad, without a

blessed bite to eat? Mortal me, lad, have you never known the gnawing agony of starvation?"

John Star was unlocking the rusty door. Here was one thing that he could do to repair the traitorous work of his kinsman—though the greater deed, the rescue of Aladoree and her mighty secret, was all but hopeless.

"Can you bring us some broth, lad?" whined the old Legionnaire.

"And a bottle of the old wine from the cellar? Something to revive us and give us strength for stronger victuals?"

"I'm going to turn you out," said John Star, adding bitterly: "That much I can do, to make up for the fool I've been!"

"You must help us creep out, lad, and up to the blessed sun. Don't forget we're mortal weak. Ah, me, we're starving, lad. Not a bite to eat since the day you locked us up. Not a morsel, lad, for all that mortal time. Though I cut off the uppers of my boots, and chewed them, for the bit of precious nourishment in the leather."

"Ate your boots? Why, it was just this morning that I brought you here!"

"Don't jest with poor old Giles Habibula, lad! Don't be so heartless, when he's had nothing but his blessed boots to eat, rotting in a dungeon for mortal weeks. Ah, and wasting his precious skill trying to pick a lock that's ruined with wicked rust!"

"Weeks? It wasn't ten hours ago! And I let you eat all that breakfast in your room, just before—enough to provision a fleet!"

"Don't torture me with your jokes, lad! I'm starved to a blessed bag of bones! For life's sake, lad, help old Giles Habibula out into the sunshine, and find him a drop of wine, to warm his poor old blood again."

The rusty bolt at last shot back,

the door creaked open. Giles Habibula waddled out, Hal Samdu stalked behind him, and Jay Kalam walked deliberately.

"We are free?" asked the latter.

"Yes. The least I can do. I've been a total idiot! I'll never be able to undo the crime I helped Eric Ulnar carry out—though I'm going to spend the rest of my life trying to!"

"What has happened?" Taut anxiety edged Jay Kalam's voice.

ERIC ULNAR was a traitor, as Aladoree thought. After I had locked up you three, he had the way clear. The ship—the one that landed last night—came from that planet of Barnard's Star. Monstrous creatures aboard, allies of Eric's—it was one of them that murdered Captain Otan. He's promised them a ship-load of iron, to pay for their part. Iron is precious to them. The ship took Eric away, and Aladoree. I was—hit. Can just now walk again."

"It's the Purples?"

"Yes. As Aladoree thought. The plot is to restore the Empire, with Eric on the throne."

They entered the courtyard, bright with the afternoon sun. Giles Habibula stood with his thick hands stretched out in front of him, staring in amazement. He fingered his heavy-jowled face, slapping his bulging paunch.

"For life's sake, lad!" he gasped. "Tell me, was that no joke? Is this

the same mortal day? . . . All that suffering! . . . My blessed boots!"

"Forget your belly, Giles!" shouted Hal Samdu, the slow and homely giant; and he turned to John Star with helpless anger on his broad red face.

"That Eric Ulnar——" He was panting, incoherent in his rage. "Aladoree—he has taken her, you say?"

"Yes, I don't know where."

"We'll find out where!" he promised savagely. "And bring her back! And Eric Ulnar——"

"Of course." It was the low, calm voice of Jay Kalam. "Of course we shall attempt her rescue, at any risk. The safety of the System demands it, if it were not our simple duty to Aladoree. The first thing, I suppose, is to find where she is—which won't be easy."

"We must get away from here," added John Star. "Is there a radio?"

"A little ultra-wave transmitter. We must report to Legion headquarters, at once."

John Star winced, and added bitterly:

"Yes, of course. Report what a fool Eric Ulnar made of me!"

"Don't blame yourself," Jay Kalam urged him. "Others, higher up, were deceived, too, or he wouldn't have been sent here. You could have done little alone. Your only guilt was obedience to your officer. Forget your regrets, and let's undo the harm!"

"But I can't help feeling——"

"Come on. We'll send a message to the base—if they didn't smash the transmitter before they left!"

But the little transmitter, located in a small tower room, had been systematically and utterly destroyed. Tubes were smashed, condensers hammered to shapeless metal, wires cut to bits, battery jars emptied and broken.

"Ruined!" he said.

"We must repair it!" cried John Star.

But with all his optimistic determination, he soon had to admit the impossibility of the task.

CAN'T be done. But there must be something. The supply ship?"

"Won't be back for a year," said Jay Kalam. "They came seldom, to avoid attracting attention."

"But when the station here remains silent, won't they know something is wrong?"

"It was only for emergencies. We had never used it. The signals might have been picked up, and located. We depended on absolute secrecy—together with the power of AKKA itself. And of course Aladoree didn't keep her weapon set up, for fear it would be stolen—that was what gave the traitors time to take her. We weren't prepared for treason."

"Could a man walk out?"

"Impossible. No water in the desert. This is the most isolated spot on Mars. We wanted no accidental visitors."

"But there must be *something*—"

"We must eat, lad," insisted Giles Habibula. "Even if it is the same mortal day. Nothing like good food to quicken the mind. A good supper, lad, with a bottle of the old wine to wash it down, and you'll have us away from here this blessed night!"

And, indeed, it was while he sipped a glass from the old man's precious cellar that inspiration came.

"We've light-tubes!" he cried. "We can step up the output—it doesn't matter if they soon burn out. Flash a distress signal. Against the dark background of the desert, somebody would see it from space!"

"We'll try that," agreed Jay Kalam. "Might not be a Legion cruiser, but it would have a transmitter to call one."

"Ah, lad, what did I tell you? What did poor old Giles Habibula tell you? Didn't a drop of wine sharpen your brain?"

When the green afterglow was gone, and the cold, clear dark of the Martian night crashed down on the red landscape, John Star was ready on the platform of the north tower, his pocket light-tube in hand, its coils rewound to increase its brilliance a thousand-fold.

Into the purple, star-shot night he flashed it, forming again and again the code letters of the Legion signal of distress. The tube burned his hand, as the electrodes fused and the over-loaded coils went dead. But Jay Kalam was ready with another,

its potential stepped up in the same way; he kept flashing the silent appeal for aid.

It seemed incredible to him, as he stood there, that Aladoree had been with him that morning on the same platform. Incredible, when now she was lost somewhere in the black gulf of space, perhaps ten million miles away. With a little ache in his heart, he pictured her as she had stood—slender and straight and cleanly molded; eyes candid and cool and gray; sunlit hair a splendor of brown and red and gold.

HIS determination to restore her to safety could hardly be less, he knew, were she just an ordinary bit of humanity, not the keeper of the System's priceless treasure.

It was long after midnight when the last light-tube went out.

Then, until the lemon-green dawn, they waited on the platform, scanning the star-sifted purple, anxious for the blue rocket-exhausts that would brake the descending ship. But they saw no moving thing, save the faint tiny spark of Phobos, rising in the west and creeping swiftly eastward.

Giles Habibula was with them, lying on his back, peacefully snoring. He woke with the dawn, and went down to the kitchen. Presently he called up that breakfast was ready. The others were about to leave the tower in despair, when they heard the rockets of a ship landing.

A long silver craft, an arrow of white flame in the morning sun, it dropped across the fort, pushing ahead the blue flare of its rockets.

"A Legion cruiser!" John Star exulted. "The latest, fastest type."

His blue eyes keener than they appeared, Hal Samdu read the name on its side:

"Purple—something—she's the *Purple Dream*!"

"*Purple Dream?*" echoed Jay Kalam. "That's the flagship of the Legion fleet. The ship of the Commander himself!"

"If it's the Commander's ship," John Star said slowly, his high spirits falling, "I'm afraid it won't bring us much good. Commander Adam Ulnar is Eric Ulnar's uncle. The real leader of the Purples.

"IT WAS Adam Ulnar who sent Eric on that interstellar expedition and Adam Ulnar who found that Aladoree was hidden here, and sent Eric to be commanding officer of her guard. I'm afraid we can't expect much but trouble from the Commander of the Legion."

