

Chapter Twenty

"A Certain Slight Dexterity"

"**M**Y BLESSED bottle of wine!" sobbed Giles Habibula, plaintively. "I carried it out of the sunken cruiser. I carried it through the jungle of thorns, I carried it up the black and evil mountains. For precious months I carried it on the raft. I risked my mortal life to save it, fighting a wicked flying monster. I dived for it into the horrors of the yellow river. I was near drowning with it in the fall beneath that aqueduct!"

"The only bottle of wine on the whole black and monstrous continent!"

His fishy eyes clouded, and the clouds gave forth a rain of tears. He sank down on the bare metal floor of the cell in a stricken heap.

"Poor old Giles Habibula, lonely, desolate, forlorn old soldier of the Legion. Accused for a pirate, hunted like a rat out of his own native System, caught like a mortal rat in a wicked trap to be tortured and murdered by the monsters of an alien star!

"And, ah me! even that is not enough! I'd carried that bottle

through a mortal lot of hardship and peril. I'd held it up to the light, many a time, sweet life knows, my old mouth watering. Always I'd save it for the hour of greater need. Ah, yes, for such a time of mortal bleak necessity as faces us now!"

"And it must fall! Fall two thousand fearful feet. Every precious drop of it. Gone! Ah, Giles Habibula——"

His voice was overcome by cataclysmic grief, earthquakes of sighs and storms of tears.

John Star questioned Eric Ulnar again. He had slept, that shattered human wreck, his haggard, emaciated body exhausted by the outburst of hysteria. He was calm when he woke, sunk in a sort of apathy, speaking in a dull, weary tone.

"The Medusæ are planning to desert this planet," he said. "They have fought for long ages to keep this mother-city alive. And they've done wonders—making this red gas to keep the atmosphere from freezing, and robbing other worlds to replace their exhausted resources. But now they're coming to final defeat—because the dying planet is spiraling back into the dying star. Even they can't stop that. They have to go."

"They already have an outpost in the System, you say?"

"Yes," continued the lifeless monotone. "They've already conquered the Moon of Earth. They're generating a new atmosphere for it, filled with this red poison gas. And they're building a fortress there, out of this black alloy they used in place of iron, for their base against the Earth."

"But the Legion! Surely——"

"The Legion of Space is destroyed. The last, disorganized remnant of it was annihilated in a vain attack on the Moon. The Green Hall, too, is gone. The System has no organization left. No defense.

"And the Medusæ, from the fort on the Moon, are proceeding with the destruction of the human race. They're firing great shells, filled with the red gas, at Earth and all the other human planets. Slowly, in every atmosphere, the concentration of the gas is increasing. Soon men everywhere will be insane and rotting.

"Only a few of the Medusæ, I believe, have already gone to the System. But their great fleet is now being organized and equipped, to carry the migrating hordes to occupy our conquered planets."

THERE had been a change in Eric Ulnar's manner. On that first occasion, his voice had been a thin, hysterical scream. Now his dull tones were hardly audible. His face—it still had a sort of pallid beauty from

his long yellow hair, worn and haggard and pain-drawn as it was—his face was vacantly calm. He spoke of the plans of the Medusæ with an unconcern that was almost mechanical, as if the fate of the System no longer mattered to him.

"And Aladoree?" John Star demanded. "Where is she?"

"She is locked in the next cell, beside us."

"She is!" gasped Hal Samdu, hoarse with gladness. "So near?"

"But you say she's been——" John Star could not keep a little sob of pain and anger from his voice, "been tortured?"

"The Medusæ want to know her secret," came the lifeless, expressionless reply. "They want the plans for AKKA. Since they can't communicate with her themselves—she doesn't know the code—they made me try to get the secret for them.

"We've used different means," his dull drone went on. "Fatigue, hypnotism, pain. But she won't tell."

"You——" choked Hal Samdu. "You—beast—coward——"

He charged across the cell, great hands clutching savagely. Eric Ulnar shrank from him, shuddering, cried out:

"Don't! Don't let him touch me! I'm not to blame! They tortured me! I couldn't stand it! They tortured me. And they wouldn't let me die!"

"Hal!" protested Jay Kalam, gravely. "That won't help things a bit. We need to know what he can tell us."

"But he——" gasped the giant, "he—tortured Aladoree!"

"I know, Hal," soothed John Star, holding his arm, though he shared the savage impulse to destroy this no longer human creature. "What he tells us will help to rescue her."

He turned back to Eric Ulnar.

"In the next cell, you say. Is there a guard?"

"Don't let him touch me," came the abject, lifeless whine. "Yes, one of the Medusæ always watches in the great hall above."

"If we could get past the guard, is there any way out?"

"Out of the city, you mean?"

"Yes," Jay Kalam spoke up and his quiet voice held a calm, surprising confidence. "We're going to rescue Aladoree. We're going to take her outside the city, and let her set up her weapon. Then the Medusæ will come to us for orders—unless we decide to destroy the whole city out of hand."

"No, you could never get out of the city," returned the dull voice of that beaten thing. "You can't even leave the hall. It opens over a pit a mile deep. Just a sheer, blank wall below the door. Even if you got down, you'd have no way to cross the city. The Medusæ have no streets; they fly."

"But there's no use even to talk of that. You can't even get out of this cell, or get Aladoree out of hers. The sliding doors are locked. You are unarmed prisoners. Talking of stealing something the Medusæ

are guarding in their securest fortress!"

His voice died in dull contempt.

WITH the impatience of a trapped animal, John Star gazed about the cell. A bare metal chamber, square, twenty feet wide. Ten feet overhead was the rectangular opening through which they had been dropped, closed now with a sliding grille of square metal bars. Green light filtered through the bars from the dim, lofty hall above. His eyes, searching for any weapon or device to aid their escape, found no movable thing in the cell. It was simply a square box of that eternal black alloy.

Hal Samdu was pacing back and forth on the hard bare floor, his eyes roving like those of a caged beast, sometimes casting a glance of savage rage at Eric Ulnar.

"You can't get out of this cell, even," insisted that flat, no longer human voice. "For they will kill you soon. They will be coming back to make me try again to get the plans from Aladoree. She will tell, this time. They are preparing a ray that burns with all the pain of fire, and yet will not kill her too quickly. But they will let us all die as soon as she tells. They've promised to let me die, when she tells."

"Then," John Star muttered fiercely, "we must get out!"

Hal Samdu beat with his fists on the hard black walls. They gave out a dull, heavy reverberation, a mel-

ancholy roll of doom; he left blood from his knuckles.

"You can't get out," droned Eric.
"The lock——"

"One of us has a certain dexterity," said Jay Kalam. "Giles, you must open the door."

Giles Habibula got to his feet in the corner of the cell, wiping tears from his fishy eyes, still mourning for his lost bottle.

"Ah yes," he wheezed, in a brighter tone. "One of us has a certain slight dexterity. It came of the accident that his father was an inventor of locks. Even so, it cost him weary years of toil, to develop an aptitude into a skill.

"A blessed dexterity! Ah, as dear life knows, it has never been given the credit it has earned. Ah, me! Lesser men have won riches and honor and fame, with half the genius and a tenth the toil. And to old Giles Habibula his talent and his unremitting effort have brought only poverty and obscurity and disgrace!"

"Mortal me! But for that dexterity, I should never have been here, rotting in the hands of a lot of fearful monsters, waiting for torture and death! Ah, no! But for that affair on Venus, twenty years ago, I should never have been in the Legion. And 'twas that dexterity that tempted me then—that, and the fame of a certain cellar of wine!"

"Poor old Giles, brought by his own genius to ruin and starvation and death——"

"But now's the chance to make your skill undo all that," urged John Star. "Can you open the lock?"

"Ah, me, lad! The penalty of unjust obscurity! If I had been a painter, a poet, a blessed musician, you would never dare cast doubt upon the power of my art. With my genius, it would be known from end to end of the System. Ah, lad, it was an ill tide of destiny into which I was cast!"

"That even you, lad, should doubt my genius!"

"Come, Giles!" cried Jay Kalam.
"Show him."

THE three of them lifted Giles Habibula—now an easier task than it would once have been—so that he could reach the barred grating, ten feet above the floor.

He looked at the black case of the lock, fingered it with his oddly sure, oddly delicate hands. He set his ear against the case, tapped it with the fingers, reached up through the bars and moved something, listening.

"My mortal eyes," he at last sighed plaintively. "I never saw such a clever lock as this. Combination. The case is precious tight. No place to insert an instrument, to feel it out. And the wicked thing has levers, instead of cylinders. Never was a lock like this in the System."

Again he listened intently to tiny clickings from the lock, resting the tips of sensitive fingers against the case, now here, now there, as if vibration revealed the inner secret.

"Bless my poor old bones!" he muttered once. "A clever new idea! If we were back in the System, the patents on it would earn me all the fame and wealth that I've been cheated of. A lock that challenges even the genius of Giles Habibula!"

Abruptly he gasped, stooping.

"Let me down! A fearful monster coming!"

They lowered him to the floor. Above, a huge greenish hemisphere floated over the grating. A gross mass of glistening, slimy, translucent flesh, palpitating with strange slow life. An immense, ovoid eye stared at them with such a dread intensity that John Star felt it must be reading their very minds.

A dark tentacle dropped four small brown bricks through the grating. Eric Ulnar, breaking from his apathy, snatched one of them and gnawed it eagerly.

"**F**OOD," he whimpered. "This is all they give us."

A cube of dark, moist jelly, John Star found one of them to be; it had an odd, unpleasant odor, an insipid lack of flavor.

"Food!" wept Giles Habibula, biting into another. "Ah, for good life's sake, if they call this food, I'll eat my blessed boots first, as I did in the prison on Mars!"

"But we must eat it," said Jay Kalam. "Even if it isn't palatable. We'll need strength."

The greenish, quivering vastness of their jailor presently floated away

from above the grating; they lifted Giles Habibula, to resume his battle with the lock.

He muttered in exasperation from time to time; his breath, in the absorption of his effort, became a slow sighing. Sweat stood out on his face, glistening in the dim green light that shone through the bars.

There was, at last, a louder click. He sighed again and raised his face against the bars. Then he shook his head and whispered hastily:

"Life's sake—let me down!"

"You can't open it?" asked John Star, anxiously.

"Ah, lad, so still you doubt?" he breathed, sadly. "The price a man must pay for a precious spark of genius! There was never a lock designed that Giles Habibula couldn't open. Though many an ambitious locksmith has tried, life knows!"

"Then it *is* open?"

"Ah, yes. The bolts just went back. The grate is unlocked. But I didn't open it."

"Why—"

"Because that fearful flying monster is waiting up there in the hall. Hanging still over a mortal queer contraption on a tripod of black metal. Its evil purple eyes would see any move we make."

"Tripod?" shrilled Eric Ulnar, voice edged with a new panic of hysteria. "Tripod? That's the machine they use for communication. They've brought it again, to make me get the secret from Aladoree. They'll kill us all when she tells!"

Chapter Twenty-one

The Horror in the Hall

"**L**IFT me," said John Star, and Hal Samdu's great hands swung him up.

Through the square metal bars of the grating, he could see the walls and ceiling of the vast hall, too wide and too high for the scale of human needs. Made all of the dead-black alloy, it was illuminated by little green, shining spheres strung along the middle of the ceiling.

The Medusa was in view, hanging over the cell and a little to one side. A bulging, enormous hemisphere of greenish flesh, slimy, half transparent, slowly throbbing. Ovoid, foot-long purple eyes, protruding a little—hypnotic and evil. Black tentacles dangling, like the Gorgon's serpent-locks.

Beside it was the tripod mechanism. Three heavy, spike-pointed legs, supporting a small cabinet, from which hung cables fastened to little objects that must have been electrodes and microphone, for picking up Eric's voice and the telepathic vibrations of the Medusæ.

At a sign, the giant lowered him. "There's a chance," he whispered.

"If there are no others in sight—and if we're quick enough."

He told what he had seen, outlined his plan. Jay Kalam nodded grave approval. In quick, breathless whispers, they discussed the details, down to the smallest movement.

Then Jay Kalam gave the word, and Hal Samdu swung John Star up again. This time he seized the grating, slid it swiftly and noiselessly back, in a moment was on his feet in the hall above. Without the loss of an instant he leaped toward the tripod.

Jay Kalam meanwhile came through the opening after him, catapulted by the arms of the giant, and helped Hal Samdu to follow.

An instant after the grating opened, the three stood beside it, working with savage hastè to dismember the tripod. Even so, the guarding Medusa had already moved. The green dome of it swept swiftly toward them, thin black appendages whipping out like angry snakes.

Hal Samdu wrenched apart the communicator. One heavy, sharp-pointed leg he thrust to John Star, another to Jay Kalam. The third, with the heavy black case still fas-

tened to it, he brandished like a great metal mace.

Holding the pointed leg like a pike, John Star lunged at a purple eye.

Instinctive terror smote him, the same numbing fear that had struck him twice before from the luminous Gorgon-eyes, the touching off of an age-old response to elemental horror. He felt tingling chills where hair sought to rise, the ice of sudden sweat. Something checked his heart and breath; something froze his muscles.

IMMOBILITY of instinctive terror—old inheritance from some primeval progenitor, which had found safety in keeping quiet. Useful, perhaps, to a creature too small to do battle and too slow to run away. But now—deadly!

He had known it was coming. He had braced himself to meet it. He would be ruled by his brain, not by age-old instinct-patterns!

