

Chapter Eleven

The Trap on Pluto's Moon

IT WAS five days' flight to Pluto, most distant outpost of the System; so far that even its sun was but a bright star, its daylight eternal twilight.

Five days—with the full power of the geodynes, whose fields of force reacted against the curvature of space itself, warped it, so that they drove the ship not *through* space, to put it very crudely, but *around* it, and so made possible terrific accelerations without any discomfort to passengers, and speeds far beyond even the speed of winged light. Apparent speeds, a mathematician would hasten to add, as measured in the ordinary space that the vessel went *around*; for both acceleration and velocity were quite moderate in the hyper-space it really went *through*.

Giles Habibula nursed the hard-driven generators with amazing care and energy—his thick hands proved to have an astounding sureness and delicacy and skill; and he had an enormous respect for the ever-increasing swarm of Legion cruisers racing astern, with their threat of successfully prosecuted charges of piracy, if not immediate destruction of the *Purple Dream* and all on

board in the consuming flame of their proton blasts.

He adjusted the injured unit until it was all but perfect. For an hour at a time, perhaps, the song of the generators would be clear and keen—but always the harsh discord of the destructive vibration returned.

One by one, the far-flying cruisers of the Legion had joined the pursuing fleet, until sixteen ships were chasing the *Purple Dream*. But, little by little, they were left behind, until, near Pluto, John Star estimated them to be nearly five hours astern.

Five hours, that meant, in which to land at the hostile base, overcome its crew, force them to bring aboard some twenty tons of supplies, and get safely away into space again.

In those days of the flight, John Star found himself thinking often of Aladoree Anthar—and his thoughts were soft music and sheer agony. Though he had known her but a day, memory of her brought a glow of joy to him, and a bitter throb of pain at thought of the human traitors and the monstrous half-known things that held her captive.

The *Purple Dream* hurtled down on Pluto's moon.

Pluto itself, the Black Planet, was naked rock and ancient ice, killing

cold and solitude. Its only people were a few hardy miners, mostly descendants of the political prisoners shipped there under the Empire, lonely exiles of eternal night.

Cerberus, moon of Pluto, was a tiny, cragged rock, more desolate and cruel to man than even its dark planet. A dead satellite, it had never lived. Save for the crew of the lonely Legion station, it had no inhabitants.

JOHN STAR had more than half expected that the Pluto Squadron of the Legion fleet would be warned and waiting for them, but the field seemed deserted as they came down. He began to hope that the evil web of Adam Ulnar's treason had not been spun so far.

Cerberus Station was a square field, leveled, between ragged black pinnacles. Red-glowing reflectors, spaced along the perimeter, radiated heat enough to keep the air itself from freezing into snow. A long, low building of insulating blocks armored with white metal housed barracks and storerooms. The power plant, which gave energy to fight the enemy cold, must be somewhere underground. The spidery tower of the ultra-wave radio station rose from a black peak beyond the building. Farther, there was only frowning desolation: broken, ugly teeth of mountains, yawning crater-maws, cracked and riven and blasted rock, and strata of ice as old as the stone, all forever dead.

In a uniform which had belonged to Captain Madlok, John Star stepped out onto the thin and bitter air, upon the little deck formed by the lowered outer valve. Assuming a confidence which he hardly felt, he waited while two men approached, with a manner of apprehensive hesitation, from the low white building.

"Cerberus Station, ahoy!" he hailed them, his manner as sternly official as possible.

"*Purple Dream*, ahoy," one of them responded, doubtfully—a very short man, very bald, very stout, very red of face, his appearance showing the careless neglect that sometimes comes of long isolation. There was, John Star thought, the equivalent of an entire meal accumulated on the front of his tunic. He wore the tarnished insignia of a Legion lieutenant.

"I am Captain John Ulnar," John Star said briskly. "The *Purple Dream* requires supplies. Captain Kalam is making out the requisitions. They must be aboard without delay."

The short man scowled suspiciously, pig-eyes narrowed.

"John Ulnar?" His voice was a nasal snarl. "And Captain Kalam, eh? In command of the *Purple Dream*, eh?"