Chapter Six

THE four of them went out of the old gate, Giles Habibula still eating morsels he had stuffed into his pockets, and down the red boulder slope to the *Purple Dream*, lying amid the yellow dunes of the sand desert.

Her officer, a man too old for his rank, thin and stern, with a jaw like a trap, appeared in the open air-lock.

"You flashed a signal of distress?"

"We did," said John Star.

"What's your difficulty?"

"We must leave here. We have an urgent matter to report to the Green Hall."

"What's that?"

"It's confidential."

"Confidential?" the officer repeated, looking down with frosty eyes.

"Very."

"Come aboard, then, to my state-room."

They climbed the accommodation ladder to the great valves, and followed him down the narrow deck into his cabin. Closing the door, he turned on them with sharp impatience.

"You need keep nothing back from me. I'm Captain Madlok of the *Purple Dream*. I enjoy Commander Ulnar's full confidence. I know that you men were stationed

here to guard a priceless treasure. What account have you to make of it?"

All his companions hesitated, Jay Kalam habitually taciturn, Hal Samdu, slow with words, Giles Habibula overly cautious. John Star spoke out bitterly:

"That treasure is lost!"

"Lost!" snapped Madlok. "You've lost AKKA?"

John Star nodded, sick at heart. "A traitor was sent here——"

"I don't care for alibis!" rapped Madlok. "You admit that you have betrayed your trust."

"Aladoree Anthar has been kidnapped," John Star said stiffly, Madlok's stern face recalling his lectures in military courtesy. "I suggest, sir, that she must be rescued. And I believe, sir, that the news should be communicated at once to the Green Hall."

Madlok's voice had a brittle snap: "I shall take care of any reports necessary."

"Sir, the search must begin at once," said John Star, urgently.

"I'm accepting no orders from you, if you please. And I shall take the four of you at once to Commander Ulnar, at his estate on Phobos. You can report your failure to him."

"May I go back, sir, just a few minutes?" appealed Giles Habibula. "Some things I must bring——"

"What things?"

"Just a few mortal cases of old wine, sir."

"What! Wine! We're taking off at once."

"If you will pardon me, sir," gravely offered Jay Kalam, "our mission gives us a peculiar position in the Legion, regardless of military rank. We are not under your command."

"Your signals were seen from Commander Ulnar's private observatory on Phobos," snapped Madlok. "Inferring—and rightly—that you had betrayed your trust and lost AKKA, he sent me to bring you to the Purple Hall. I trust that you will condescend to obey the Commander of the Legion. We take off in twenty seconds!"

John Star had heard of the Ulnar estate on Phobos, for the magnificent splendor of the Purple Hall was famous throughout the System.

The tiny inner moon of Mars, a bit of rock not twenty miles in diameter, had always been held by the Ulnars, by right of reclamation. Equipping the barren, stony mass with an artificial gravity system, synthetic atmosphere, and "seas" of man-made water, planting forests and gardens in soil manufactured from chemicals and disintegrated stone, the planetary engineers had transformed it into a splendid private estate.

FOR his residence, Adam Ulnar had obtained the architects' plans for the Green Hall, the System's colossal capitol building, and had duplicated it room for room.

But he had built on a scale an inch larger to the foot, using, not green glass, but purple, the color of the Empire.

The *Purple Dream* dropped upon the landing stage atop the square, titanic tower. Beyond the edge of the platform, when they disembarked, John Star could see the roofs of the building's great wings, glistening expanses of purple stretching out across the vivid green of lawn and garden. Beyond, the woods and hills of the tiny world appeared to drop with an increasing, breath-taking abruptness, so that he felt as if he were perched insecurely on the top of a great green ball, afloat in a chasm of starry purple-blue.

They dropped in an elevator three thousand feet, escorted by Madlok and half a dozen alert armed men from the cruiser, and entered an amazing room.

Corresponding to the Green Hall's Council Chamber, it was five hundred feet square, arched with a tremendous dome. The lofty vault and columned walls were illuminated with colored lights to secure effects of ineffable vastness and splendor.

In the center of the floor, all grouped in a tiny-seeming space, were a thousand seats, corresponding to the seats of the Council of the Green Hall—empty. Above them, on a high dais, stood a magnificent gem-canopied throne of purple crystal—vacant. On its seat lay the old crown and sceptre of the Emperors—waiting.

They marched, astonished and awed, across the vast floor, under the whispering vault, and around the dais. Behind the throne they entered a small room, beyond a guarded door. There Adam Ulnar, Commander of the Legion of Space, master of all this splendor and the immense wealth and power it represented, was sitting at a simple table.

Though twice Eric Ulnar's age and almost twice his weight, Adam Ulnar was as handsome as his nephew. Square-shouldered, erect, he wore a plain Legion uniform, without insignia to show his rank. The calm strength of his face—nose prominent; mouth firm; blue eyes deep-set, wide apart, steady—contrasted with the reckless girlish weakness of Eric's narrow face. His long hair, nearly white, lent him the same distinction that Eric had from his flowing yellow locks.

JOHN STAR, to his surprise, felt an immediate instinctive admiration for this man of his own blood, so generous to an unknown relative—but now, it seemed, a traitor to the Legion he commanded.

"The men, Commander," Madlok reported briefly, "who lost AKKA."

Adam Ulnar looked at them, without surprise, a faint smile on his distinguished face.

"So you were the guard of Aladoree Anthar?" he said, his voice well-modulated, pleasant. "Your names?"

JOHN STAR named his companions. "And I am John Ulnar."

Smiling again, the Commander stood up behind the table.

"John Ulnar? A kinsman of mine, I believe?"

"So I understand."

He stood still, coldly unsmiling; Adam Ulnar came around the table to greet him, warmly courteous.

"I'll see you alone, John," he said, and nodded to Madlok, who withdrew with the others.

Then he turned to John Star, urged cordially:

"Sit down, John. I wish now that we had met sooner, and under less awkward circumstances. You made a brilliant record at the Academy, John. I've a career planned for you, equally brilliant."

John Star, remaining on his feet, his face taut, said stiffly:

"I suppose I should thank you, Commander Ulnar, for my education and my commission in the Legion. A few days ago I should have done so very gratefully. Now it seems that I was intended merely for a dupe and a tool!"

"I wouldn't say that, John," Adam Ulnar protested softly. "It's true that events did not take place just as I had planned—Eric is taking affairs too much into his own hands. But I had you placed under his direct command. I was planning——"

"Under Eric!" John Star burst out hotly. "A traitor! Much as I once admired him, that's what he is. Obeying his orders, I helped betray

the Legion and the Green Hall."

"Traitor is a harsh word to use, John, just because of a political difference."

"Political difference!" Shocked outrage shook John Star's voice. "Do you admit to me openly that you are false to your own trust as an officer of the Legion? You, the Commander himself!"

Adam Ulnar smiled at him, warmly, kindly, and a little bit amused.

"Do you realize, John, that I am by far the most wealthy man in the System? That I am easily the most powerful and influential? Doesn't it occur to you that loyalty to the Purple Hall might be more to your advantage than support of the democracy?"

"Are you trying, sir, to make a traitor out of *me*?"

"Please, John, don't use that word. The form of government I stand for has a historic sanction far older than your silly ideas of equality and democracy. And, after all, John, you are an Ulnar. If you will consider just your own personal advantage, I can give you wealth, position, and power, which your present impractical democratic attitude will never earn for you."

"I will not consider it."

John Star was still standing stiffly in front of the table. Adam Ulnar came around beside him to take his arm persuasively.

"John," he said, "I like you. Even when you were very small—I suppose you don't remember when we

were ever together—you displayed qualities I approve. Your courage, and that stubborn determination which is about to keep us apart now, was one of them—something left out of my nephew's disposition.