A moment it checked him—just a moment. Then his numbed body responded to desperately urging nerves. He went on, metal point swinging up before him.

The Medusa had taken full advantage of that small delay. The black whip of a tentacle, small as his finger, but cruelly hard, pitilessly strong, snapped around his neck; it constricted with merciless, suffocating force.

In spite of it, he carried out the lunge. Fighting down the blinding

agony from his throat, he completed, with every atom of weight and strength behind it, the forward rush, the upward swing.

The point reach the eye, ripped through its transparent outer coat, plunged deep into the sinister purple well of it, between the fringes of black membrane. A pendulous blob of clear jelly burst out, a quick rush of purple-black blood; and the great socket was sunken, sightless, more than ever hideous.

Abruptly increasing its fearful pressure on his larynx, the choking tentacle hurled him forward with a violence that almost snapped his vertebrae, flung him dazed and blind against the metal floor.

With a dogged will that ignored danger and physical pain, he clung to consciousness; he clung to his weapon. Even before he could see he was scrambling back to his feet, dimly aware of the blows of Hal Samdu's club—great soft thuds against boneless, palpitating flesh.

His sight came back. He saw the giant, head and shoulders towering from a very mass of black and angry serpents, shining bronze with sweat of agony and effort, muscles knotting as he swung the metal mace.

He saw Jay Kalam lunge, as he had lunged, to drive his point deep into a purple eye. Saw him instantly wrapped in ferocious black whips, that squeezed his body and twisted it and flung it savagely against the floor.

Then he staggered forward again.

Black ropes caught his knees before he came in thrusting distance, tripped him. They snatched him aloft with resistless strength, whirled him up to dash him down again.

A huge, malevolent purple eye came before him, as he was flung up—one of the two that remained to the creature. It was too far to reach with a lunge. But he threw his weapon, hurled it deep into the shining target with a twisting swing of his whole body, a long sweep of his free arm.

The serpents dropped him to tug at the spear.

ON HANDS and knees he sprawled beside Jay Kalam, who was still motionless, groaning, weapon at his side. John Star snatched it as he got to his feet, straightening fairly underneath the creature, surrounded by agonized appendages.

On the under surface of the hemisphere, a circle of green quivering flesh, he saw a curious organ. A circular area three feet wide, slightly bulging, that glowed with soft golden iridescence. The light wavered, pulsed rhythmically, with the regular palpitations of the slimy flesh.

With the quick intuition that it must be vital, he thrust at it.

Sensing his attack, the creature fought to avoid it. Hal Samdu, dazed, was flung at his feet. Black serpents struck. A rope whipped about his waist, tightened fiercely. The same weapon that he had flung

into the great eye was now grasped in thin coils; it flailed at him, struck his head with a blinding agony.

He drove on; his point pierced the golden, shimmering circle.

The yellow light went out of it at once. And the Medusa fell, a soft mountain of quaking flesh. Only by a desperate, sidewise fling did he get his body from beneath it in time; even so it caught his legs.

The glowing organ, he was later sure, must have been the agency of its remarkable locomotion, perhaps emitting some radiant force that lifted and propelled it; perhaps giving it a grasp, in some manner yet inexplicable, upon the curvature of space itself.

Half under it he lay for a while, unable to extricate himself. Still the creature was not completely dead; the dying serpents writhed about him in aimless agony.

It was Hal Samdu who reeled back to his feet to end the battle with a few mighty blows of his club, and then dragged John Star from beneath.

A moment they stood gazing at that quivering mound of slimy greenish protoplasm, tall as Hal Samdu's head, the yet-twitching tentacles sprawling away from the edge of it, three sightless eyes staring horribly.

Utterly hideous as it was, both of them were moved by a contrary impulse of pity for its manifest agony. For its kind had endured in the face of all adversity, perhaps since the

planets of the Sun were born. The death of it was somehow dreadful.

"It had tortured *her*!" gasped Hal Samdu. "It deserved to die!"

They turned from it then, to lift Jay Kalam, who was already returning to consciousness, struggling to sit up.

"Only stunned!" he muttered. "So it's finished? Good. We must get on to Aladoree. Before others come. If it called for aid—Hal, please help Giles and Ulnar out of the cell. Must—work—fast!"

He dropped back again. He had, John Star saw, been cruelly hurt when the tentacles flung him down. His fine face was thin and drawn with pain, his grave eyes closed. Gasping, he lay there a moment, then whispered:

"John? Find her. I'll be all right. We must be quick!"

JOHN STAR left him then. He ran around that mountain of slow green death, and found another grating in the floor. He dropped to his knees, peering into darkness but faintly relieved by the green rays that streamed through the bars from the hall. At last he made out a slight form, lying on the bare floor, sleeping.

"Aladoree!" he called. "Aladoree Anthar!"

The slender dim shape of her did not stir, he heard her quiet breathing—it seemed strange to him that she should be sleeping so peacefully, so like a child, when the fate of the

System depended on a thing she knew.

"Aladoree!" He spoke louder. "Wake up."

She rose, then, quickly. Her quiet voice showed complete possession of her faculties, though it was dull with a heavy weight of apathy.

"Yes. Who are you, here?"

"John Ulnar, and your—"

"John Ulnar!" Her low, tired voice cut him off, cold with scorn. "You've come, I suppose, to help your cowardly kinsman make me betray the specifications for AKKA? I'll warn you now that you're going to be disappointed. The human race is not all your own cowardly breed. Do what you like, I can keep the secret till I die—and that, I think won't be very long!"

"No, Aladoree!" he appealed, shocked and hurt by her bitter scorn. "No, Aladoree, you mustn't think that. We've come—"

"John Ulnar—" her voice cut him, hard with contempt.

Then Giles Habibula and Hal Samdu dropped by the grating.

"Bless my eyes, lass! It's a fearful time since old Giles has heard your voice. A mortal time! How are you, lass?"

"Giles! Giles Habibula?"

In the voiceless cry that came up from darkness through the bars was incredulous relief, ineffable joy that brought a quick, throbbing ache to John Star's heart. All the contemptuous scorn was gone; only pure delight was left, tremulous, complete.

"Ah, yes, lass, it's Giles. Old Giles Habibula, come on a wicked and perilous journey to set you free, lass. Just wait a few blessed moments, while he works another lock."

Already he was on his knees by the sliding grille, his thick fingers curiously deft and steady, moving over the little strange levers that projected from the case.

"Aladoree!" cried Hal Samdu, an odd, yearning eagerness in his rusty voice. "Aladoree—have they—hurt you?"

"Hal!" came her glad, trembling cry. "Hal, too?"

"Of course. You think I wouldn't come?"

"Hal!" she sobbed again, joyously. "And where's Jay?"

"He's—" began John Star, when Jay Kalam's grave tones, weak and uneven, came beside him:

"Here, Aladoree—at your command."

He reeled to the edge of the grating, sank beside it, still weak and white with pain, though smiling.

"I'm so—glad!" her voice came from darkness, broken with sobs of

pure joy. "I knew—you'd try. But it was—so far! And the plot—so clever—so diabolical—"

"Ah, lass, don't weep so!" urged Giles Habibula. "Every precious thing is all right, now. Old Giles will have this door open in a moment, and you out in the precious light of day again, lass!"

John Star abruptly sensed something amiss. Quickly he looked up and down the long, high-walled black hall. The vast bulk of the dead Medusa lay motionless, serpentlocks sprawling and still. The floor of dull green light revealed nothing moving, no enemy. Yet something was wrong.

Suddenly it struck him.

"Eric Ulnar!" he gasped. "Did you help him out of the cell?"

"Ah, yes, lad," wheezed Giles Habibula. "We couldn't leave even him for the wicked things to torture."

"Of course," rumbled Hal Samdu. "Where is—"

"He's gone!" whispered John Star. "Gone! Still a coward and a traitor. He's gone to give the alarm!"

Chapter Twenty-two

Red Storm at Dusk

"**A**H, NOW!" wheezed Giles Habibula. "Ready, lass, to come?"

The lock had snapped; he slid back the barred door.

"Please go down, John," said Jay Kalam. "Help her."

John Star swung through the opening, hung by his arms, dropped lightly on the floor of the cell, beside Aladoree. Her gray eyes watched him doubtfully, greenish in

the gloom of that strange prison.

"John Ulnar," she asked, her scornful dislike less open, yet still cutting him deep, "you came with them?"

"Aladoree!" he pleaded. "You must trust me!"

"I told you once," she said coldly, "that I could never trust a man named Ulnar. That very day you locked up my loyal men, betrayed me to your traitorous kinsman!"

"I know!" he whispered, bitterly. "I was a dupe, a fool! But come! I'll lift you."

"I was the fool—to trust an Ulnar!"

"Come! We've no time."

"You must be more clever than Eric, if you have the confidence of my loyal men. You Purples! Are you trying, John Ulnar, to get the better of them and the Medusæ too?"

"Don't—" It was a pained cry.

"Please be quick!" urged Jay Kalam from above.

She came to him, then, still doubtful. John Star slipped an arm about her slight body, lifted her foot, and swung her upward into Hal Samdu's reaching arms; then leaped, himself, to catch them.

They stood in the cavernous hall, tiny in its gloomy silent vastness.

Aladoree was thin, John Star saw, and pale, her white face drawn with anxiety and suffering; her gray eyes were burning with a fire too bright, and ringed with blue shadows. Her startled outcry at sight of the hideous mountain of the dead Medusa

showed nerves strained to the point of breakdown; yet her erect bearing revealed courage, decision, proud determination.

Torture had not conquered her.

"We're here, Aladoree," said Jay Kalam. "But we've no ship to leave in. No means, even, to get out of the city. And no proper weapons. We're depending on you. On AKKA."

Disappointment shadowed her worn face.

"I'm afraid, then," she said, "That you have sacrificed your lives in vain."

"Why?" Jay Kalam asked apprehensively. "Can't you build the weapon?"

Wearily, she shook her head.

"Not in time, I think. Simple as it is, I must have certain materials. And a little time to set it up and adjust it."

“WE'VE the thing they used for communication with Eric Ulnar." He pointed to Hal Samdu's mace. "Rather battered, now. It was electrical. A sort of radio, I think. It would have wires, insulation, maybe a battery."

Again she shook her head, even more wearily.

"It might do," she admitted. "But I'm afraid it would take too long to straighten and arrange the parts. These creatures will soon find us."

"We must take it along," said Jay Kalam.

Hal Samdu unfastened the device from the head of the tripod, slung

it to his body by the connecting wires.

"We must do—something!" cried John Star. "Right away. Eric must have gone to give the alarm."

"We must somehow get outside the city," agreed Jay Kalam. "Aladoree, do you know any way——?"

"No. That way," she pointed, "the hall leads into a great shop, a laboratory, I think. Many of them are always there, working. Eric went that way, I suppose, to tell them. The other end is outside. A mile high! There's no way to get down, without wings."

"There might be," mused Jay Kalam. "I remember—a drain, it looked to be. We must see——"

They ran three hundred feet to a great door at the end of the hall, an immense, sliding grate of heavy black bars, crossed, close-set, fastened with a massive lock. Through the bars they saw the black metropolis again—a storm raging over it.

Looming mountains of ebon metal, fantastic, colossal machines of unguessable function, all piled in titanic confusion, with no order visible to the human eye, no regularity of shape or size or position. No streets; chasms merely, doors opening into breathtaking space, thousands of feet above the chasms.

Now the city was lashed with wild violence. The four had weathered other storms, on their trek across the black continent, always toward the end of the week-long day, when swiftly chilling air caused sudden

precipitation. But this was a wilder fury.

It was almost dark. A lurid pall of scarlet gloom shrouded the city's nightmare masses. Wind shrieked. Yellow rain fell in sluicing sheets; it drenched them, stung them with its icy whip, even in the shelter of the bars. Blinding lightning flamed continually overhead, stabbed red swords down incessantly at black buildings that loomed like tortured giants.

Below the door was a mile-deep chasm, walled in completely by black, irregular buildings. John Star could see no way visible to leave its misty, flood-drenched floor.

Aladoree shrank back instinctively from the chill rain that lashed through the bars, from the ominous glow of the sky and the fearful below of the wind and thunder. Giles Habibula hastily retreated, muttering:

"Mortal me! I never saw such——"

"The lock, Giles!" Jay Kalam requested urgently.

"Bless my bones, Jay!" he howled above the roaring elements. "We can't go out into that! Into that wicked storm, and a fearful pit a mile deep!"

"Please!"

"Ah, if you will, Jay. 'Tis easier, now."

HIS deft, steady fingers manipulated the levers of the lock, more surely, this time, more confi-

dently. Almost at once it clicked; the four men set their shoulders to the bars, and slid the huge grille aside.

Staggering against wind and rain that now drove in with multiplied force, they peered over the square metal ledge. The smooth black wall dropped sheer, under them, for a long mile, sluiced with rain. Jay Kalam braced himself against the howling gusts; he pointed, shouted into the roar of thunder:

"The drain!"

They saw it, beside them, ten feet away. A huge, square tube, supported at close intervals by a metal flange that secured it to the wall. Straight into the pit it fell, dwindling to a thin black line, lost at last in the redly flickering murk below.

"The flanges!" Rather by watching his lips than by sound they caught the words. "A ladder. Too far apart. Inconvenient shape. But we can climb them. Down."

"Bless my bones!" howled Giles Habibula, into the tempest. "We can't do that, Jay. Not in this frightful storm. We can't even reach the mortal flanges! Poor old Giles—"

"John——" Jay Kalam's lips moved, his face a question.