His dirty, yellow-stubbled face held a smirk of sullen cunning. John Star watched his shifty-eyed hostility, and suddenly knew that he must be one of Adam Ulnar's men—knew that the web of unguessed treason

in the Legion had reached out even to this cold forgotten rock.

"We are." Boldness was the only way. "We're on a top emergency mission, and we must have these supplies at once."

"I'm Lieutenant Nana, commandant of the station." The sullen voice was devoid of military courtesy. With a knowing leer, Nana added cunningly: "The special orders in my file show the *Purple Dream* under Captain Madlok and Commander Adam Ulnar. She's listed as the Commander's flagship."

JOHN STAR didn't pause to wonder what his game could be. If he had been warned against them, it seemed strange that he had stayed to meet them peaceably—an unfortified supply base, Cerberus Station showed no evidence of any weapons heavy enough to challenge the *Purple Dream*. If he had received no warning—but there was no time for puzzles.

"There has been a change of command," John Star informed him curtly. "Now here is Captain Kalam."

Jay Kalam appeared beside him, in another borrowed uniform. They swung down the accommodation ladder from the tiny deck, and Jay Kalam offered a document, rapping sharply:

"Our requisition, Lieutenant!"

Glancing up at the ship's low turret, John Star made a quick motion with his hand. The ship's long pro-

ton gun lifted instantly out of its housing, and swung out above their heads to cover the long white building. Hal Samdu was at his post.

Nana looked up at the needle with small, blood-shot eyes. His unwashed face showed neither surprise nor any great alarm. He gave John Star a narrow-eyed glare of sullen hostility, and then reluctantly took the réquisition.

"Sixteen tons of cathode plates!" His astonishment sounded unconvincing. "Not for one ship!"

"Sixteen tons!" John Star rapped. "Immediately!"

"Impossible!" Nana scowled again at the menacing gun, and muttered evasively: "I can't let you have them without first reporting to Legion Headquarters, for confirmation of your orders."

"We've no time for that. Our mission is top emergency——"

Nana lifted his untidy shoulders, in defiance.

"I'm the commandant of Cerberus Station," he snarled. "I'm not accustomed to accepting orders from——" He paused, and his red eyes narrowed as he finished defiantly, "——from pirates!"

"In this case, however," Jay Kalam said softly, "I should advise you to do so."

Nana shook his fist, in a rage that looked like bad acting, and Jay Kalam waved a signal to Hal Samdu. The great needle above their heads lifted toward the radio tower on the peak, and blinding incandescence

jetted out. The tower crumpled instantly, into hot ruin.

And Nana was suddenly trembling, his unshaven face white and twitching with a fear that looked more genuine than his wrath had been.

"Very well," he whispered hoarsely. "I'll accept your requisition."

"Go with him, Captain Ulnar," said Jay Kalam. "See that there is no mistake or delay."

Nana complained that he did not have all the supplies required. Most of his men were too ill to help with the loading. The cranes and conveyors were out of order. He was doing his utmost, John Star recognized, to delay them until the sixteen pursuing Legion cruisers should have time to arrive.

YET, four hours later, under John Star's stern supervision and the menace of the great proton gun, all the cathode plates were aboard. The cylinders of oxygen were safely loaded, and the supplies of food and wine that Giles Habibula had added to the requisitions. Only the black drums of rocket fuel remained piled beneath the air-lock, and it was still an hour before the pursuing ships should reach them. Yet John Star had caught a gleam of sullen satisfaction in Nana's red pig-eyes, that sharpened his uneasiness.

Then Jay leaped from the valve, and came running across the field.

"Time to go, John!" His voice was low, urgent.

"Why? We ought to have an hour—"

Jay Kalam glanced at the curious, staring men gathering to load the rocket fuel, and dropped his voice. "The 'scopes show another ship, John. Nearer. Headed here from Pluto."

"So that was Nana's game!" John Star nodded in bleak understanding. "A nice little surprise for us. Anyhow, we've got to have the fuel. We'll have to take a chance on outrunning Nana's friends."

Jay Kalam's lean dark face was taut with a rare concern.

"This isn't a Legion cruiser, John —it's moving a good deal too fast." Beneath his calm, John Star could sense his deep alarm. "I never saw the like. A black spider of a ship, with things jutting out of a round belly of a hull."