"**I**'VE been interested in your career, John—I've followed it more closely than you ever knew. Your progress at the Academy—everything you have done—was reported to me in detail.

"I had no son of my own, John. And the family of Ulnar isn't very large—just Eric, the son of my unfortunate elder brother, and you and I. Eric is twelve years older than you are, John. He was pampered in his youth. He was always told that one day he would be Emperor of the Sun; he was spoiled.

"And I don't quite like the results, John. Eric is weak; he's headstrong, and yet a coward. This alliance with the creatures from the planet of the Runaway Star was a coward's device—he made it without my knowledge, because he feared my own plans for the revolution would fail.

"Anyhow, with you, I tried a different way. I put you in the Academy and left you ignorant of your high destiny. I wanted you to learn to depend on yourself, to develop some character and resource and courage of your own.

"This last experience has been a sort of test, John. And it has proved, I think, that you have everything I

had hoped for. Besides, I like you, John."

"Yes?" said John Star, coldly, and he waited.

"The Empire is going to be restored. Nothing can halt our plans, now, John. The Green Hall is doomed. But I don't want to set a weakling back on the throne. Ulnar is an old name, a proud name, John. Our ancestors paid for the Empire, with blood and toil and brains. I don't want our name disgraced, as such a man as Eric might disgrace it."

"You mean—" cried John Star, astounded. "By all this, you mean that I—"

"That's it, my boy!" Adam Ulnar was smiling at him with pleasure on his proud, distinguished face, and a fond hope. "That's it. I don't want Eric to be Emperor of the Sun, when the Green Hall surrenders.

"The new Emperor shall be you!"

John Star stood motionless, staring dumbfounded into that fine strong face, with its crown of snowy hair.

"Yes, you shall be Emperor, John." Adam Ulnar repeated softly, warmly smiling. "Your claim is really better than Eric's. You are in the direct line of descent. I have proof."

John Star shook off his hand then, and moved back a step, laughing incredulously.

"What's the matter, John?" The tall Commander seemed deeply concerned. "You don't—"

"No!" John Star caught his breath, and spoke decisively. "I don't want to be Emperor. If I were ever Emperor, I'd abdicate. I'd restore the Green Hall."

Adam Ulnar went slowly back behind the table, and sat down heavily, wearily. A long time he sat silently, watching John Star's tense, determined figure with a frown of painful thought.

"I see," he said at last. "I see you're in earnest. An unfortunate result of your training, which I had not anticipated. I suppose it's too late to change you, now."

"I'm sure it is."

Again Adam Ulnar mused awhile, and then he stood up suddenly, his lean face imperious with decision.

"I hope you understand the situation, John. Our plans are going ahead. If you won't be Emperor, Eric will. Perhaps, with my advice, he won't do too badly. Anyhow, the Green Hall is doomed. I suppose, with your foolish attitude, you'll be against us?"

"I will!" John Star promised warmly. "I hope for nothing more than a chance to smash your crooked schemes."

Adam Ulnar nodded; for an instant he almost smiled.

"I knew you would." The family pride rang briefly in his sad, slow voice. "And that means, John—I'll be as honest with you as you have been with me—that means that you must spend your life in prison. Unless it becomes necessary to kill you,

I have far too much confidence in your ability and your determination to set you at liberty."

"Thank you," said John Star, his tone more friendly than he intended.

Something softened the proud authority of the old Commander's face.

"Good-bye, John. I'm sorry we must part, this way."

HE LAID his hand a moment on John Star's shoulder, and showed a sudden concern at his involuntary shudder of pain.

"You've been hurt, John?"

"Some weapon from the black ship. It made a greenish burn."

"Oh, the red gas!" The Commander was suddenly very grave. "Open your tunic, and let me see. The stuff is believed to be an air-borne virus, really, though the biochemical reports brought back by the expedition are incomplete and extremely confusing. The effects of it are rather distressing, but my experts in planetary medicine have worked out a treatment. Turn, and let me see. . . . You must go right to the hospital, John, but I think we can catch it in time."

"Thank you," said John Star, less stiffly—for he remembered terrifying rumors of men insane and rotting alive from that red gas.

"I'm sorry, my boy, that I'll never be able to do more for you. I'm really sorry that you choose to go to prison from the hospital—not to the empty throne in the Purple Hall."

Chapter Seven

Giles Habibula's Higher Calling

IN A HOSPITAL room in the south wing of the colossal Purple Hall, a gruffly capable, tight-mouthed doctor washed John Star's injury with a blue, palely luminescent solution, covered it with a thick salve, bound it and made him go to bed. Two days later the old skin began to peel off in hard, greenish flakes, leaving new healthy flesh beneath it.

"Good," said the laconic physician, bending to examine him. "Not even a scar. You're lucky."

John Star practiced one of the wrestling holds he had learned in the academy. He walked out of the room in the doctor's clothing, leaving him gagged and bound, furious but unharmed.

Four men in Legion uniform met him at the door, armed, unsurprised, and warily courteous.

"This way, please, John Ulnar, if you are ready now to go to the prison."

With a taut little smile, John Star nodded silently.

The prison was a huge space, square and lofty, beneath the north wing of the Purple Hall. Its walls were white metal, shining and im-

pregnable. The triple doors were massive, sliding slabs of armor plate, with guards in the short halls between. The mechanism permitted only one door to open at a time, so two always sealed the way to freedom.

The cell block stood in the center of that great room, a double tier of big, barred cages, partitioned with sheet metal. Each cell had a hard, narrow bunk, and the barest necessary facilities for a single occupant. One guard was always on watch, pacing endlessly around the block of cells.

John Star, locked in alone, threw himself hopelessly on the bunk. His heart was set on escape. For the Legion, under Adam Ulnar, would get no orders to attempt the rescue of Aladoree. The Green Hall, he realized bitterly, wouldn't even be informed that AKKA was lost.

But how escape? How leave the locked cell? How evade the sentry outside—who carried only a club, lest some prisoner snatch his weapon? How pass the triple doors, with guards between? How get through the endless, labyrinthine corridors of the Purple Hall, a veritable fortress? How finally get away from the tiny planet, which was vir-

tually a private empire of Adam Ulnar, policed by his loyal retainers? How accomplish the sheer impossible?

He heard a wheedling voice from the next cell:

"Ah, have you no heart, man? We've been locked in this evil place a blessed time, on bread and water, or precious little more. Is your heart of stone, man? Surely you can bring us something more for supper. Just an extra morsel, to edge our appetite for the regular prison fare. A thick steak with mushroom sauce, say; and a hot mince pie for each one of us. Just to give us an appetite."

"An appetite, you bag of tallow?" retorted the sentry, good-naturedly, walking past. "You eat more now than seven men."

"Of course I eat," came the whining plaint. "What else can a man do, a devoted old soldier of the Legion, rotting in this black dungeon, accused of murder and betrayal of duty and life knows what other crimes he didn't do?"

"Ah, come, man, and bring me a bottle of wine. Just one blessed bottle. It'll bring a bit of warmth into a poor old soldier, against the cold of these iron walls. It'll help me forget the court-martial that's coming, and the lethal chamber beyond it—life knows they mean to kill the three of us!"

"How can you be so heartless, man? How can you refuse one little drop of happiness to a man already

doomed and as good as dead? Come, for life's sake! Ah, just one bottle, man, for poor, starved, beaten, condemned old Giles Habibula——"

"Enough! Keep quiet! I bring you all I can. Six bottles, you've already had today! No more, the warden said. At that, I never knew such generosity! It's only by the special order of the Commander himself that you get a drop. And no more talking, now! That's regulations."

JOHN STAR was glad to hear again of his companions, though it was no good news that they were awaiting trial. Adam Ulnar would be ruthless with these loyal men, whose real crime was only the knowledge of his treason.

He still lay hopeless on the narrow cot, when a low, cautious tapping on the metal partition by his head abruptly recalled him from his apathy of despair. For the muted tapping formed letters, in the Legion code:

"W-H-O?"