"I'll try!" he screamed.

He was the lightest, the quickest, of the four; he could do the thing if any of them could. He nodded to Hal Samdu, smiling grimly. The giant's hands took him up, hurled him out over the chasm, out into wild rain and bellowing wind.

His arms stretched out, his fingers caught the edge of a metal flange. But the hurricane had his body; it flung him out, over the abyss. Fingers strained. Shoulders throbbed. Muscles cracked. But he hung on.

The merciless gust released him, left him clinging to the flange, drenched and strangled in roaring rain. He tried the flanges, found that they would serve, however awkwardly, as a ladder; he nodded at the others.

He braced himself, then, standing on one leg, the other knee hooked over the flange above; waited, arms free. Jay Kalam was flung out, and he caught him, helped him to a higher position. Then Giles Habibula, green-faced, gasping.

And Aladoree, who said in a queer, muffled tone, "Thank you, John Ulnar," when he caught her in his arms.

HAL SAMDU then passed out the gory legs of the tripod, which they slung to their belts. Standing on the narrow ledge, he closed the sliding grate, so that the lock snapped, in hope of confusing pursuit. Then he leaped, through blinding sheets of rain, and John Star leaned out to catch him.

His great weight made an intolerable burden for John Star in his cramped and insecure position. A furious downward gust increased it. John Star felt, as he clung to the giant's wet hand, that his body must be torn in two. But he kept his hold.

Hal Samdu caught a flange with his free hand, was safe. And they started down the drain.

The bracing flanges were uncomfortably spaced; it would have been no slight feat to climb down a mile of them under the most favorable circumstances. Now rain fell in blinding, suffocating sheets from the roaring sky; the pitiless wind tore at them. All of them were already half exhausted. But apprehension of inevitable pursuit drove them to reckless haste.

In only one way was the storm an advantage, John Star thought; it had driven the Medusæ to shelter from above their buildings and machines; there seemed no danger of accidental discovery, before pursuit started from above. But that advantage they paid for very dearly in the battle with wind and rain.

THEY were halfway down, perhaps, when Aladoree fainted from sheer exhaustion.

John Star, just below her, had been watching her, afraid that she would slip from the wet flanges. He caught her; he held her until she revived and protested stubbornly that she was able to climb again. Then Hal Samdu lifted her to his shoulders, made her cling to him pickaback, and they climbed on.

The great chasm's floor, as they descended, became more distinctly visible through the mist of falling water. A vast square pit, a full thousand feet across. Black, blank sides of huge buildings walled it, without a break. The floor was flooded with yellow water from the rain. All the water on the planet appeared yellow in volume, carrying in solution the red, organic gas.

Anxiously scanning the flooded floor, John Star could see no possible avenue of escape from it—unless they should climb another of the drains that was discharging its flood into the pit. And they were all too near exhaustion, he knew, to make such a climb, even if that could promise safety.

The torrential rain slacked suddenly, when they were near the bottom. The rumble of thunder diminished; the lurid red sky lifted slightly; the cold wind beat at them with decreasing violence.

John Star's feet had just touched the cold standing water on the floor, when Giles Habibula gasped the warning:

"My mortal eye! The evil Medusæ, coming down to take us back!"

Looking upward, he saw the greenish, black-fringed flying domes, drifting one by one from the hall they had left, floating down swiftly.

Chapter Twenty-three

Yellow Maw of Terror

S TANDING in ankle-deep water, as the others were finishing the descent behind him, John Star looked desperately about for some possible way of escape from the pit.

Before him lay the sheet of yellow flood-water, a thousand feet square. Above it, on every side, stood glistening black walls of tremendous buildings, the very lowest taller than the proud Purple Hall. Here and there the high doors broke them, but none that he saw could be reached by any but a flying creature.

Against the little red rectangle of sky above the chasm, the pursuing Medusæ were drifting down, small, darkly greenish disks against the scarlet.

"There's no way!" he muttered to Jay Kalam, splashing down beside him. "For once—none! I suppose they'll kill us, now."

"But there is one way," said Jay Kalam, voice swift and strained. "If we've time to reach it. Not safe. Not pleasant. A grim and desperate chance. But better than waiting for them to slaughter us."

"Come!" he called, as Giles Habi-

bula, the last, clambered groaning and shivering, down into chill water. "No time to waste!"

"Where?" demanded Hal Samdu, splashing after him through the yellow flood, Aladoree still clinging wearily to his back. "There's no way."

"The flood-water," Jay Kalam observed succinctly, "manages to find an exit."

At a splashing run, he led the way to an intake of the flood-drains. A yellow whirlpool, ten feet across, roaring down through a heavy metal grating.

"My bloody, mortal eye!" wheezed Giles Habibula. "Must we dive into the blessed sewers?"

"We must," Jay Kalam assured him. "Or wait for the Medusæ to kill us."

"Bless my dear old bones!" he wailed. "To be sucked down and drowned like a miserable rat! And then vomited out, sweet life knows, to be torn and swallowed by the wicked things in the yellow river. Ah, Giles, it was a mortal evil day——"

"We must lift the lid," urged Jay Kalam, "if we can!"

Hal Samdu had set down Ala-

doree, who stood shivering and weary, uncertain. Almost swept off their feet by the swirling yellow water, the four gathered along one side of the circular black grating, grasped it, strained their muscles. It did not move.

"A mortal hasp!" cried Giles Habibula, feeling along the edge.

Staggering in the mad current that buffeted his feet, Hal Samdu hammered and levered at the fastening with one of the tripod legs. John Star, glancing up at the square of crimson sky, saw the dark circles of the Medusæ, larger now, midway down.

THE giant still beat and pried at the hasp, in vain. John Star tried futilely to help him, and Jay Kalam. The furious swirl of yellow water rushed over it, hindering their efforts, making it almost impossible even to stand.

"It was Eric Ulnar who warned them," said Aladoree, her voice icy with a bitter scorn. "One of them is carrying him. I see him pointing at us."

They renewed their efforts to break the hasp with clumsy tools, panting, too busy to look up even at death descending. At last the twisted metal broke.

"Now!" muttered Hal Samdu.

They gripped the bars again, lifted. The grate stirred a little, to their united strength, settled back under the pressure of the roaring torrent that hurled against it.

They tried again, Giles Habibula panting, purple-faced, Hal Samdu's great muscles bulging, quivering with strain. Even Aladoree added her efforts. Still it did not rise.

The Medusæ were fast drifting down upon them. Stealing an apprehensive glance, John Star saw a full score of them, some carrying black implements that must have been weapons, one bearing Eric Ulnar, gesticulating, seated in a swing of woven serpents.

"We must lift it!"

They tried again, in new positions, straining fiercely. The grating came up suddenly, relatively light when above the grasp of mad water. They flung it back.

The open pit yawned before them, eight feet across. Angry, swirling water leaped into it in an unbroken sheet, from every side; it was a yellow funnel, foam-lined. Ominous, furious, deafening, the yell of wild waters came up out of it.

John Star paused, staring into its savage yellow maw with a sickening wave of horror. It seemed very suicide to dive into that bellowing vortex, suicide in a singularly fearful guise. To be sucked down that tawny, foaming throat, whirled helpless through the sewers below, battered against the walls, finally belched into the horrors of the great river!

And Aladoree! It was impossible. "We can't!" he shouted to Jay Kalam, above the snarling roar of it. "We can't drag her into that!"

"Mortal me!" hoarsely breathed Giles Habibula, the color of his face fading to a pallid, unhealthy green. "It's death! Wicked, howling death, and fearful suffocation."

He reeled back, staggering in the water that tore at his feet.

Jay Kalam glanced at the Medusæ drifting down, very close, now, with their black weapons and Eric Ulnar clinging to his cradle of snakes. He looked gravely at Aladoree, a silent question on his face.

She glanced up at them, her pale face momentarily hardening with scorn. Her gray eyes, still cool and steady, though too bright and dark-rimmed with weariness, looked deliberately from one to another of the four, and then down into the thundering whirlpool.

A long moment she hesitated. She smiled then, oddly; she made a little fleeting gesture of farewell. And she dived into that yellow, bellowing funnel.

JOHN STAR was dazed by the suddenness of her action, by the cold, reckless courage of it. It was a moment before he could recover his faculties, put down his own horror of that avid, howling maw. He tossed aside his improvised weapon, then; he gasped a last full breath of air, and followed.

Twenty feet down, he fell with the yellow, foaming vortex into a plunging river.

The murky red gloom was extinct in an instant. In complete darkness

he was whirled along, beneath the black city. After a little time his struggles brought him to the surface. The drain was racing almost full. His fending arm was bruised against the top of the tube. But he was able to inhale a gasp of foul, reeking air.

He caught breath, again, to shout Aladoree's name, then realized the utter futility of that. Whirling ahead of him in the roaring torrent, she could never hear. Nor would it serve any good if she did.

The passage turned presently; he was strangled in the smother of foam below the angle.

Again, after an indefinite time of waiting, fighting to keep afloat, breathing when he could, he was flung into a deeper, swifter current. Here the drain was all but full. The wild water washed and splashed and foamed against the roof of it; it was seldom he could find an open space from which to fill his lungs.

On and on he was rushed, until he felt that he had fought that savage torrent forever; until his bruised, weary body screamed for rest; until his lungs shrieked for pure air again, and not the foul, foam-filled pockets above the thundering tide.

He could not last another moment, he was thinking, when he plunged into a new wider channel. The current sucked him under. For seeming hours, deadly, lung-tortured, he fought for the surface; and he came up under racing metal, no air beneath it.

Somehow, he kept the water from

his aching lungs. He let the mad current whirl him on. Could Aladoree, he wondered, have endured all this? And the three behind him, if they had dived before the Medusæ came, could they be still alive?

Abruptly he was in a wild fury of roaring foam. He was drawn down again until a cruel weight of water crushed his chest. Fighting a weary way upward, too nearly lifeless to feel any glow of triumph, he saw light in the water.

Up he broke through yellow foam, gratefully sucked in the clear reviving air of the open—quite oblivious of the red and slowly deadly gas that tainted it.

ABOVE, on the one side, was the sullen sky, washed to its full and sinister brilliance by the storm. On the other was the mile-high metal wall of the black metropolis. He had been discharged into the surging flood of the yellow river.

Boiling, scarred with lighter lines of foam, pitted with vortices of angry whirlpools, its turbid tide reached away from him, ten miles wide, so wide that the low dark line of jungle on the farther bank was all but lost in thick red murk.

For miles below him, it rushed along the base of the mighty wall, until it reached the not less forbidding barrier of the black thorn-jungle.

For months he had voyaged that yellow tide; he had learned to face its thousand perils. But the others

had been with him then; they had been on board the raft; they had been armed against the ferocious life of river and air and jungle.

Anxiously, he looked about him for Aladoree—in vain.

When he had breath, he shouted her name. His voice was a thin, useless sound, weak and hoarse, drowned in the roar from the chaos behind him where the flood from the drains met the river's mighty tide.

But he saw her, presently, a hundred yards below him. Her head a tiny thing, bobbing upon the boiling yellow surface. Her body too small, he realized, too frail, too weary, to struggle long against the savage river.

He swam toward her heavily, his limbs all but dead.

The turbid current moved her toward him; it carried her farther again, faster than he could swim; wild water taunted him until, in the near-delirium of exhaustion, he gasped curses at it as if it had been sentiently malicious.

She saw him; she struggled feebly toward him, through rough yellow foam, as they raced along in the shadow of the walls. He glanced back, sometimes, hoping that one of the other three might have come through alive, and saw none of them.

Aladoree vanished before his eyes, when he was not a dozen feet from her, sucked down by a pitiless current; she appeared again as he was

about to dive hopelessly for her, flung up helpless in the freakish water.

He caught her arm, dragged it across his shoulder.

"Hang on," he gasped. And he added with a last grim spark of spirit:

"If you can trust an Ulnar." With the brief, wan ghost of a smile, she clung to him as they were swept along.

The yellow, swirling foam bore them on, under the mighty, marching walls, toward the river-bend below. There the thorn-jungle waited.

Chapter Twenty-four

"For Want of a Nail"

JOHN STAR had never any clear recollection of that time in the river. In the ultimate stages of exhaustion, driven far beyond the normal limits of endurance, he was more machine than man. Somehow he kept himself afloat, and Aladoree. But that was all he knew.

The feel of gravel beneath his feet brought purpose briefly back. He waded and crawled up out of the yellow water, on the edge of a wide, smooth bar of black sand, carrying the limp girl.

Three hundred yards across the dark bare sand rose the jungle. A barrier of black and interwoven swords, it towered forbidding against the crimson sky. It was splashed with huge, vivid blooms of flaming violet that gave it a certain

terrible beauty; and it hid death in many guises.

The open sand, John Star knew, was a no-man's land, menaced from the river and the jungle and the air. But he had scant heed left for danger. Pulling the exhausted girl safely out of the yellow shallows, into the dubious shelter of a mass of driftwood lodged against a sand-buried snag, he fell beside her on the sand. Fatigue overcome him there.

He knew, when he woke, that precious hours were lost. The huge disk of the red sun was already cut in half by the edge of the jungle; the air already chill with a deadly hint of coming night.

Aladoree lay beside him on the black sand, sleeping. Looking at her slight, defenseless form, breathing so slowly and so quietly, he felt an aching throb in his chest. How many times, he wondered, as they lay there,

had death passed by on the yellow river, or stared from the wall of thorns—and spared their lives, and AKKA, and humanity's hope?