Quickly, cautiously, he replied: J-U-L-N-A-R."

"J K-A-L-A-M."

He waited for the sentry to pass again, and tapped: "E-S-C-A-P-E?"

"C-H-A-N-C-E."

"H-O-W?"

"G-U-A-R-D-S C-L-U-B."

For the most of a day and a night John Star watched that club, as it passed at regular intervals outside the bars. A simple, eighteen-inch stick of wood, the grip taped, the

slender part above wrapped with green-enamelled wire, for reinforcement. He did not see how it could be very useful, but evidently it was part of some plan for escape conceived by Jay Kalam's deliberate, analytic mind.

Each guard was locked in the great room with them four hours at a time, pacing around the cell block, reporting through a speaking tube at fifteen-minute intervals.

Their habits differed. The first, good-natured man carried the club safely in his farther hand. The next walked a precise, cautious beat, well out of reach. The third was not so careful, swinging the club by a leather thong, sometimes from one wrist, sometimes the other. He would swing it sometime, John Star thought, within a foot of the bars. He waited, unobtrusively alert, until the guard was changed again. And his chance had not yet come.

Again the good-natured man. And the precise, cautious man.

Then, again, the one who swung the club. John Star waited an hour, sprawled on the cot with gloom on his face, aimlessly picking the lint from his blanket—and the chance did come.

Every minutest motion of it he had planned, rehearsed in his mind. He was keyed up, ready; his trained body reacted with lightning quickness. He sprang, soundlessly, when the club began its swing. His arm slipped through the bars. His straining fingers snatched around the

wood. He braced knee and shoulder against the bars. His arm came back.

IT WAS all done before the guard could turn his head.

The leathern thong on his wrist jerked him against the cell; his skull struck the bars; he went down silently.

John Star slipped the thong over his limp hand, whispering:

"Jay! I have the club!"

"I hoped you might," spoke Jay Kalam, quietly, quickly, from the cell to his right. "If you will please hold it out to Giles—"

"Outside here, lad!" The fearful, wheezing gasp came from his left. "Quick, for life's sake!"

He thrust the club back through the bars, felt Giles Habibula's fingers grasp it.

"Shall I search him?" he whispered. "For keys?"

"He had none," said Jay Kalam. "They knew this might happen. We must depend on Giles."

"My father was an inventor of locks," came the absent nasal whine from the cell on the left. "I learned a higher calling. Giles Habibula was not always a crippled old soldier in the Legion. In his nimbler days. . . ."

The voice drifted away. John Star restrained his curiosity, waiting silently. There was nothing else to do. In the next cell, Giles Habibula was busy. His breath became audible, panting. John Star could sometimes hear a fearful muttering:

"Mortal minutes! . . . This wicked wire! . . . Life's precious sake! . . . Ah, poor old Giles. . . ."

"Hurry, Giles!" implored Hal Samdu, from the cell beyond. "Hurry!"

There were tiny, metallic sounds.

"We've another five minutes." Jay Kalam's voice was calm and low. "Then the guard's report is due."

The sentry groaned. John Star silently restored him to unconsciousness with a trick he had learned at the Academy—one quick blow with the edge of his open hand.

His door swung open. He stepped out to join Giles Habibula. The short and massive body of the old Legionnaire seemed to quake with apprehension, but his thick hands were oddly sure and steady. Already he was feverishly busy at the door of Jay Kalam's cell, with a bit of twisted green wire—the winding which had reinforced the club.

"Poor old Giles wasn't always a lame and useless soldier in the Legion, lad," he wheezed abstractedly. "Things were different when he was young and bold—before mortal disaster overtook him, back on Venus, and he had to join the blessed Legion——"

That door let out Jay Kalam; the next gave freedom to Hal Samdu.

Breathless, John Star whispered, "Now what?"

They had four minutes, before the guard would fail to report. The great room that housed the cell-block was massively metal-walled, windowless.

It had one opening—with armed men waiting between the three locked doors across the single passage.

"Up!" said Jay Kalam, as urgently as he ever spoke. "On top of the cells."

JOHN STAR swarmed up the bars. The others swiftly followed, Giles Habibula puffing, hauled by John Star from above, pushed by Hal Samdu beneath. They reached the metal net that covered the second tier of cells, the white-painted metal ceiling still fifteen feet above.

"Now!" whispered Jay Kalam. "The ventilator."

He pointed to the heavy metal grating in the ceiling above, from which a cool draft struck them.

"Your part, Hal! If your strength was ever needed, it is now."

"Lift me!" cried the giant, great hands ready.

They lifted him.

Puffing Giles Habibula and Jay Kalam stood on the netting, John Star, lightest of the four, on their shoulders, while huge Hal Samdu stood upon his.

The ventilator grill was strong, though it had been placed where men were not likely to reach it. Hal Samdu's immense hands closed about its bars; he strained; John Star heard mighty muscles cracking. His breath came in short, laboring gasps.

"I can't—" he sobbed. "Not this way!"

"We've one minute longer, per-

haps," Jay Kalam told him softly.

The giant lifted himself from John Star's shoulders, and doubled his body, planting one foot on each side the grating, hanging by his arms.

"Catch him!" cried John Star.

Hal Samdu straightened, with his feet on the ceiling. Strained metal snapped. He fell down, head foremost, fifteen feet, the grate torn out in his hands. The tube yawned black, above, a cold stream of air pouring down from it.

The three caught him in their arms.

A whirring from the door of the great room. The lock mechanism was opening the inner valve. In seconds, the guardsmen would come, to find why the speaking tube was silent.

"You first, John," said Jay Kalam. "The lightest. Help us."

They lifted him to the opening. He hung his knees over the edge, and swung down his body, hands reaching.

Giles Habibula came first, wheezing, hoisted from beneath. Then Hal Samdu, who lowered John Star, a living rope, so that Jay Kalam could catch his hands.

HALT!" rang the order from the opening door. "As you are! Or we fire to kill!"

They scrambled upward into the narrow black mouth of the ventilator tube. Another rapped command. The blast of a proton gun lit the dark tube with brief, intense violet; and spattered fused metal behind them. It reached them all with numbing electric shocks.

They tumbled ahead into cramped black spaces.

Chapter Eight

With Death Behind

THE horizontal passage they followed was formed of heavy sheet metal, square, not three feet high, and as Giles Habibula put it, in his incessant rumbling mutter, "black as the gut of a mortal whale."

They scrambled along on all fours, bruising limbs and heads

upon rivets and interior braces. Giles Habibula was ahead, then Jay Kalam, and Hal Samdu, with John Star behind.

The guards must have delayed to get a ladder—escape into the ventilation system must have found them unprepared—for at first there was no sound of pursuit. The four dragged themselves through the narrow dark, the strong wind from the

fans rushing about them, Giles Habibula puffing like an engine.

"If it branches," gasped Jay Kalam, "we must turn against the air current. That will guide us toward the fans, away from the small dividing passages. We must get past the fans, and out through the intake. If we lose the way, they'll have us trapped like rats—"

He stopped. The wind against their faces had abruptly ceased.

"They've shut off the fans," he whispered bitterly. "Now we haven't the air to guide us."

"I hear voices," John Star breathed. "Behind us. Following."

"Sweet life's sake!" wheezed Giles Habibula, later. "A mortal wall! I bumped my old head into it."

"Go on," said Jay Kalam, behind him, quietly urgent. "Feel about. There must be a way."

"My blessed head! Ah, yes, there is a way. Two ways. 'Tis another passage we're entering. Right or left?"

"A blind chance, since they stopped the fans. Say, right!"

They hastened on for another while, on hands and bruised knees.

A gasp from Giles Habibula. "My mortal life! A fearful pit! I half fell into it. For life's sake, don't push so! I'm sprawling on the edge!"

"The shaft turning down, it must be," said Jay Kalam. "We turned wrong, I'm afraid—the intake must be above. But it's too late to turn

back. Feel about. There should be rungs, a ladder—in case the shafts should need to be cleaned, or repaired."

"Ah, yes, right you are, Jay. I've found them—and precious flimsy they are, for such a man as I. Ah, Jay, I should have stayed back in the cells, to let them torture me and starve me and use my poor old body as they would, court-martial me and seal me in their ghastly lethal chamber. Old Giles Habibula is too old, Jay, too ill and lame, to be running through black and filthy rat-holes on his knees, and dancing up and down flimsy little ladders in the dark. He's no mortal monkey!"

YEET he had slipped over the edge in a moment; he was already tumbling down the dark ladder, the others behind him, punctuating his phrases with the gasps of his panting breath.

"A floor!" he wheezed presently. "Ah, it's all up now, I'm afraid. I've struck bottom. No way out but tiny pipes a rat himself couldn't creep through."

They explored with anxious, bleeding fingers, but found no branching passage large enough for a man to enter.

"We should have turned left," Jay Kalam said.

"We must go back," John Star cried. "If we hurry, perhaps we can beat them."

Now ahead, he rushed back up the ladder. He reached the horizon-

tal shaft, and plunged down it, reckless of bumps and bruises. Hal Samdu kept close at his heels, Jay Kalam not far behind. Giles Habibula, heaving and gasping frantically, called out from far in the rear:

"For dear life's sake, you can't abandon poor old Giles! Wait for me, lad! Jay, Hal, you can't leave an old comrade alone, to be starved and tortured and done to his death! Wait just a second, for poor, lame and suffering old Giles Habibula to snatch a breath of blessed air."

John Star saw the white flicker of a pocket light-tube on the wall ahead; again he heard voices. The pursuing guards, then, were just approaching the intersection. He scrambled desperately to reach it first.

The light flashed briefly, out of the intersecting tube, to strike the wall. He oriented himself by it, and waited, crouched behind the angle, breathing quietly as he could. Hal Samdu came up behind, and he cautioned the giant to silence with a pressure of his foot.

Far back, he heard Giles Habibula's plaintive appeal:

"Just one blessed second! For life's own sweet sake! Ah, a poor old soldier, sick and crippled, imprisoned and unjustly sentenced to a wicked traitor's death, deserted by his comrades and caught like a dying rat in this stinking hole—"

The light flashed again, close now. The leading man came out of the side tunnel. John Star caught his

grappling arm, and hauled him around the metal corner, into deadly combat.

A fight in utter darkness, for the dropped light-tube went out. A savage battle; the unknown guard fought for his life, John Star for more than his. And brief; it was over before the next man in line could reach the cross-passage.

The Legion Academy had trained John Star. He knew every weak point of the human machine. He knew the twist that snaps a bone, the jab that pulps a nerve, the shift that kills an opponent with his own fighting strength. He was light, but the Legion training had made him hard and quick and sure enough to fight the Legion, now.

THE other man tried first to use the heavy little proton gun in his right hand, and found that his wrist was broken. With his left hand, then, he struck into the darkness, and, his own blow hurled him against the wall of the shaft. He twisted back, tried to butt, and broke his neck.

That was all.

When the next man flashed his light, to see how the battle went, John Star had the proton gun the first had dropped, pointed ready down the tube.

A thin, searing jet of pure electricity, the proton blast fused metal, ignited combustibles, electrocuted flesh. It was a narrow, killing sword of intense violet incandescence!

A matter of split seconds.

The other men had similar weapons, also ready. But they must have held themselves a moment, must have waited to aim. John Star did not delay.

And five men died in the shaft, the three foremost by direct, searing contact with the ray, the two others electrocuted by current conducted through ionized air—the proton gun was not a toy; and John Star pulled hard on the lever, to exhaust all the energy of the cell on one terrific blast.

The blinding violet flame went out. There was darkness in the shaft again, Stygian, complete. Silence. The pungence of ozone in the air, from the action of the ray. The acrid smell of seared flesh and smoldering cloth.

Such swift spilling of life sickened John Star. This was the first test of the deadly arts he had learned; he had never killed a man before. He was abruptly trembling, faint.

"John?" whispered Hal Samdu, uncertainly.

"I'm—I'm all right," he stammered, and tried to get possession of himself. There had been no choice. He had had to kill as he would surely have to kill again. A few lives, he told himself sternly, were nothing against the safety of the Green Hall. Or—whispered another part of him—the safety of Aladoree!

He fumbled weakly for the dropped light-tube.

"The guards——"

"They're all dead!" he whispered dully. "I killed them—all."

"You've a proton gun?" Hal Samdu did not sense his horror.

"Dead!" But the question brought him back to the needs of the moment. "Yes. Useless, though, until I find an extra cell. Burned out."

Forcing himself to it, he searched the body by him, found no extra, and moved on to those the ray had slain.

Jay Kalam came up.

"You used the proton-blast? Full power? No use, then, to look for weapons, or light-tubes either. Anything electrical. Burned out."

He found another proton gun; half fused, reeking with burned insulation, it was still so hot it seared his fingers.

FAR down the shaft, toward the prison, he heard a command; he saw a flicker of warning light.

"They're coming again. We must get on. To the left, this time."

Giles Habibula came noisily up; he blundered into Jay Kalam, wheezing:

"Time we rested! I've lost ten mortal pounds, already, scampering through these foul and endless rat-holes. Ah, but I'm hot as——"

"Come on!" retorted Hal Samdu. "You'll be hotter when a proton blast catches you in the rear!"

On they tumbled, desperate, bruised, gasping for breath, again without a weapon—save for the use-

less proton gun—still without light. Running on all fours. Colliding painfully with rivets and flanges. "Playing an evil game of rat-and-ferret," sobbed Giles Habibula.

John Star, now ahead, reported suddenly:

"Another shaft! Larger. Runs both up and down."

"Up, then!" said Jay Kalam. "The intake must be above us. Probably on the roof."

They ascended flimsy metal rungs, in close-walled, smothering dark.

"The roof!" John Star whispered suddenly. "Can we get to the landing stage, above the tower? There are ships on it."

"Possibly," said Jay Kalam. "But we must pass the fans—easy to do if they keep them stopped. But there are guards on the landing stage, and we've no weapon."

They climbed rungs without end, up through rayless gloom. Breath came with painful effort. Muscles screamed and quivered with the agony of fatigue. Worn, blistered hands left blood on the metal.

Giles Habibula, lagging a little behind, puffing noisily, yet found breath for complaint.

"Ah, poor old Giles is dying for a drink. Perishing for one blessed sip of wine! His precious throat is dry as leather. Poor old Giles; lame, feeble, sick old Giles Habibula—he can't stand this any longer. Climbing till he feels like he's turned into a mortal mechanical monkey!"

"I've been counting the rungs,"

Jay Kalam said calmly, at last, breaking the silence of endless, tortured effort. "We must be in the tower."

A current of air presently struck them, blowing down the shaft.

"The fans, again!" muttered John Star. "I wonder why——?"

He soon knew. The downward wind increased. It became a tempest, a howling hurricane. It yelled in their ears with demoniac voices. It ripped garments from their bodies. It snatched at them with prankish hands, hammered them with savage blows.

"Trying——" screamed Jay Kalam above the roar of it, "to blow us—off the ladder! Climb on—stop—fans—"

The wind whipped his voice away.

JOHN STAR climbed on, against the relentless pressure of howling air, fighting the tearing demon talons. The flimsy metal rungs quivered, bent beneath the strain. Steadily, painfully, he won his way against the narrow storm.

Another sound was at last in his ears, above the shrieking air—a whine of gears, a whirring of great rushing vanes. The purring of the over-driven fans, deadly in the dark.

Upward he battled, inch by hard-won inch, to the top of the trembling ladder, to a wide platform of vibrating metal bars. There he paused to play a game with death. Somewhere in the dark above, those

great blades were racing, and he knew they would never pause as they split his skull and splashed his brain.