He tried to sit up, sank back with a gasp of pain. Every individual muscle in his body was stiffly rebellious. Yet he forced himself up, rubbed his painful limbs until some flexibility returned to them, and got unsteadily to his feet.

First he picked Aladoree up in his arms, still sleeping, and carried her higher on the bar, beyond the unseen peril that might strike from the shallows. He made a flimsy little screen of driftwood, to hide them, and found a heavy club; he waited by her, to watch until she woke.

With wary glance he scanned the tawny river, flowing away until the farther dark jungle wall was dim in red haze. He searched the bare waste of somber sand, the black thorn-barrier behind it; the ramparts of the black metropolis, miles up-river, just visible above the jungle. But it was out of the murky sky that danger came, gliding down on silent wings.

THE creature was low when he saw it, diving at the sleeping girl behind her little screen of branches. Somewhat it resembled a dragon-fly grown to monstrous size. It had four thin wings, spreading thirty feet. It was, he saw, like the creature that Giles Habibula had once battled for his bottle of wine.

He caught his breath, startled by

its strange and wicked beauty. The frail wings were blue and translucent; they glittered like thin sheets of dark sapphire. Ribs of scarlet veined them. The slim, tapered body was black, oddly and strikingly patched with bright yellow. The one enormous eye was like a jewel of polished jet.

A single pair of limbs stiffened under it; cruel yellow talons spread to clutch the girl's body. And its tail, a thin yellow whip, scorpion-like, armed with a terrible black barb, arched down to sting.

John Star leaped straight in the path of it, swung his club for the jet-black eye. But the brilliant wings tilted a little, the creature swerved up; it struck at him instead of the girl. His blow missed the solitary eye; the thin, pitiless lance of its sting came straight at him.

He flung his body down, twisting his blow to fend away the stabbing barb. He felt the impact as his club struck the whipping tail; the venomous point was driven a little aside, yet it grazed his shoulder with a flash of blinding pain.

Scrambling instantly back to his feet, nearly blind with searing pain, he dimly saw the creature rise and turn and glide back again, on translucent blue-and-scarlet wings. Again it dived, talons set. This time, he saw, the barbed tail was hanging; his club had broken it.

Staggered with agony, he aimed his blow again at the bright jet disk of the eye. And this time the crea-

ture did not swerve. It plunged straight at him, yellow talons grasping. In the last instant, dizzy with pain from its venom, he realized that the talons would strike him.

Fiercely, he sought to steady his reeling world; he put every ounce of his strength behind the heavy piece of driftwood, felt it crush solidly home against the huge black glittering disk. Then his senses dissolved in the acid of pain.

Vaguely, he knew that it was not flying with him. Dimly, he knew that it was floundering on the sand, dragging his body still locked in its talons. His last blow had been fatal. The creature was dying.

Presently the death-struggles ceased; the furry body collapsed upon him. The yellow talons, even in death, were set deep in his arm and shoulder. One by one, when the blinding pain began to ebb a little, he strained his fingers to open them, and he came at last to his feet, faint and ill and bleeding.

Even dead, the thing was beautiful. The narrow wings, spread unbroken on the black sand, were luminous sheets of ruby-veined sapphire. Only the reddened talons and the broken sting were hideous—and the head of it, pulped under his last blow.

WEAKLY, he reeled away from it, too faint even to pick up his club. He sank down beside Aladoree, still quietly breathing in the dead sleep of exhaustion, peacefully

unaware of the death that had been so near.

Sunk in a hopeless apathy of new fatigue and pain, at first he did not even move when he saw three tiny figures toiling along the flat black sand. They must be Jay Kalam and Hal Samdu and Giles Habibula; he knew they must have come alive, by some miracle of courage and endurance, through the drains and out of the yellow river. But he was too deep in exhaustion to feel any hope or interest.

He sat there, by the sleeping girl and the brilliant dead thing, aimlessly watching them come wearily over the black bar, out of hazy red distance.

Three strange, haggard men, each of them with a few tattered bits of cloth still clinging to a worn, exposure-browned body. Bearded men, long-haired, shaggily unkempt. They walked close together. Each of them carried a club or a thorn spear. Their sunken, gleaming eyes peered about with a fierce alert suspicion. They were like three dawn-men, hunting in the shadow of some early jungle; three elemental beasts, cautious and dangerous.

It was strange to think of them as survivors of the crushed and betrayed Legion of Space, the last fighting men of the once-proud System, left alone to defend it from the science of an alien star. Could these shaggy animals decide an interstellar war?

John Star at last found spirit to

stand, to shout and wave. They saw him, hurried to him over the bar.

Hal Samdu still carried the black mechanism from the tripod, slung about his great shoulders by its connecting wires. He had dived with it into the drains; burdened with it, he had fought the yellow river.

"Aladoree?" he rasped, hoarse, weary, anxious, stalking up ahead of the others.

"Asleep," John Star found energy for the one word, the gesture.

The giant dropped beside her, eagerly solicitous, a smile of relief on his haggard, red-bearded face.

"You carried her out?" he rasped. "And killed—that?"

John Star could only nod. His eyes had closed, but he knew that Jay Kalam and Giles Habibula were coming up. He heard the latter wheezing weakly:

"Ah, precious life! It's been an evil time, a fearful time! Washed through the stinking sewers like garbage, and flung to die amid the wicked horrors of the fearful yellow river. Ah, poor old Giles Habibula! It was a mortal evil day—"

His voice changed.

"Ah, the lass! The lass has not been harmed. And this wicked glittering monster! John must have killed it. . . . Ah, old Giles knows how you feel, lad! A mortal bitter time, we've all been through!"

His voice brightened again.

"This dead creature—the flesh of it is good to eat. 'Tis like the one I fought so mortal hard for my bottle

of wine—that precious wine I never got to taste! We must have a fire. I'm fearful weak from hunger. Ah, poor old Giles, dying of hunger—"

John Star drifted away, then, a second time, into blissful sleep.

IT WAS colder, when he woke. His body was numb and stiff, though a sheltered fire of driftwood blazed beside him. Dread night was coming apace; the sun's angry disk now completely gone, the sky a low dome of baleful murky twilight. Bitter wind blew across the river, toward the jungle.

Giles Habibula was by the fire, grilling meat he had cut from the dead flying thing. John Star felt gnawing hunger; it must have been the fragrance of the roast that awoke him. But he did not eat at once.

Jay Kalam and Hal Samdu were beside Aladoree, beyond the fire. The little machine that the giant had brought so far, they had taken apart. The pieces of it were spread out before them, on a flat slab of driftwood. Coils of wire and odds and ends of metal and black plastic.

He stood up, hastily, despite the stiffness of his body, and hurried to them. In their absorption, they did not look up. Before Aladoree was an odd little device, assembled from the black metal parts, from rudely carved fragments of wood. She was fingering the remaining bits of metal, anxiously, one by one, rejecting each with a little hopeless shake of her head, still desperately seeking.

"You're setting it up?" John Star whispered eagerly. "AKKA?"

"She's trying!" breathed Jay Kalam abstractedly.

John Star glanced across the black jungle-top, toward the towers and machines of the black metropolis, remote in the red twilight. It was sheer impossibility, he felt, that the crude little device on the sand should ever harm those colossal walls.

"I must have iron," said Aladoree. "A tiny bit of iron, the size of a nail, would do. But I must have it for the magnetic element. Except for that, there's everything I need. But there's no iron here."

SHE laid down the tiny device, hopelessly.

"We must find ore, then," said John Star. "Build a furnace, smelt it."

Jay Kalam shook his head gravely, wearily.

"We can't do that. No iron on the planet. The Medusæ, you know, first promised to conquer our System for the Purples, just for a ship-load of iron. In all our wanderings, I saw no trace of iron deposits."

"We can't build the weapon, then," Aladoree said slowly. "Not here. If we could only get back to the System."

"The ship is lying wrecked, somewhere on the bottom of the ocean."

Numb with bleak despair they stood there, shivering in the chill wind that came up across the river. Over the dark thorn-jungle they stared, at the walls and towers and unguessable mechanisms of the dark metropolis. Old before the dawn of man, it would stand invincible when the last man was gone.

From those far walls and towers, abruptly, green flame burned. They saw titanic forms rising, the black spider-shapes of the Medusæ's interstellar fliers. A monstrous swarm rose up as the far thunder of green-flaring rockets rolled over the jungle and the river, and vanished at last in the blood-red sky.

"Their fleet!" whispered Aladoree. "Flying away to the System, with all their hordes, to occupy our planets. Their fleet, already gone! If we had found a bit of iron— But it's too late. We've already failed."

Chapter Twenty-five

Wings Above the Walls

"**A**LL for the want of a mortal nail!" commented Giles Habibula, in a voice that might have softened the heart of a statue of iron.

"Ah, me! That the lack of a blessed nail could mean so much!"

He was huddled on the black sand, a heap of dejection, carelessly holding a smoking piece of meat on a stick, above the sheltered driftwood fire.

"Poor old Giles Habibula! Ah, that he should live to see such a fearful day! Better—ah, sweet life knows, far better—that he should have died as a blessed babe! Better that the law should have taken its cruel, pitiless course, that time on Venus!

"A fearful reward it is, in dear life's name, mortal fearful, for twenty years of loyal service in the Legion. Accused for a precious pirate. Imprisoned and starved and tortured! Ah, yes, driven out of his own native System, to this hideous world of frightful horror!

"Poisoned by the very mortal air, doomed to howling insanity and death by slow green rot. Hunted by a million mortal monsters. Forced

to scuttle like a rat through the wicked black city. Driven like a miserable rat to drown in the stinking sewers. Now face to face with a fearful death, in the cold of the dreadful night. And the one bottle of wine on the whole black continent smashed before he'd had a taste of it!

"Mortal me! It's more than a man can endure. Too mortal much, in life's dear name, for a poor old soldier of the Legion, sick and lame and feeble, with his wine spilled under his very eyes!

"And now, for the want of a nail, the whole human System is lost! Ah, me, for the lack of one precious bit of iron, all humanity doomed to die before the invasion of the monstrous Medusæ! Ah, good life knows, it's a mortal evil time! A mortal bitter time! Poor old Giles Habibula——"

There was a crackling sound from the driftwood fire, a whiff of bitter smoke. He stirred himself abruptly, rose with a final doleful wail:

"Ah, me! Misfortunes never come alone. Now the mortal meat is burned!"

And he went back to the bright-winged thing that John Star had killed, to cut another steak from its furry body.

By the glittering, sapphire-and-ruby wings that lay forlorn on the black sand, the others were standing in a dispirited little group, shivering in the increasing cold wind that blew out of the deepening red twilight.

From the river bar they were staring, beaten and beyond hope, at the walls and towers and machines of the black metropolis, looming weird against the darkling scarlet sky, above the dark thorn-jungle.

An overwhelming sense of failure, of the inevitable doom overtaking them and all humanity, rested oppressively upon them; despair held them in dead silence.

THE keen blue eyes that peered above Hal Samdu's red beard caught a black space flier—a colossal spider-ship of the Medusæ, riding eerie green jets—moving toward the somber walls above the yellow river. He pointed, silently followed it.

"Is that——?" John Star cried, with a sudden painful leap of his heart. "Beneath it—could it be—?"

"It is," Jay Kalam said gravely, "the *Purple Dream*!"

"Your ship?" cried Aladoree.

"Our ship. We left it wrecked, under the yellow sea, with Adam Ulnar on board."

"Adam Ulnar!" Her voice was edged with scorn. "Then he has gone back to his allies."

She looked at John Star oddly.

"It looks," he admitted, "as if he had. He could communicate with

the Medusæ by radio. He must have called them, got them to raise the ship and help repair it."

They watched the *Purple Dream*, flying under the vast black vanes of the Medusæ's flier, its tiny torpedo shape no more than a silver mote. Blue flame burst from its rockets as it approached the black city, and it slanted down athwart the red sky, the other huge machine hanging near above it, on green wings of distant thunder. It slowed; it came at last to rest on a tower of the black wall, in full, maddening view of them. The black ship landed close beside it.

For a few minutes they all stared at it, silent with the intensity of their desires.

"We must get that ship!" Jay Kalam whispered, at last.

"It would take us to the System," breathed Aladoree, voiceless. "We could find iron. We could set up AKKA. We could save at least a remnant of humanity."

"We could try," agreed Jay Kalam. "They would follow us from here, of course. With those weapons that throw flaming suns. The Belt of Peril is still above us; we'd have to get through that again. All their invasion fleet will be guarding our System now. And the hordes of them, in that new fortress on the Moon. . . . But," he whispered, "we could try."

"But how?" rasped Hal Samdu hoarsely.

"That's the first question. It's

miles to where the ship is, across the jungle. On top of that smooth wall, a mile high. Nothing could reach it but a flying thing. And that black flier is beside it, apparently to guard it. How?"

His eyes fell, then, on John Star, who was staring fixedly at the wings of the creature he had killed, glittering beside them on the black sand.

"What is it, John?" he demanded, his low voice strangely tense.

"Nothing could reach it except a flying thing?" John Star said slowly, absently. "But I think—I think I see a way."

"You mean—to fly?"

JAY KALAM searched his intent, haggard face; puzzled, he glanced at the long splendid wings at which John Star was staring, sheets of sapphire, veined with red.

"Yes. I used to fly," said John Star. "At the Legion Academy. Gliding. One year I was gliding champion of the Academy."

"Build a glider, you mean?"

"It could be done—I believe it could. Those wings are long enough. Strong. The thing's body was larger than mine. And the wind is blowing across the river, toward the jungle and the walls. There would be rising currents."

"Here are the wings. But the rest—?"

"Not much would be needed. The wings are already ribbed. We need posts to brace them together, but we could cut canes in the jungle.

And twist fiber cords to lash them together."

"There isn't much time."

"No. It will soon be too cold to work. Just a few hours. But we've no shelter, no weapons. We'd never live through the night. No, Jay, it seems the only thing."

"Yes!" Jay Kalam spoke suddenly, accepting the idea. "Yes, we shall try. But it's a desperate undertaking, John. You realize that. An uncertain craft—if we can build one that will fly at all. The danger you will be discovered. The difficulty of getting on board; and then getting the better of Adam Ulnar, with only a thorn dagger. Even if you get safely to the controls, there's that spidership on guard."

"I know," John Star said soberly. "But it seems the only thing."

So they set out, in the face of every conceivable obstacle and danger, to do the impossible, first searching for tools, for sharp-edged shells, for rocks that would serve as knives and hammers, for the iron-hard jungle thorns.

Measuring the bright wings, John Star drew on all his old knowledge for a design into which they would fit, sketched it with charcoal on a slab of bark.

Then, in increasing cold and darkness, with the glistening wings, with struts and braces shaped from jungle cane, with twisted fiber cables and members shaped from the tough thorn wood, he labored hour after hour to construct the

glider, while the four others roved the beach and the jungle fringe for materials.

They did not rest until it was finished, a simple thing, frail and slight. Merely the four bright wings, braced together, with fiber thongs to fasten them to John Star's body. They bound it on him, and he ran with it a few times down the sand bar, into the bitter wind, the others hauling him with a rope of twisted bark, to try its balance.

HE THRUST two thorn-daggers into his belt, then, and fastened a long black spear to the frame beside him. He ran down the sand, the others tugging on the rope. He rose, cast it off.

His strange craft came up unsteadily, swerved and dived toward the sand. He righted it with a desperate twist of his body—its only control was by shifting his weight. And he soared up in the strong current that rose over the jungle.

He looked down, once, at the tiny group on the bar of black sand—three ragged men and a weary girl whose hopes had sent him up. Three tiny figures, alone in the red dusk. He waved a hand; they waved back.

Heart aching queerly, he soared on. He could not fail them, for they would surely die unless he took the ship. Jay and Hal and Giles—and Aladoree! He could not let them die, even if their safety had not meant the survival of humanity. Over the black thorns, now. Sheer

disaster if he fell here. When he found time to look again, the four were lost in the shadow of the jungle-edges.

His old skill came back swiftly. He found his old elation again in the sweeping, soaring flight; there was a lifting joy even in the difficulty of managing his tricky craft, even in defying the black jungle.

Keeping within the rising currents above the jungle's edge, he worked steadily up-river, toward black and mighty walls—grown vague, now, in the thickening red gloom, the *Purple Dream* no longer visible. At first he had been doubtful of the frail machine, but he soared with increasing confidence, presently fearing only that the wind should change, or the Medusæ discover him. Then unexpected danger came.

Up from the black forest came gliding another creature, like the one which had supplied his wings. It circled him; it climbed above him; it dived at him again and again, sting and talons ready, until he knew that it meant to attack.

He shouted at it and vainly waved his arms. At first it seemed alarmed, but then it dived again, nearer than before.

He unbound the black spear with cold-stiffened fingers, and set it before him. The thing dived a last time, slender sting curved, yellow talons set. It came straight at him. He met it squarely, spear aimed at its single black eye.

The point went home. But the rushing body struck his fragile craft with a force that made its flimsy structure creak. Flung off balance, John Star slipped toward the jungle, after the body of his attacker as it plummeted down.

Equilibrium recovered, just clear of the thorns, he rose again. But the fiber-bound frame had been weakened and warped by the impact. It snapped and groaned alarmingly as he soared, its flight more startling and unstable than ever.

But at last he reached the stronger, gusty current that rose against the walls of the black city. Up he was carried, up, fearful that each moment would see his bright wings folding, his body spinning back to the yellow river.

So he came at last level with the tower. He made out the *Purple*

Dream, a tiny spindle of silver, lying on the huge black platform in the vast shadow of the spider-ship that guarded her. The nightmare city stretched away beyond; the machines on the high platforms were an army of black giants, crouching in the red twilight.

Over the landing stage he swept, and down.

The gust carried him too fast, almost he was swept over the wall and into the city; the glider cracked and fluttered. His body was slowed and shuddering with the probing cold, numb and unresponsive.

But his feet touched black metal in the shadow of the *Purple Dream*. He slipped free of the binding thongs, and discarded the bright wings. He ran silently toward the airlock, thorn dagger in hand, alert for the unknown obstacles ahead.

Chapter Twenty-six

Traitor's Turn

THE air-lock, to his relief, was open, the accommodation ladder down to the metal platform. He was up the steps in an instant, across the lowered valve, and upon the long, narrow deck inside, beneath the curve of the hull, where he came face to face with Adam Ulnar.

At their parting, months before, on the bottom of the yellow sea,

Adam Ulnar had seemed a beaten man, shattered, crushed with the discovery that he and his cause had been betrayed by the Medusæ, broken with the knowledge that he had unwittingly betrayed mankind.

He was different now.

Always tall, impressive of figure, he was once more erect, confident, coolly resolute. Freshly shaven, long white hair combed and shining, neatly groomed in Legion uniform, he met John Star with a hearty smile

of surprised welcome on his handsome face.

"Why—why, John! You surprised me. Though I had hoped——"

He started forward, extending a well-kept hand in greeting. And John Star leaped to meet him, menacing his throat with drawn thorn dagger.

"Keep still!" he whispered harshly. "Not a sound!"

He felt the contrast between them. A strange figure he presented, he knew; grimy, exposure-blackened, haggard from fatigue, half naked. With shaggy head and many months' growth of beard he must look more beast than man. An uncouth animal, facing a polished, confident, powerful man.

"Adam Ulnar," he breathed again, fiercely, "I'm going to kill you. I think you well deserve to die. Have you anything to say?"

He waited, shuddering and stiff with cold. Suddenly he was afraid that he could not strike this serene, smiling man, whose personality roused instinctive admiration and quick pride in their kinship—for all his black treason against the Green Hall.

"John!" protested the other, his voice urgently persuasive. "You misunderstand. I'm really delighted that you came. My unfortunate nephew told me, a little while ago, that you had been here, and had drowned in the sewers. Knowing you and your companions, I could scarcely believe that all of you had perished. I was

still hoping to be of some assistance to you."

"Assistance!" echoed John Star harshly, still threatening his throat with the dagger. "Assistance! When you are responsible for everything that's wrong!"

"I want all the more, my boy, to help you, because I realize my own responsibility. It's true that you and I have differing political views. But I never had any desire to help the Medusæ to colonize our planets. I have no other purpose, now, than to undo what I've done."

"How's that?" demanded John Star, with a sick fear that this smooth, compelling voice might win his confidence, and betray it again.

Adam Ulnar made a gesture to include the ship about them.

"I've already done something. You must admit that. I've had the cruiser raised and repaired, in the hope that it might carry AKKA back to the System in time to avert disaster."

"But the Medusæ raised it."

"**O**F COURSE. They tricked me; it was my turn—if I could do it. I got back in communication with them, and asked to join them. I agreed to aid them with my military skill, in the conquest of the System. And I asked them to raise the *Purple Dream*, fit it up for my maintenance.

"They raised the cruiser, and repaired her, well enough, but I'm afraid they haven't a very high opinion of humanity. They don't seem to trust me as far as we Purples

trusted them. The black flier outside has been standing guard over me, day and night. You know the sort of armament it has—those guns that fire atomic vortices."

"You've seen Eric?" demanded John Star suspiciously. "He's with you?"

"No, John. He isn't with me now. He told me how the Medusæ had made him try to force the girl to reveal her secret. He told me all about your arrival and escape. And he told me how he went back to warn the Medusæ—he didn't think you had a chance to get away, and he hoped to earn their favors."

"The cowardly beast!" muttered John Star. "Where is he?"

Adam Ulnar nodded, a shadow of pain on his handsome face.

"That's what he was, John. A coward. Even though his name was Ulnar. A pitiful coward. He made the first, foolish alliance with the Medusæ, because he was a coward, because he was afraid to trust my own plans for the revolution.

"I knew, then, John, that I'd made a mistake. I knew it was you who should have been Emperor, not Eric. Even then, it might not have been too late—if you had been willing to take the job."

"But I wasn't."

"No, you weren't. And perhaps you were right, John. I'm losing my faith in aristocracy. Our family is old, John; our blood is the best in the System. Yet Eric was a craven fool. And the three men with you

—common soldiers of the Legion—have shown fine metal.

"It hasn't been easy for me to change, John. But I had time to think, under that yellow sea. And I have changed. From now on, I shall support the Green Hall."

"Yes?" John Star's voice was hard with skepticism. "But answer my question. Where is Eric? Both of you—"

"Eric will never betray mankind again, John." The voice was edged with pain. "When I found how he had sent the Medusæ after you, when you were escaping—I killed him." He winced. "My own blood as he was—I killed him. I broke his neck with my own hands."

"You—killed . . . Eric?"

JOHN STAR whispered the words very slowly, his haggard eyes anxiously scanning Adam Ulnar's face, now stern with its pain.

"Yes, John. And killed part of myself with him, for I loved him. Loved him! You're the heir, now, to the Purple Hall, John."

"Wait!" snapped John Star, savagely, pressing the dagger closer, while he searched the gauntly handsome, pain-shadowed face.

"Very well, John."

With a curious little smile, Adam Ulnar folded his arms, backed to the wall, stood watching him.

"You don't trust me, John. You couldn't, after all that has happened. Go ahead, then; drive your weapon home, if you feel that you must. I

shan't defend myself. And as I die I shall be proud that your name is Ulnar."

John Star came toward him, crude weapon lifted. He gazed into the fine, clear eyes. They did not waver. They seemed sincere. He could not kill this man! Though doubt still lurked in his heart, he lowered the black thorn-blade.

"I'm glad you didn't strike, John," Adam Ulnar said, smiling again. "Because I think you will need me. Even though we have the cruiser repaired, there are obstacles ahead of us, yet.

"The black flier, here, is on guard. If we get away from that, they can send a whole fleet after us. The Belt of Peril is still above—it is weaker, I've recently learned, above the poles of the planet, but even there it's a very effective barrier.

"Even if some succession of miracles let us get to the System, humanity is already crushed, disorganized. We would receive no aid; we might be attacked, even, by miserable human wretches already insane from the red gas.

"We'd have to deal with their fleet, and the black fort on the Moon, from which they are shelling all the System with that red gas. Eric says they dismantled all their gas plants here, months ago, and moved them to the Moon—that must be why the concentration of the gas is getting so weak in the air here.

"Already, John, we may be too late. We may be the sole survivors,

with no chance of surviving very long, ourselves. If we're going to try at all, we've very little time."

"I'll trust you, Adam," said John Star, striving to put down a lingering doubt. He added swiftly: "We must pick up Aladoree and the others. They're down by the river, without shelter from the cold, or any real weapons. They'd soon die in this night!"

"To move now with that black flier on guard," protested Adam Ulnar, "would be suicide. We must wait some opportunity—"

"WE CAN'T wait!" He was harsh with desperation. "We've the proton gun. If we took them by surprise—"

Adam Ulnar shook his head.

"They dismantled the needle, John. Removed it. The cruiser is unarmed. They took even the racks of hand weapons. Your thorn is the only weapon we have—against those suns they throw!"

John Star set his jaw.

"There's one way!" he muttered grimly. "A way to move so fast they'd have very little time."

"How's that?"

"We can take off with the geodynes."

"The geodynes!" It was a startled cry. "They can't be used for a take-off, John. You know that. They can't be used safely in any atmosphere. We'd fuse the hull with friction-heat! Or crash into the ground like a meteor!"

"We'll use the geodynes," said John Star, harshly. "I'm a pilot. Can you run the generators?"

ADAM ULNAR looked at him for a moment, strangely; then he smiled, took John Star's hand, and squeezed it with a quick strong pressure.

"Very good, John. I can operate the generators. We shall take off with the geodynes. . . . I wish you had been my nephew."

John Star felt a responding emotion, checked by that little doubt which refused to die. So many had trusted this tall commanding man; his treason had been so appalling!

They parted. In the little bridge-room, John Star inspected the array of familiar instruments; he tested them swiftly, one by one. All the iron, he saw, had been replaced by other metals. But everything seemed to function as it should. He peered through a tele-periscope.

The Medusæ's guarding flier lay beside them, one vast strange vane extending overhead. Against the dim red glow lingering in the murky west, it loomed evil and gigantic; it looked more than ever like some hybrid spider-thing, swollen to Cyclopean dimensions.

The low, clear music of the geodyne generators became audible, and rose to a keening whine. Adam Ulnar's voice came crisp from the bulkhead speaker:

"Generators ready, sir, at full power."

John Star's brief, grim smile at the "sir" was checked again, by sharp mistrust. Swiftly he estimated the position of the bar on the river, planning the thing he meant to do. For the slightest error, he realized, meant instant annihilation.