Cautiously he moved, feeling his way. He was out of the main air-current, now; he could move more easily. Yet sudden, freakish blasts still drove at him savagely; they were demon hands jerking him toward the racing unseen vanes.

Toward the whine of gears he moved. With cautious fingers he explored the frame of the vibrating machine. He tried to shape a mental image of it. At last he found the end of a rotating shaft; and he thrust, slowly, carefully, with the heavy little gun, three times in vain.

Then metal teeth snapped it from his hand. The purring changed to anger. The gears snarled and screamed. They chewed metal, and spit the fragments savagely. And they broke. The unloaded motor whined briefly with rage.

Silence, then. Peace. The whirling, invisible vanes slowed, and stopped. The demoniac air was stilled. John Star waited in the quiet dark, panting, resting his trembling muscles, while the others climbed up to his side.

"Now, the 'intake,'" softly urged Jay Kalam. "Before they come!"

"Wait a mortal moment," wheezed Giles Habibula, sobbing for air. "For sweet life's sake, can't you wait for a lame, old' soldier, climbing like a dog in a treadmill, with his hair blown out by the roots!"

They climbed again, up a huge,

still blade, and out along the massive, motionless axle. They ran upright into the vast, horizontal intake tube and came to the bottom of another vertical pit.

"Light!" exulted John Star.

A SQUARE bright patch, at the top of the shaft, shone like a beacon of welcome. It was not the sky, however, but only the under-surface of the great landing stage.

Up the last short ladder, and over a low metal wall, and they stood at last upon the tower's roof. Flat, and tiled with purple glass, the enormous roof was spaced with the openings of other ventilator shafts, and crowded with the forest of gigantic piers that supported the immense platform of the flying stage, yet another hundred feet above.

"They will know we're up here," Jay Kalam reminded them gently. "From the fan. No time to waste."

They ran to the edge of the roof, and climbed again, up the diagonal lattice-work of an enormous vertical member. The last five feet, around the edge of the gigantic metal platform, John Star climbed alone. Clinging like a human fly, he peered cautiously over the edge of the immense flat table.

A mere hundred feet away lay the nose of the *Purple Dream*. A slender bright arrow, the flagship was a-shimmer under the small sun which burned hot through the thin air of Phobos.

The *Purple Dream*! Only thirty

yards away, it was freedom and safety and the means to search for Aladoree. Trimly slender, beautiful; the newest, finest, fleetest cruiser of the Legion fleet. A splendid hope, and hopeless.

Her air-lock was sealed, her bright armor impregnable. Twelve Legionnaires, armed, stood in line beneath her valves, wearily alert.

What madness, for the four to think of taking her! Four tattered fugitives, bruised, exhausted, with not one weapon save their bodies, and a thousand hunting them. What madness, when the cruiser was the System's most powerful fighting machine!

John Star knew it was madness, yet he dared to plan.

Chapter Nine

"To the Runaway Star!"

HE CLIMBED back to the others, mutely eager Hal Samdu, cool, composed Jay Kalam, wheezing, groaning Giles Habibula.

"The *Purple Dream* is there. Her valve toward us, sealed. A dozen men guarding her. But I think I see a way—a chance."

"How?"

He explained, and Jay Kalam nodded, offering quiet suggestions.

"We'll try it. We can do no better."

They climbed down the pier to the roof again, Giles Habibula complaining bitterly at the new effort. They ran diagonally across the purple tiles among the maze of beams, and clambered wearily up again to the platform, to the edge behind the *Purple Dream*.

Again John Star looked above the surface.

No sentry, no searcher, was now in view. That herculean climb up the shaft, three thousand feet, the last thousand against a hurricane, the escape through the blades of the fan—all that must not have been comprehended in the plans of their pursuers.

The flat platform. The side of the *Purple Dream*, fifty feet away, a shimmering curve of armor. Purple-blue sky above and beyond.

"Now," he whispered. "All clear!"

In seconds, he was over the edge, although even for his trained body it was an awkward scramble. Hal Samdu, with his help, came more easily. Giles Habibula, hauled limp and green-faced over the edge, looked once three thousand feet down, to the purple roofs of the

wings and the green convexity of the tiny planet, and grew suddenly and amazingly ill.

"Sick!" he groaned. "Mortal sick and dying. Hold me, lad! For poor Giles is faint and dying—and he feels he's falling off the whole blessed moon!"

For all her fleetness and her fighting power, the *Purple Dream* was not large; one hundred feet long, twenty feet her greatest diameter. Yet it was not easy to get silently and unobserved on top of her, as John Star's plan demanded.

They ran beneath the black, projecting muzzle of her port stern rockets, and lifted John Star to it. And he, again, helped the others up. From the rocket, over the glistening smoothness of her silvery hull, they inched a slow and perilous way up and forward.

Once Giles Habibula fell. He started to slide down her polished shell, croaking in mute terror; John Star and Hal Samdu caught him, drew him back. At last they were safely amidships.

There they lay, waiting, atop her flattened hull.

At first they were glad enough to rest, from that super-human climb. But the sun beat down on them, through the thin artificial atmosphere of Phobos, blinding, intense, and terrible. It drove back upon them from the mirror of the hull. They were blistered, gasping with heat, and thirst came to torture them.

They dared not move; they could

only wait. And their position held a mounting peril.

True, they were invisible from near the ship. But the bright metal platform, at a distance, was visible, shimmering and dancing in the heat—and any chance searcher there could easily see them on the cruiser.

TWO hours, perhaps, they had been broiling on that flat silver grill, when they heard a bell below, and taut, excited voices:

"From the Commander. He's going aboard in five minutes. The cruiser will be ready to take off at once."

"Have the valve unsealed. Inform Captain Madlok."

"Wonder where he's bound?"

"Wants to get away, I guess, until these escaped prisoners are captured."

"Legion men, they say. One an old criminal. All desperate fellows, dangerous."

"Hiding in the ventilation shafts, they say."

"Don't blame the Commander, if he's going away. Men clever enough to break out of that prison—"

"They've already killed six, in the tubes."

"Twelve, I heard it—with their own guns!"

The sound of hurried feet on the stair from the elevator. A ringing clang of metal, as the great outer valve dropped to form a tiny deck under the air-lock. Feet on the accommodation ladder, entering

the vessel. At last the crisp order:

"All clear! Close the valves!"

"Now!" whispered John Star.

He rolled swiftly off the hull, and slid down feet first, to the little platform of the lowered valve. The jar shook him, but he caught his breath and darted inside the air-lock. Hal Samdu was a second behind him, then Jay Kalam; Giles Habibula, for all his bulk, was very little later.

In the struggle that followed, they had the advantage of complete surprise. The first man, at the control mechanism of the valves, was not even armed. He gasped at sight of John Star, his face abruptly white with panic—for the new reputation of the four had preceded them aboard. And he tried to run.

John Star caught him. A sharp jab to a vital plexus, a flat-handed blow near the ear. He slumped, limp and silent.

Giles Habibula stumbled wheezing over the flanges, and John Star shot at him:

"Close the valves!"

Once the air-lock was sealed and secured from within, he knew, the *Purple Dream* was armored well against outside danger.

With the gigantic Hal Samdu close behind him, and Jay Kalam, he burst upon the narrow deck.

Two uniformed men appeared before them, gasped, started, and tried to reach their weapons. The first of them met Hal Samdu's fist, rebounded against a bulkhead, and crumpled slowly to the deck. A pro-

ton gun fell spinning, and Jay Kalam scooped it up in time to meet a third attacker in the Legion green.

John Star met his own opponent, briefly. They both had Legion combat training, but John Star fought for AKKA—and Aladoree herself. The other snatched for his gun, and staggered back screaming, arm snapped, back broken. Seizing his weapon, John Star turned in time to meet Captain Madlok, just emerging from his cabin.