Fingers on the keys, he peered back into the tele-periscope.

He remembered the air-lock, then, and touched the button that closed it. That act, he knew, might betray them. But if he had left it open, mere air-resistance would have torn it away.

Tensely he waited, one second, two, and three, for the motors to work. A long, slender black cone projected abruptly from the huge black sphere of the flier's belly. It swung toward them. A weapon!

Four! Five! He heard the clang of the closing valve and touched a key.

The tower platform and the black flier vanished instantaneously. Yet, since that unimaginable force was applied equally to the entire ship, there had been no perceptible shock; the geodynes had flung them away with a rapidity incalculable—and perilous!

Dim crimson gloom spun about them. A black shadow met them.

Driven with lightning speed to meet this desperate emergency, John Star's fingers leaped across the keys. Years of training now found their test. He had often imagined, in the days at the Academy, that such a thing might be done, half longing

for the chance to try it, yet half fearful that the chance might come.

After the merest instant of acceleration, he reversed the geodynes for another split second, to check an inconceivable velocity.

- And the *Purple Dream*, a moment before upon the black wall, was plunging down toward the flat yellow river, still at a frightful speed, her hull incandescent from friction with the air. Desperately, he flung down the rocket firing keys, to check the remaining momentum before they struck.

A desperate game, this playing with the curvature of space itself, in the very atmosphere of a planet. Human daring and human skill, pitted against titanic forces. Savage elation filled him. He was winning—if the rockets stopped them in time!

Down on a dark sand bar hurtled the incandescent ship. Down to the bank of a freezing river. Rockets thundering at full power to the last moment, she struck the sand heavily; she plowed into it, steam mantling her red-hot hull.

By the narrowest margin—safe!

Safe, at any rate, until the Medusæ had time to strike.

Hot valves flung open. Four passengers came aboard. Half-naked, haggard passengers, dead-weary, stiff with cold. The air-lock clanged behind them; the *Purple Dream* thundered away again, blue blasts licking black sand.

Geodynes cut in at once, she plowed with an utterly reckless velocity upward through the dim red afterglow. John Star felt a moment of wild triumph, before he recalled the belt of fortress satellites ahead; recalled the six light years of interstellar space beyond; remembered the fleets of the Medusæ, guarding the System, and the occupation force waiting in their new black citadel on the Moon.

Behind, he saw huge machines stirring along the walls and towers of that nightmare metropolis. A full score of the spider-ships lifted on jets of green fire, to pursue. More than a match for the *Purple Dream* in speed, armed with those weapons that fired suns of annihilating atomic flame!

Chapter Twenty-seven

The Joke on Man

THE red murk above grew thin. The *Purple Dream* burst upward into the freedom of space, where her incandescent hull

could cool. The planet drew away beneath them, a huge and featureless half-moon of dull and baleful orange-red.

Up from it followed the swarm of spider-ships. The recklessly sud-

den start of the cruiser had left them too far behind to use their fearful weapons at once. But swiftly they closed the gap.

Ahead was the Belt of Peril.

Sinister web of unseen rays spread from the six trailing forts in space. Mighty secret of an elder science. Dread zone of unknown radiation that melted molecular bonds, to let stout metal and tortured human flesh dissolve away into mist of free atoms.

Remembering Adam Ulnar's new information that it was weaker over the poles, John Star set his course northward. He drove the cruiser at the utmost power of the geodynamics, sick already with his dread of the barrier, sick at thought of what Aladoree must suffer within it. But there was no choice.

The *Purple Dream* plunged into the wall of unseen radiation, John Star alone on the bridge.

Fiery mist swirled suddenly away from his body, from bulkheads and instruments. Mist of excited or ionized atoms, dancing points of rainbow light. White, searing pain probed his body, screamed in his ears, flamed before his eyes. Atom by atom, the ship and his body were dissolving away. Limp with suffering, he fought to keep awareness, to keep the hurtling cruiser within the narrow passage of partial wave-interference above the pole.

His body, grown luminous and half-transparent, was immersed in shining agony. He could scarcely

move the keys. Red flame burned away his very brain.

Part of him was startled, inexplicably, by a sudden laugh, strange and harsh and wild. A mad laugh. Lunatic! It shook him with a sickness of new horror, for he knew that the one who had laughed was himself.

He had just thought of a terrific joke!

Like those survivors of the first expedition, the sane part of him knew, he was going mad! Long exposure to the red climate-control gas had overtaken him at last. Gone mad! And doomed to die of slow green decay!

He was laughing. Laughing at a monstrous joke. The joke was the death of the System, by madness and green leprosy. And its point, the death of those who tried to save mankind, by the same slow decay. A fearful joke! So terribly funny!

MILLIONS, all the human billions, laughing foolishly, inanely, as their flesh turned to foul green rot and fell away. And those who had thought to save them—the very first to die. What a cosmic joke! Men laughing at the face of red pain. Men and women laughing while their flesh turned green! Laughing, until their bodies fell apart, and they laughed at death!

What a universal joke!

His hands slipped away from the keys; he was doubled up with laughter, literally and physically.

Would the Medusæ see the point, as they rained the bombs of red gas on the planets? Or was their monstrous race too old for laughter? Had they forgotten how to laugh, before the Earth was born? Or had those green and palpitating bodies the power of laughter, ever?

He must ask Adam Ulnar. He could communicate with the Medusæ. He could find out. He could tell them the joke—the cosmic joke, a whole race laughing as it died.

He tried to stand up, but laughter wouldn't let him rise. He rubbed his hands together. They felt dry, papery. Already the scales were forming on his skin. His flesh would flake away until his bones were bare. He was a joke, himself! What a joke!

He lay on the floor and laughed.

Dimly, then, he became aware of something he must do. Red flame lapped at his brain; he was sick with suffering. And there were others. Others? Yes, Jay and Hal and Giles. And Aladoree! He could not fail them! But what was the thing he must do?

It was to drive the cruiser on, he remembered vaguely, through the Belt of Peril. Then this intolerable pain would cease. It would leave the others. Aladoree! So beautiful, so weary. He must not let her suffer this!

He fought the laughter. He tried to forget the joke. He battled the agony that consumed his nerves. Doggedly, he dragged his limp body back to the controls.

On through the radiation barrier he drove the *Purple Dream*. He watched the semi-transparent instruments through a haze of colored light. He moved the keys with shining hands. He was shaken again and again with laughter.

He knew, finally, that they were beyond the barrier. The red pain faded; the unearthly luminescence departed from the instruments; the dancing rainbow glitter slowly dissipated from the air. But still he sobbed with laughter.

Jay Kalam came finally into the bridge, haggard and pain-drawn, but calmly efficient. Already, since they had passed the barrier, he had shaved and found a new uniform. He was neat again, lean and brown, gravely handsome.

"Well done, John," he said quietly. "I'll take the bridge a while. I've just been talking with the Commander about our chances of outrunning the fleet behind us. He says——"

JOHN STAR had struggled desperately to listen, to keep silent and understand what Jay Kalam said. But the joke—it was so terribly funny. He burst into mad laughter again, a wild tempest of laughter that sprawled him on the floor.

He must try to tell Jay Kalam about the joke. Jay Kalam could appreciate it. Because, very soon, he would be laughing too, as his own body turned to green decay. But, for the racking laughter, he could

not speak at all, form any words.

"John!" he heard Jay Kalam cry, aghast. "What's the matter? Are you—hurt?"

Jay Kalam helped him to his feet; held him until he could stop laughing and shake the tears out of his eyes.

"A joke!" he gasped. "An immense joke! Men laughing as they die!"

"John! John!" The grave voice was faint with inexpressible horror. "John, what is it?"

He struggled to forget the joke. There was something else he had to tell Jay, something else not quite so funny. He checked another fit of sobbing laughter.

"Jay," he whispered, "I'm going mad. It's the red gas. I can feel it on my skin, and I can't stop laughing—though I guess it isn't really funny. You must take the controls. And have Hal lock me in the brig—"

"Why, John!"

"Please lock me up. I might—I might even harm Aladoree. . . . And go on to save the System."

The laughter came back; he clung to Jay Kalam, sobbing out: "Wait a little, Jay. Let me tell you the joke. So very, very funny. Millions of men laughing—while they die. Little children, even, laughing while their flesh decays. It's the biggest joke of all, Jay. A cosmic joke on the whole human race."

Laughter overcame him. He fell shaking to the floor.

The next he knew, beyond laughter and delirium, he was strapped to a berth in a cabin, and Giles Habibula was bathing his body with a pale, luminously blue solution, evidently the same which Adam Ulnar's close-mouthed physician had used on the wound where the liquid gas had burned him, long ago in the Purple Hall.

"Giles," he whispered, and his voice came hoarse and weak.

"Ah, lad!" wheezed Giles Habibula, smiling. "You know me, lad, at last! It's mortal time you did. You'll laugh no more—promise old Giles?"

"Laugh. What have I to laugh at?" Vaguely he remembered some great joke, but what it was, he could not say.

"Nothing, lad!" gasped Giles, relieved. "Not a precious thing. And you'll be on your blessed feet again, lad, by the time we reach the System."

"The System? . . . Oh, I remember. Does Jay think we can escape the black fleet?"

"Ah, lad, we left them long ago. We flew close to the red dwarf star. They could not follow—its gravitational field stopped their propelling mechanisms. Some of them fell in it. So did we—mortal near! Ah, a wicked fight we had to drive clear of it, lad."

"**S**O I WAS laughing? . . . I almost remember. I thought that red gas had got me. But that doesn't

seem so funny. Am I sane again, Giles?"

"Ah, yes, you seem to be, lad. Just now. Adam Ulnar had this solution. The things made it up, to a prescription he had, while they were repairing the ship. It neutralizes the gas—if one has not been exposed too mortal long. The fearful green scales went from your skin days ago. But we were afraid—"

"Did any of the others—"

The wheezing voice fell. "Yes, lad. The precious lass—"

"Aladoree?" Pain throbbed in John Star's hoarse cry.

"Ah, yes. All the rest of us escaped; we all used this solution. But the dear lass caught it when you did, lad, in that fearful Belt of Peril—the shock of that radiation seemed to bring it on."

"How is she, Giles?"

"I don't know, lad." He shook his head. "The evil green is all cleared from her precious skin. But still she is not herself. She lies, as you lay, in a dead trance we can't wake her from. She was mortal weak and weary, you know, lad, when it took her."

"Ah, lad, it's bad. Mortal bad. If she doesn't wake she cannot build the blessed weapon. And all our trouble has been in vain. Ah, it's a wicked time! I like the lass, lad. Dear life knows I'd hate to see her die!"

"I—I—" whispered John Star, through his agony of apprehension

and despair. "I—like her, too, Giles."

And he sobbed.

John Star was able to return to the bridge by the time they entered the outskirts of the System, passing Pluto and Neptune. All the familiar planets, they saw in the tele-periscope, had turned a dreadful red. Even Earth was a dull spark of sinister crimson.

"Red," breathed Jay Kalam, his lifeless tone edged with horror. "The air of every planet is full of the red gas. I'm afraid we're too late, John."

"Even if we aren't," John Star whispered bitterly. "Aladoree is still no better."

"We'll land on earth, anyhow. Find a piece of iron. And wait. Perhaps she'll wake—before the last man is dead."

"Perhaps. Though her pulse, Giles says—" He broke off, and muttered fiercely: "But she can't die, Jay! She can't!"

THEY were slipping past the Moon, five days later, toward Earth. Aladoree still lay unconscious, her strong heart and her breath grown desperately slow. Her frail body, weakened by exhaustion, by captivity and torture, by months of exposure to the red gas, was fighting desperately for life itself. The others watched her, kept her warm. They bathed her lax body in the neutralizing solution, helped her swallow a little broth or water when

she could. They could do no more. The rest was up to her.

The Moon was a red world of menace. John Star scanned it through a tele-periscope. Naked since before the birth of Man, its rugged mountains were shrouded now in deadly crimson gas; the new human cities were mounds of lifeless ruin. On a bare plateau of lava, he saw the Medusæ's fortress!

Unearthly citadel! A replica of the black metropolis on their own doomed planet. Tremendous walls and towers of that black, enduring alloy, bristling with fantastic black machines—the instruments of a science that had survived through uncounted ages, had conquered many worlds.

"The hordes of them are waiting there," said Jay Kalam somberly.

"Manufacturing the red gas. Bombarding the planets with shells of it. And their invasion fleet is stationed there. If they discover us—"

His voice fell. He had seen the same thing that shocked John Star with horror. A flaring burst of cold green flame above a black landing stage. A black flier rising, following them toward Earth!

"Perhaps they have already. But we may have time to land ahead of them, and look for a piece of iron."

"But Aladoree is still in that dreadful trance," John Star muttered. "Unless she wakes, to build AKKA, we have no weapon."

On they plunged, toward the red murky Earth, fearfully watching the black spider-ship crossing after them from the newly crimson Moon.

Chapter Twenty-eight

The Green Beast

INTO the atmosphere of Earth, red-hazed with poison now, the *Purple Dream* dropped, over western North America, to land at last by the Green Hall, on the brown mesa beneath the mile-high, rugged Sandias.

John Star volunteered to leave the cruiser, to look for iron. There had

been none aboard when the ship came back into their possession. Space-craft are non-magnetic, since magnetic fields interfere with the operation of the geodyne; and the Medusæ, refitting the vessel, had removed the few bits of precious iron and steel from the instruments.

"Carry this," Jay Kalam told him, and gave him his old thorn dagger. "And be cautious if you meet men.

They may be mad, dangerous. . . . And hurry. We must get iron, and slip away, somewhere, before the black ship comes. We must hide, and wait for Aladoree to wake."

Dropping outside the air-lock, John Star paused to stare in horror at what remained of the System's proud and splendid capitol.

The sky was clouded with a scarlet murk, through which the mid-afternoon sun burned with a blood-red, evil light. Bare mesas and cragged mountains were turned strange and grim and incredibly desolate under the dreadful illumination.

The Green Hall had been destroyed by a great shell from the Moon.

On the edge of the grounds, where once had been wide, inviting lawns, a ragged crater yawned, rimmed with torn, raw rock. Beyond the pit the building lay in colossal ruin, a mountain of shattered emerald glass, from which protruded skeletal arms of twisted, rusting steel.

A moment he waited, horror-struck. Then, remembering the urgent need of haste, he plunged forward through a rank growth of weeds, through the bare skeletons of trees that the liquid gas must have killed, across dead lawns piled with rocks flung from the crater and shattered fragments of green glass.

Curious, he soon had cause to reflect, how hard it is to find even a nail when it must be had. He found

assorted metal objects: a bronze lamp-stand, a little figurine of cast lead, the charred, twisted aluminum of a wrecked air-sled. Even a great steel girder flung from the building, many times too heavy to carry.

He hurried on, desperately searching the devastated grounds for any fragment of iron small enough to move, with an occasional anxious glance at the lurid sky. If the Medusæ had seen them, if the black ship was coming to attack them—

He stumbled around a great heap of broken green glass, and came face to face with green horror.

IT HAD been a man. A gigantic man. It must have survived through the days of terror by sheer brute strength. Nearly seven feet tall, its body half naked, half clad in the ragged, filthy fragments of a Legion uniform—the uniform of the Green Hall Guards. Its skin was a mass of bleeding sores, scabbed and crusted horribly with hard green flakes. Red-rimmed eyes, green-clouded, hideous; stared from the horror of its face, half sightless. Its lips were gone. With naked fangs it was gnawing avidly at a fresh red bone that John Star knew, shudderingly, to be a human humerus.

Sight of this man-beast, crouching, gnawing, snarling, sickened him with pitying horror. For it meant far more than one man's fate. It epitomized the doom of all humanity, under invasion by an older and more able race—a wise, efficient race,

now proved by the crucial test better fitted to survive.

Involuntarily he had cried out at sight of that green, doomed beast. Then, realizing the danger, he tried to slip away. But it had already become aware of him. It made a curious, half-vocal, questioning sound—hoarse and flat and queer, for its vocal cords were evidently too far decayed for articulation. The red-rimmed, clouded eyes peered hideously, and found him. It came toward him, lumbering, bestial.

"Stand back!" he shouted sternly, tension of panic in his voice.

The effect of his sharp command was curious. For that shambling thing straightened suddenly to military erectness. It came to attention. Stiffly it raised an unspeakable, green-crusted paw in salute. But that was no more than a mechanical reaction left over from its forgotten humanity. It slumped back into the same stooping posture; it lumbered on toward him.

"Attention!" he shouted again. "Halt!"

A moment it paused, and then came on faster. Formless, protesting sounds spewed from its lipless mouth. And John Star stood, faint with horror, trying to understand its cries, until it uttered an abrupt, eager, animal squeal, and broke into a crouched and stumbling run.

He knew, then, that it was stalking him for food.

Swiftly he looked behind him for a path of escape; he realized with

a wave of sick apprehension that it had trapped him. Its animal cunning was not yet gone. Mountains of broken green glass hemmed him in. He must face it.

True, he had the black thorn. But he was not so strong, he knew, as he had been before his own long sickness. And this avid, mewing animal was well over twice his weight. The green decay, apparently, had not yet greatly wasted away its strength.

He hoped, as they came to grips, that the tricks of combat he had learned in the Legion Academy would make up his disadvantages. But as one horny, green-scaled paw seized his dagger wrist in a clever, cruel hold, he knew that it had once been another Legionnaire. Its crazed brain had not forgotten how to fight.

THE dagger dropped from his paralyzed grasp. Foul green arms locked him in a crushing embrace. Then it tried an old trick of his own. A knee in his back, the other locked over his thighs; his shoulders twisted, twisted, until his back would break.

He struggled vainly in the merciless hold, blind with pain and panic. The hard green scales were harsh against his body; fetor of decomposition sickened him. His efforts failed, and he felt a giddy sickness.

Naked fangs slashed at his shoulder; the thing made an eager whine. It was hungry.

Sheer desperation brought his old

cool composure back, then. Through the mist of agony he imagined himself back at the Academy. He smelled the reek of leather and rubbing alcohol and stale sweat. He heard an instructor's bored, nasal monotone: "Twist your body, *so*; drive your elbow into the plexus, *so*; slip your arm here, *so*; then lock your leg and turn."

He did it, as the dry old voice whispered in his memory, hardly aware where he was, knowing only that the torturing pain would cease when he had done it, and he would be free to search for a nail.

Snap!

He rose slowly, beside that quivering mass of greenish decay. He staggered on again among the shattered Green Hall's ruins, scanning the battered earth. He must hurry! If the black flier came, . . . It was a child's toy that caught his eye. A rusty, broken little engine that could no longer move its tiny burden—but might yet save the System.

He tore the shaft out of it, assured himself that it was good gray iron, and hastened back toward the cruiser.

Clambering over a heap of broken green glass, he looked up, and saw the black spider-ship. It was slanting down, across the red and murky sky.

At a dogged, weary run, he staggered back into view of the *Purple Dream*. Tiny torpedo shape of silver, a pygmy in the shadow of the huge, black-vaned machine plunging down on hot green jets

above the dark Sandias. It was still beyond the yawning crater, a quarter mile away.

Hopelessly, a needle-pain of exhaustion stabbing at his heart, he stumbled on. The cruiser was unarmed; the weapons on the black flier could annihilate it in an instant.

WONDERING dimly, as he ran, he saw a little group appear on the lowered valve of the air-lock, and hurry down the accommodation ladder. Jay Kalam and Hal Samdu and Giles Habibula, he recognized them, carrying the inert figure of Aladoree.

The valve closed above them; and Adam Ulnar had not appeared.

They ran away from the cruiser; evidently it was about to take off with Adam Ulnar at the controls. But why? Still running grimly on, John Star remembered his old doubt. Had his famous kinsman turned again? Had he put the others off to go back to the *Méduse*? John Star could scarcely believe that. Adam Ulnar had seemed sincere. But—

Then the *Purple Dream* moved.

It plunged forward in the fastest take-off he had ever witnessed. It leaped away so swiftly that his eyes lost it. They caught it again, flashing toward the spider-flier, its hull already incandescent.

Even as he realized that it was driven, not by the comparatively feeble rockets, but by the terrific power of the geodynes, it struck the round black belly of the enemy craft

with a burst of blinding light.

Flaming, the black invader fell with a curious deliberation out of the red sky. It struck the barren slopes of the Sandias, rolled down them, still looking queerly like a black and monstrous spider in the slow agony of death.

John Star's old, haunting doubt was gone.

"You are the last Ulnar," Jay Kalam greeted him with a solemn new respect, when he came up to the lonely little group on the edge of the mesa. "Adam Ulnar said he was trying to pay a debt. And he told me to tell you, John, that he hoped you would be happy in the Purple Hall."

John Star dropped on his knees by the limp, white-faced girl.

"Aladoree! How is she?"

"Ah, me, lad," dolefully wheezed Giles Habibula, fixing a pillow under her head, "she seems no better. No better! She may never——"

They tried to make her comfortable, under a little shelter made from the branches of a shattered

tree. They found rude clubs to defend her if the green beasts should find them. Hal Samdu and Giles Habibula went to search for food and water; they returned in the dim and lurid sunset, empty-handed.

"Mortal me!" wailed Giles Habibula. "Here we are lost in a fearful desert, all death and dead ruin, without food or drink for ourselves or the lass! Ah, me! And frightful, mewing creatures are roving all about us, hunting for mortal human food. Ah, it's a wicked time!"

The Moon came up in the scarlet dusk, a huge and blood-red globe, above the rugged ramparts of the dark Sandias. And they saw, against its pocked and sinister face, a little cluster of tiny black specks, creeping about, growing, expanding. A little swarm of black insects that became steadily and ominously larger.

"A fleet coming down from the moon," whispered Jay Kalam. "Since that one ship did not return. . . . A whole fleet of their spider-ships, coming to make sure we are destroyed. They'll be here in an hour."

Chapter Twenty-nine

AKKA—and After

SHE must wake," whispered John Star. "Or she never will!"

"I'm afraid so," agreed Jay Ka-

lam. "I imagine they'll destroy the very mesa, with those atomic suns. To be sure we trouble them no more. . . . But there's no way——"

"She must wake!" John Star muttered again.

With a sort of fierce tenderness, he lifted Aladoree from where she lay. Her body was limp, relaxed. Her eyes were closed, her pale, full lips parted a little, her fine skin very white. He could scarcely feel her pulse; her breath was very slow. Deep, deep, she was sunk in the coma in which she had lain so long.

So lovely and so still! He held her fiercely in his arms, staring up in mute, savage defiance at the red and black pocked Moon. She must not die! She was his! Forever—his! So warm, so dear! He would not let her die.

No! No, she must wake, and use her knowledge to build the weapon and destroy the menace of that red Moon. He must wake her, so she could be his forever!

Unconsciously, he had been whispering it to her. And he spoke louder now, in a desperate appeal. He called to her, trying without actual hope to shout through her coma, to make her realize the desperate need that she should wake.

"Aladoree! Aladoree! You must wake up. You must. You *must*! The Medusæ are coming, Aladoree, to kill us with the opal suns! You must wake up, Aladoree, and build your weapon. You must wake up, Aladoree, to save what's left of the System! You mustn't die, Aladoree! You mustn't! Because I love you!"

He always believed that his appeal reached through to her sleeping mind. Perhaps it did. Or perhaps, as a medical scientist has

suggested, it was the irritating stimulation of the red gas itself that roused her, outside the *Purple Dream*. That does not greatly matter.

She sneezed a little, and whispered sleepily:

"Yes, John, I love you."

He almost dropped her, in his eager start at her response, and she came wide awake, staring about in amazed alarm.

"Where are we, John?" she gasped. "Not—not back on that planet——"

She was gazing in horror at the red Moon in the red-bathed sky.

"No, we're on the Earth. Can you finish the weapon, quickly, before the Medusæ come? We brought the parts you made by the river."

SHE stood up, looking dazedly around her, clinging uncertainly to John Star's arm.

"Can this be Earth, John, under this terrible sky? And that the Moon?"

"It is. And those black specks are the spider-ships of the Medusæ, coming down to kill us."

"Ah, the lass is awake!" wheezed Giles Habibula, joyfully.

And Jay Kalam hurried forward with the small, unfinished device that Aladoree had built back on the other planet, useless for want of a little iron.

"Can you finish it?" he asked, still calmly grave. "Quickly? Before they come?"

"Yes, Jay," she said, equally calm,

seeming to recover from her first bewilderment. "If we can find a bit of iron——"

John Star produced the broken shaft of the toy engine. She took it in eager fingers, examined it.

"Yes, John. This will do."

Dusk was red in the west. Ghastly night came down. Under the red, rising Moon the four stood silent about Aladoree and her weapon, tense with hope and dread. They were alone on the mesa, cold in that dreadful light. Behind them was the murdered Green Hall, a stark skeleton of dead human hopes, terrible and quiet against the murky afterglow. Before them the mesa sloped up to the rugged Sandias, beneath the baleful Moon.

Silence hung over them—the awful silence of a world betrayed and slain. Only once was it broken—by a fearful, hideously half-vocal howl of agony and terror from the ruin.

"What was that?" the girl whispered, shuddering.

It was something no longer human, stalked by another hungry beast, John Star knew. But he said nothing.

Aladoree was busy with the weapon. A tiny thing. It looked very simple, very crude, utterly useless. The parts of it were fastened to a narrow piece of wood, which was mounted on a rough tripod, so that it could be turned, aimed.

John Star examined it—and entirely failed to see the secret of it.

He was amazed again at its simplicity, incredulous that such a thing could ever vanquish the terrible, ancient science of the Medusæ.

Two little metal plates, perforated, so that one could sight through their centers. A wire helix between them, connecting them. And a little cylinder of iron. One of the plates and the little iron rod were set to slide in grooves, so that they could be adjusted with small screws. A rough key—perhaps to close a circuit through the rear plate; though there was no apparent source of current.

That was all.

Aladoree made some adjustment to the screws. Then she bent over, sighting through the tiny holes in the plates, toward the red Moon, with the black specks of the enemy fliers against it. She touched the key and straightened to watch, with a curious, lofty serenity on her quiet, pale face.

JOHN STAR had vaguely expected some spectacular display about the machine, perhaps some dazzling ray. But there was nothing. Not even a spark when the key was closed. So far as he had seen, nothing had happened at all.

For a strange moment he fancied he must still be insane. It was sheer impossibility that this odd little mechanism—a thing so small and so simple that a child might have made it—could defeat the Medusæ. Efficient victors over unknown planets and unknown ages, what had

they to fear from such a toy?
"Won't it——?" he whispered, anxiously.

"Wait," said Aladoree.