Madlok came out crouched and snarling, a proton needle ready in his hand. But once again John Star was first—merely the hundredth of a second, perhaps, but enough. A white blade of electric fire stabbed out, and the *Purple Dream* had a new commander.

THEY divided, then. Giles Habibula remained to guard the air-lock. Hal Samdu ran toward the crew's quarters, in the stern. Jay Kalam plunged down into the generator rooms, below the deck. John Star darted forward toward the Commander's cabin and the navigation bridge.

The four were still outnumbered two to one—the full complement of the *Purple Dream* had been twelve; and such a crew was ample, since the cruiser was handled almost completely by automatic mechanisms, needing men chiefly for inspection and navigation. But they had not completely lost the advantage of surprise.

JOHN STAR found two men forward. The navigator came out of the bridge-room with a proton gun in his hands. He saw John Star and tried to fire. But he lacked the peril of AKKA and its keeper to nerve his urgency. By a few fatal thousandths of a second, he was too late.

John Star flung open the door marked COMMANDER, and found Adam Ulnar in his cabin, hanging up the coat that he had worn aboard.

For a long second, the tall, white-haired master of the Legion and the Purple Hall stood quite motionless, breathless, staring at the menacing needle of the proton gun, his handsome face frozen into absolute lack of expression. He breathed suddenly. The coat fell out of his hands. He sat down heavily in the single chair.

"Well, John, you surprised me." He said with a short, husky little laugh. "I had learned you were too dangerous to keep alive. I was going away until you had been disposed of. But I was hardly expecting this."

"I'm glad you value your life," John Star snapped harshly. "Because I want to trade it to you."

Adam Ulnar smiled, defensively, recovering his suave self-possession. Again he was the shrewd elder statesman of the Purple Hall.

"You have the advantage, John. Your men, I suppose, have control of the cruiser?"

"I imagine so, by now."

"You know, this adds piracy to your long list of crimes. All the Legion fleets will be hunting you, now."

"I know. But that doesn't save your life. Shall we trade?"

"What do you want, John?"

"Information. I want to know where you have Aladoree Anthar."

Adam Ulnar smiled in faint relief, and spoke more easily:

"Fair enough, John. Promise me my life, and I'll tell you—though I don't think the information will give you any satisfaction."

"Well?"

"I didn't approve the thing, John. I wanted her brought here, to the Purple Hall. I think Eric is trusting his strange allies too far. . . . She wasn't disposed to talk, you see. It was difficult to persuade her, without the danger that she would die, and her secret with her. And we still have to deal with a few stubborn fools in the Legion—men like you are, John—still loyal to the Green Hall."

"But where is she?"

"They took her on the Medusa flier, John, back to the Runaway Star."

"Not there!" he gasped. "Even Eric wouldn't——"

"Yes, John," his famous kinsman told him soberly. "I didn't think you'd find much comfort in the fact."

"We'll go after her!"

"Yes, John, I believe you would

do that." There was a note, almost, of admiration in Adam Ulnar's voice. "I believe you would. But you couldn't possibly hope to succeed."

"No?"

"Our allies, John, are a pretty efficient race. They've had a longer existence than the human race. I don't like them, myself—I've had contact enough with them. I don't approve the alliance. And I didn't approve taking the girl there. I don't trust them so far as Eric does.

"They aren't human, at all, you understand—not like any form in the System, though Eric called them Medusæ. They have a queer psychology. Unpleasant. Frankly, I'm afraid of them.

"But they're scientific, able, advanced. They have the accumulated knowledge of ages I can't estimate. Weird as they are, they've splendid brains. Cold, emotionless intelli-

gence. They're more like machines than men. They get what they want, quite efficiently, with no human scruples.

"So I think, John, that they will be able to guard the girl, on their own planet—and make her tell the secret. They have set up very effective defenses, to guard their own strange world. That Belt of Peril, the one that the insane survivors of Eric's expedition keep babbling about.

"And even if you keep me helpless, John, our plans will go ahead. The Medusæ will come back. The Legion will go over to them—our Purple organization controls it now. The Green Hall will be wiped out—the Medusæ have amazing weapons, John. And Eric will take the throne.

"The throne you might have had yourself, John."

Chapter Ten

Farewell to the Sun

GILES HABIBULA made queer noises. He gasped, strangled, sputtered. Fragments of food flew out of his mouth. His face—save for the ample purple protuberance of his nose—had faded to a greenish, sickly pallor. His fat hands trembled as he tilted up the

big flagon of wine, and cleared his vocal organs sufficiently to permit articulate—though still somewhat explosive—speech.

"My dear life!" he sputtered, rolling a fishy eye about the little bridge-room. "My mortal life! We can't go there!"

"Probably we can't," John Star agreed soberly. "The chances are

against us—a hundred to one, I suppose. But we can try."

"Bless my bones! We can't go there, lad. 'Tis beyond the System—six light years, and more. That's a frightful distance, when it takes a precious ray of light six long and lonely years to cross it!"

"Ah, there are ten thousand mortal dangers, life knows! I'm a brave man—you all know poor old Giles is brave enough to deal with any common peril. But we can't do that. Of all the doomed and dismal expeditions that ever dared to fly outside the precious System, only one ever came back!"

A TINY red light glowed suddenly on the geodesic telltale screen; a warning gong rang out.

"Another Legion cruiser," observed Jay Kalam, tautly quiet. "Scouring space for the *Purple Dream*. That makes five, in the range of the telltale. Hunting pirates was always a popular sport, with the Legion."

"And the nearest within ten thousand miles," added John Star, with a glance at the dials. "Though they probably won't discover us until we contrive to get the generators repaired, and start moving."

"And to the Runaway Star!" Giles Habibula wheezed on, dolefully. "Sweet life's sake, to the green Medusæ's dark and evil world! The expedition the Legion sent there had five fine fighting ships. The best the System could build. Full, trained

crews. And look what came back, after a whole eternal year!

"One crippled ship! The men on her, most of them, blessed babbling lunatics, chattering to freeze your blood about the horrors they had found on the dark and hideous planet of that evil star. And rotting away, all the fearful while, of some frightful virus the doctors never saw before—the flesh of their mortal bodies turning green and flaking off.

"Mortal terrors! And you want us to go there, in one poor and lonely little ship, with her geodynes already wrecked. Just four men of us, against a whole planet full of green and cunning monsters!

"You can't ask old Giles Habibula to go out there, lad. Poor old Giles, half dead from scampering like a hunted rat through the ventilator tubes in the Purple Hall. Old Giles is too feeble for that. If you three idiots want to go out to your death of madness and howling horror, why then you must let poor old Giles off the ship on Mars."

"To be tried and put to death for a pirate?" asked John Star, smiling grimly.

"Don't joke so with old Giles, lad! He's no swaggering, red-handed pirate, lad. Old Giles is just a poor——"

"The whole Legion is hunting us, Giles," Jay Kalam broke in quietly. "Ever since we took the *Purple Dream*. The agents of the Legion would soon have you—you'd never disguise that nose!"

"Good life's sake, Jay, don't talk so! I hadn't thought of that. But we are blessed pirates now, with the hand of every honest fighting man against us. Ah, every man looks on us with trembling and horror, and seeks to strike us down to death!"

His fishy eyes glistened with tears; his wheezing voice broke.

"Poor Giles Habibula, aged and crippled in the loyal service of the Legion, now without a place on any planet to rest his mortal head. Hunted through the black and frozen deep of space, driven out of the System he has given his years and his strength to defend. Driven out to face a planet full of green inhuman monsters. Ah, me! The ingrate System will regret this injustice to a mortal hero!"

He wiped the tears away, then, with the back of a great fat hand, and tilted up the flagon.

He had found opportunity for a raid on the galley, since they took the ship. His capacious pockets were stuffed with slabs of synthetic Legion rations, sweet-cakes, and fragments of baked ham, which now flowed again toward his mouth in a stream of traffic interrupted only by the trips of the wine-flagon to the same destination.