Her voice was perfectly calm, now without any trace of weakness or weariness. Like her face, it carried something strange to him. A new serenity. A disinterested, passionless authority. It was absolutely confident. Without fear, without hate, without elation. It was like—like the voice of a goddess!

Involuntarily, he drew back a step, in awe.

They waited, watching the little black flecks swarming and growing on the face of the sullen Moon. Five seconds, perhaps, they waited.

And the black fleet vanished.

There was no explosion, neither flame nor smoke, no visible wreckage. The fleet simply vanished. They all stirred a little, drew breaths of awed relief. Aladoree moved to touch the screws again, the key.

"WAIT," she said once more, her voice still terribly—divinely—serene. "In twenty seconds . . . the Moon. . . ."

They gazed on that red and baleful globe. Earth's attendant for eons, though young, perhaps, in the long time-scale of the Medusæ. Now the base of their occupation forces, waiting for the conquest of the planets. Half consciously, under his breath, John Star counted the seconds, watching the red face of doom—not man's now, but their own.

". . . eighteen . . . nineteen . . . twenty—"

Nothing had happened. A breathless, heartbreaking instant of doubt. Then the red-lit sky went black.

The Moon was gone.

"The Medusæ," Jay Kalam whispered, as if to assure himself of the unbelievable, "the Medusæ are gone." A long moment of silence, and he whispered once more: "Gone! They will never dare again!"

"I saw—nothing!" cried John Star, breathlessly. "How——?"

"They were annihilated," said Aladoree, strangely serene. "Even the matter that composed them no longer exists in our universe. They were flung out of all we know as space and time."

"But how——?"

"That is my secret. I can never tell—save to the chosen person who is to keep it after me."

"Mortal me!" wheezed Giles Habibula. "Ah, the blessed System is safe at last. Ah, dear life, but a mortal desperate undertaking it's been to save it. You must be precious careful not to fall into hostile hands again, lass. Old Giles will never be able to go through all this again, sweet life knows!"

"Ah, me! And here we're left in the middle of the desert, in the wicked dark—and the Moon will never rise again!"

His voice had snapped the tension that held them.

"John——" breathed Aladoree.

No longer was it the voice of a goddess. Its awful serenity was gone. It was all human, now, weak and shaken, appealing. John Star found her in the darkness. He made her sit down, and she sobbed against his shoulder, with happy sobs of relief.

"Ah, lass," groaned Giles Habibula, "good cause you have to weep. We all may perish yet, for want of a mortal bite of food!"

* * *

THE *Green Defender*, newest cruiser of the Legion of Space, flashed down to the Purple Hall, on Phobos, nearly a year later. Though one red gas shell had fallen on that tiny moon of Mars, during the Medusæ's bombardment, the great building had not been injured. The neutralizing solution had cured those affected by it; it had dissipated, combined into harmless salts, until the dark sky of the little world was free from any stain of red.

The cruiser dropped on the landing stage that crowned the central purple tower. The new Commander of the Legion came gravely down the accommodation ladder, and John Star came eagerly to meet him. Greetings over, they paused, looking down at the luxuriantly green convexity of the little planet, with grim memories of the last time they had been together here, when they took the *Purple Dream*.

"Not much trace left of the invasion," remarked Jay Kalam.

"No, Commander," replied John Star, with a little smile at the title. "Not one case of the madness left uncured, in all the System, I understand. And the red gone from the skies. It's already history."

"A splendid estate, John." With admiration, Jay Kalam's glance roved the richly green, curving landscape. "The finest, I think, in the System."

John Star's face clouded.

"A responsibility I had to assume." His voice was almost bitter. "But I wish I were back in the Legion, Jay. With Hal and Giles. I wish I were back in the guard of Aladoree."

Jay Kalam smiled. "You're—fond of her, John?"

He nodded, simply. "I was—am. I hoped—until that night, when she used AKKA. I realized then what a fool I was. She's a goddess, Jay. With the secret she has a power—a responsibility. I saw that night that she had no time for—for love."

Jay Kalam was still gravely smiling.

"Did it ever occur to you, John, that she's just a girl? Even though it may be interesting to destroy a planet, she can't be doing it all the time. She's apt to get lonesome."

"Of course," John Star admitted wearily, "she must have other interests. But she was—simply a goddess! I couldn't ask her. Anyhow, it could never be me!"

"Why do you think that, John?"

"For one thing, my name. Ulnar.

I couldn't ask her to forgive that."

"But the name needn't worry you, John. The Green Hall, recognizing your distinguished service, has officially changed your name to John Star. That's one thing we came to tell you."

"Eh?" he gasped.

THEN Aladoree came through the air-lock, Hal Samdu and Giles Habibula behind her. Her face sedate, gray eyes cool and grave, the clear sunlight working miracles of red and brown and gold in her hair, she looked at John Star in demure inquiry.

"Since the Purple Hall is now the strongest fortress in the System," Jay Kalam explained hastily, "the Green Hall requests you to assume the responsibility of guarding Aladoree Anthar."

"If you are willing, John Ulnar," added the girl, eyes twinkling.

His throat was dry. He searched in a golden mist for words, uttered them with an effort.

"I'm willing. But my name, it seems, is John Star."

Still grave, but for her eyes, she said: "I shall call you John Ulnar."

"But, you said—"

"I've changed my mind. I trust one Ulnar. More than that, I—"

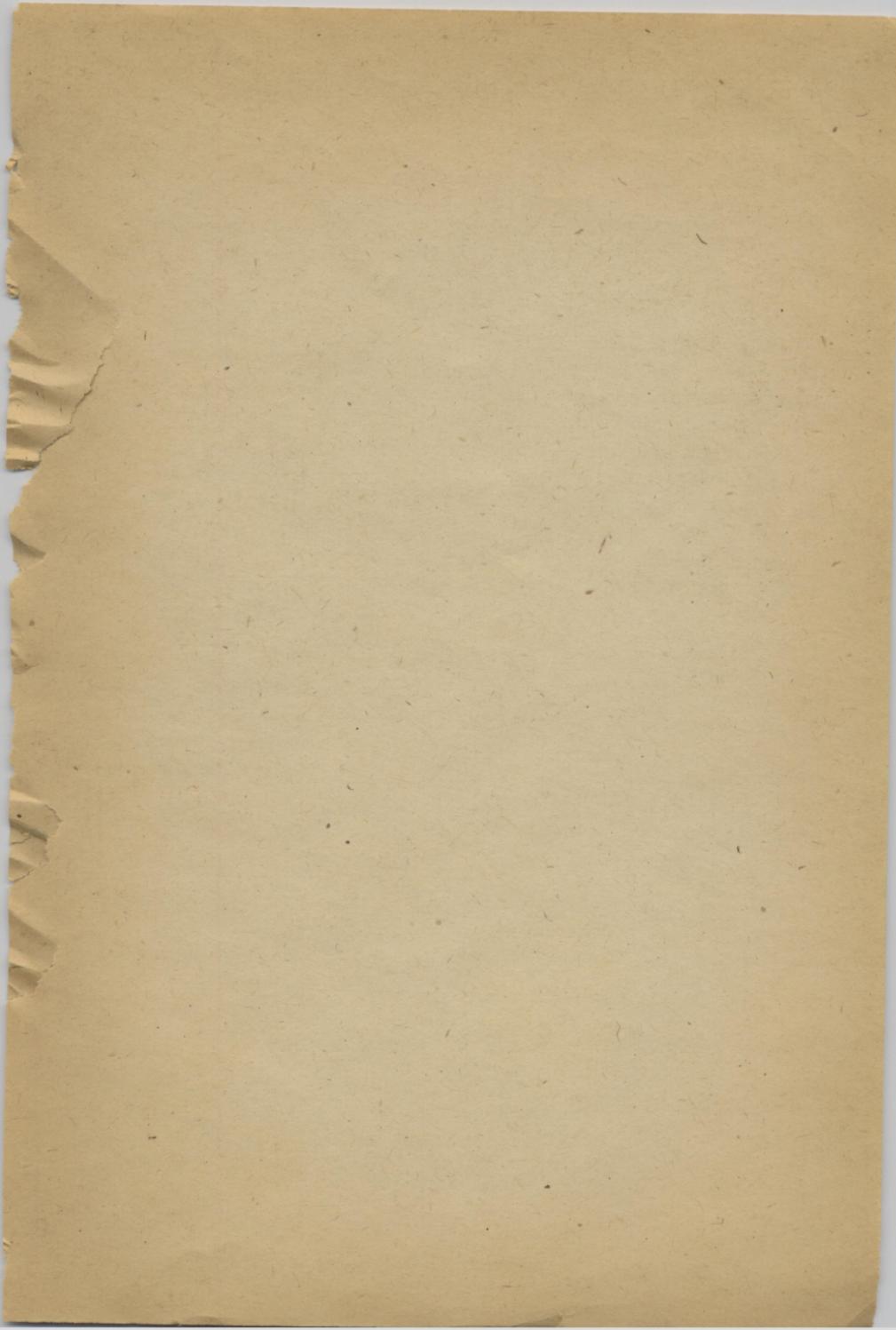
She was suddenly too busy to finish the sentence.

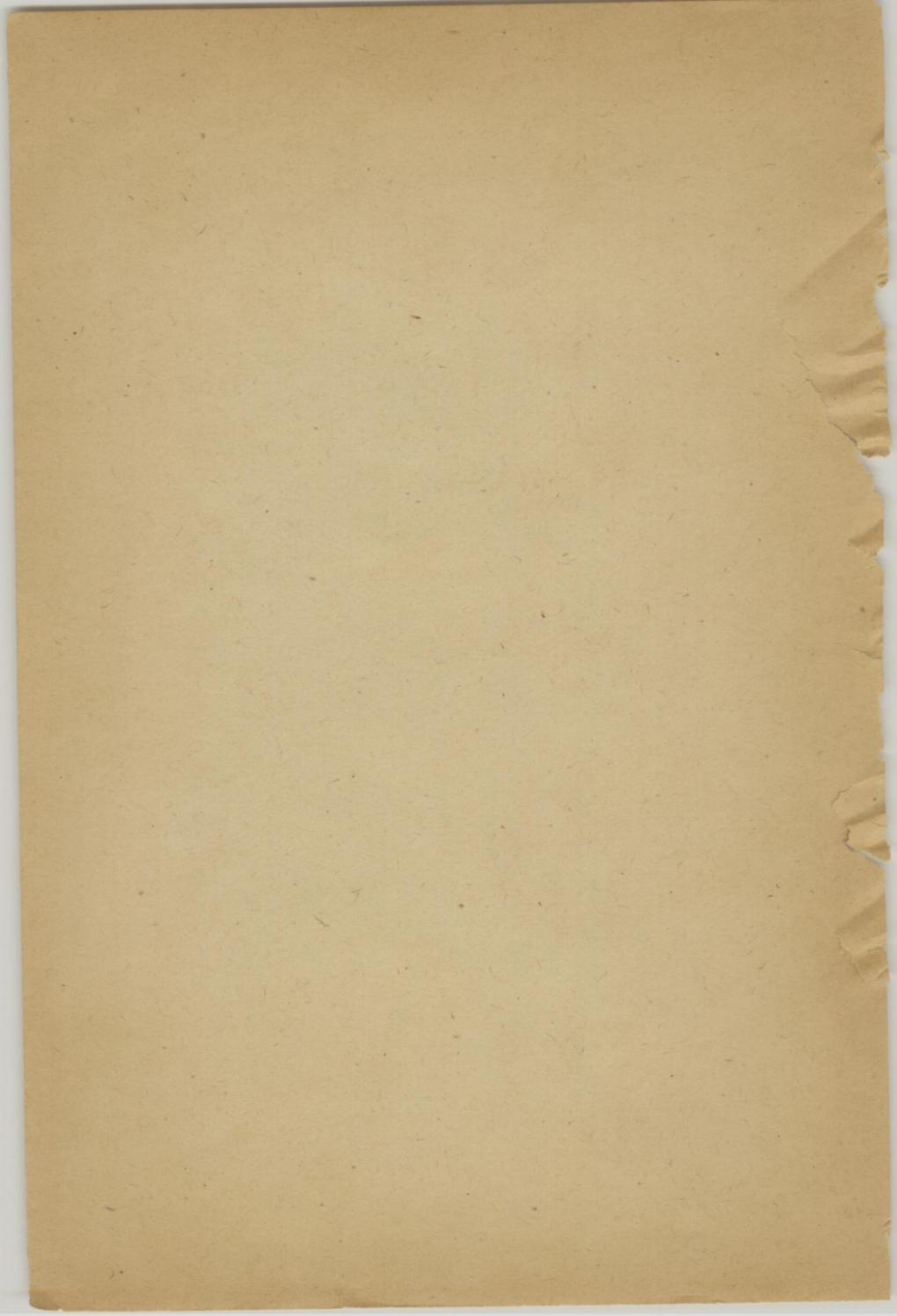
"Ah, me!" observed Giles Habibula, approvingly watching the two. He winked a fishy eye.

"'Tis evident we're welcome, with the lass. Mortal evident! Especially the lass! Ah, and it looks like a good enough place for a poor old soldier of the Legion to pass his remaining years in peace. If kitchen and cellar bear proper proportion to the rest of the building, old Giles Habibula will be happy enough."

"Ah, Hal, if you can forget your precious pride in all those medals and decorations that Jay has showered on you since the Green Hall made him Commander of the Legion, let's look about for a mortal bite to eat."

... The End ...





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