The *Purple Dream* was adrift in space, a hundred thousand miles off the huge, tawny, ochre globe of Mars. Tiny Phobos had long been lost among the million, many-hued points that pierced the black sphere of vacant night. They lay with lights

and signals dead, helpless; and the avid fleets of the Legion hunted them.

Commander Adam Ulnar safely locked in the brig, their other prisoners released through the air-lock, they had driven the cruiser away from the landing stage on the Purple Hall under rocket power. John Star had felt freedom in their grasp.

But then a dying engineer—true to the Legion traditions—had thrown a switch, burned out a geodyne unit. With generators useless and rockets inadequate to move the vessel fast or far through these hostile immensities, the four had gathered for a council of desperation.

"**S**HE'S in the hands of those monsters?" huge Hal Samdu asked again, his big hands knotting. "The monsters that Eric Ulnar's crazy veterans kept talking about?"

"Yes. Except that I doubt that those things are enough like men to have hands."

"With care," began Jay Kalam, "organization—"

"Ah, that's the word," broke in Giles Habibula. "Organization. Regularity. Four good meals, hot on the moment; twelve hours of good sound sleep. Organization—though a blessed man might still take a cat-nap now and then, or a cold bite and a sip of wine between meals."

"There's the matter of navigation," Jay Kalam went on. "I know the rudiments, of course, but—"

He looked doubtfully about, at the walls of the bridge-room, bewilderingly crowded with all the shining, intricate mechanism of telescopic periscopes, geodesic telltale, meteor deflectors, rocket firing keys, geodyne controls, gyroscope space-compasses, radar, thermal and magnetic detector screens, star-charts, planetary maps, position-, velocity-, and gravitation-calculators, atmosphere and temperature gauges—all the apparatus for the not quite simple business of taking the cruiser safely from planet to planet.

"I can handle her," offered John Star quietly.

"Good. Then we must have an engineer. To repair the geodynes—we *must* somehow get them repaired!—and then to run them."

Giles Habibula grunted, sputtered crumbs, failed to speak.

"That's right, Giles. I'd forgotten that you were a qualified technician."

He swallowed, tilted the flagon, found his voice.

"Sweet life, yes, I can run the precious geodynes. Giles Habibula can fight, when fighting has to be done, old and lame and feeble as he is. Ah, me, no man is braver than old Giles—all of you know that. When fighting must be done. But, as a matter of choice, he'll always stick to his blessed generators. It's safer—and there's nothing else but wisdom in a blessed bit of caution."

"You can fix the burned-out unit?"

"Ah, yes, I can re-wind it," prom-

ised the new engineer. "But it will be hard to synchronize it with the others. Those units are matched when they are made. When one is off balance, it makes the whole system mortal hard to tune. But I'll do my blessed best."

"And, Hal," went on Jay Kalam, "you've been a proton gunner. You can handle the big proton blast needle, if the Legion stumbles on us—though we can't afford a fight, with just four men on a crippled ship."

"Yes, I can do that," gigantic Hal Samdu nodded slowly, his red face very grave. "That's simple. I can do it."

"That leaves you, Jay," spoke up John Star. "We need you to do just what you're doing now. To plan, organize. You will be our commander."

"No—" He started a modest objection, but Hal Samdu and Giles Habibula added their voices; and Jay Kalam became captain of the *Purple Dream*.

THE new officer gave his first orders immediately, with the same gravely quiet manner he always had.

"Then, Giles, please get the geodynes into operation as soon as you can—our only chance is to get away before one of these ships catches us in a search beam, and calls the rest of the fleet to wipe us out."

"Very good, sir." Giles Habibula threw back his head, held up the flagon until the

last drop had trickled from it, saluted too elaborately, and rolled out of the bridge-room.

"John, you may be plotting our course. First we must outrun these ships around us. We'll keep above the asteroid belt, and well away from Jupiter and Saturn and Uranus, with their Legion bases—we can't risk running into another fleet. As soon as we get beyond the danger of their search-beams, we'll head on out toward Pluto."

"Very good."

"Hal, if you please, check the big proton gun. We must have it ready—though we can't risk a fight."

"Yes, Jay."

"And I shall keep watch."

"How many, now?" asked Jay Kalam, hours later. They were still drifting helpless in the void. Watching the betraying red sparks on the telltale screen, John Star answered slowly:

"Seven. And I believe—I'm afraid, Jay, they've found us!"

"They have?"

Intently he studied the instruments, and he agreed at last, his voice edged with apprehension:

"Yes. They've found us. They're moving in, all seven."

Jay Kalam spoke into his telephone:

"Hal, stand by for action. . . . Yes, seven Legion cruisers, all converging on us." He gave positions.

"Giles, the geodynes? . . . Not ready, yet? . . . And you can't depend on the re-wound unit? . . .

They've seen us. We must move soon, or never."

A few minutes, and the nearest cruiser came into range, or almost into range, of the proton blast. Jay Kalam spoke into the telephone, and a tongue of blinding violet darted at it, from the great needle in its turret above.

"It's drawing back," whispered John Star, his eye fastened to a telescope. "To wait for the others. But they'll all soon be close enough to fight."

"Ah, Jay, we can try them," whistled Giles Habibula's voice from the receiver, thin and shrill. "Though this crippled unit is still a poor, uncertain crutch!"

Jay Kalam nodded, sharply, and John Star turned to the dials and keys. The musical humming of the geodynes rose, filling the ship with a song of power. Swiftly he advanced them to their utmost output; their sound became higher, keener, until it was a vibrant whining which quivered through every member of the ship.

"Away!" he cried exultantly.

HIS eyes on the dials, on the red flecks glowing on the telltale screen, he saw that the *Purple Dream* was moving, ever faster, away from the center of that hostile crimson swarm. His own heart responded to the keening whine of the generators; he could almost feel the terrific thrust of the geodynes.

"We're gone!" he cried again.

"Off for the Runaway Star! Away to—"

His voice fell. Another note had broken the keen musical whine of the generators—a coarse, nerve-jarring vibration.

Giles Habibula's voice came from the receiver, tiny and metallic and afraid:

"Ah, these wicked generators. I re-wound the unit. But they're off-balance. They won't stay synchronized. That evil oscillation will creep back. It bleeds away the power—and it may shake the mortal ship to fragments!"

"We've lost speed," John Star reported apprehensively from the instruments. "The Legion ships are gaining."

"Adjust them, please, Giles," Jay Kalam pleaded into the telephone. "Everything depends on you."

Giles Habibula toiled. The pure power-song came back, and broke again. The *Purple Dream* flashed on, gaining upon the seven pursuing ships when the geodynes hummed clear and keen, but always losing, falling sluggishly back, when the harsh, disturbing vibration returned.

John Star studied his instruments long and anxiously.

"We're holding them just about even," he decided at last. "We can keep ahead so long as the genera-

tors do no worse—though we can't escape them altogether. Anyhow, we can say farewell to the Sun and the System. Even if they follow us out. . . ."

"No," Jay Kalam objected quietly, "we aren't ready yet to leave."

"What's the matter?"

"We must have more fuel for the trip out to Barnard's Star—six light years and back. We must have every foot of space on board packed with extra cathode plates for the geodyne generators. And, of course, we must check the supplies for ourselves—food, and oxygen."

John Star nodded slowly.

"I knew we needed a captain. Where—"

"We must land at some Legion base, and get what we need."

"**A**T A LEGION base? With all the Legion fleets hunting us for pirates? The alarm will be spread to the limits of the System!"

"We'll land," Jay Kalam said, with his usual quiet gravity, "at the base on Pluto's moon. This is the farthest on our way, and the most isolated Legion station in the System."

"But even it will be warned and armed."

"No doubt. But we must have supplies. We're pirates now. We shall take what we need."