John Star staggered back from the cold apprehension that hit him in the pit of his stomach.

"The Medusæ!" he gasped. "That's the sort of ship that took Aladoree. Nana must have sent for them, to ambush us here. I don't know what sort of weapons they would have—"

"We'll have to go," Jay Kalam cut in. "We can't risk fighting."

"The rocket-fuel?"

"Leave it. Come aboard."

They ran up the accommodation ladder.

Lieutenant Nana stared after them with narrowed red eyes, and muttered something to his men about

the drums. They all retreated toward the long metal building—with a haste that was ominous.

The air-lock was sealed. Levers flicked down under John Star's fingers. Blue flame should have screamed from the rockets, to send them plunging spaceward—but the *Purple Dream* lay dead!

Puzzled and dismayed, he tried the firing keys again—and nothing happened.

"We're somehow—stuck!" Incredulous, he scanned the dials. "Magnetism!" he exclaimed. "Look at the indicators! A terrific field. But how—? The ship is non-magnetic. I don't see—"

"A magnetic trap," said Jay Kalam. "Our friend Nana has somehow got magnets rigged, somewhere close to the ship. Our hull is non-magnetic; but still the field holds the rocket-firing mechanism and the geodynamics, out of control. He's trying to hold us, until the ships get here, and—"

"Then," broke in John Star, "we must stop their dynamos."

"Hal," Jay Kalam spoke into his telephone, "destroy the building."

THE tongue of roaring violet flame reached again from the shining needle. It swept the long, low metal building from end to end, and left it a flattened tangle of smoking metal and broken brick, flung off its foundations by the sheer thrust of the blast.

"Now!"

Again John Star tried the rockets; again only silence answered.

"The magnets still hold us. The dynamos must be underground, where our blast didn't reach them."

"I can, then!" cried John Star. "Open the lock."

He snatched two hand proton guns, besides the two in his belt already and darted out of the bridge-room.

"Wait!" called Jay Kalam. "What—?"

But he was already gone; Jay Kalam touched the controls to open the valve for him.

He dropped to the field, ran across to the smoking wreck of the long building, and searched the bare foundations until he found the stair, a shaft hewn through dark rock and strata of old ice. Down the steps he plunged, proton guns in his hands, leaping stray fragments of still-glowing metal.

A hundred feet below, in the cold crust of Cerberus, a heavy metal door loomed in front of him. He turned a proton-blast on it, at full force. It flashed incandescent, sagged, caved in. He leaped over it, into a long, dim-lit hall. He heard the drum of machinery ahead, the hum of dynamos; but another door stopped him. He tried the gun and it was dead—exhausted by that first full blast. Before he could level another, a violet lance stabbed at him from a tiny wicket.

Alert, he flung his body under that blade of killing fire, flat on his

stomach. Even though he escaped the searing ray, the conducted shock of it numbed him. But his own blast answered at the same instant, and the glowing wreck of the door was flung back upon the man behind it.

On his feet at once, though his shoulder was blistered and throbbing, he sprang for the door, tossing away his discharged gun and snatching the two from his belt.

A square room was before him, rock-hewn, great dynamos humming in the center of it. Five men stood about it in attitudes of petrified dismay, only Lieutenant Nana's hand groping mechanically for his weapon.

Both John Star's guns flamed—at the generators.

Unarmed now, but sure the dynamos were wrecked, he flung his discharged guns in Nana's sullen, blinking, yellow-stubbled face* and ran back down the hall and up the stair, hoping surprise would give him time to get back aboard.

IT DID. The air-lock clanged again. The rockets washed black pinnacles with roaring blue flame, and the *Purple Dream* flashed upward from Pluto's cragged moon—off at last, John Star exulted savagely, off at last for far-off Barnard's Etar, to the aid of Aladoree!

"The delay—" whispered Jay Kalam. "Too long, I'm afraid. That black spider-ship has got too close—we can hardly escape it, now!"

Chapter Twelve

Storm in Space

CERBERUS, moon of Pluto, fell behind, a cold gray speck, and vanished.

The Black Planet itself was swallowed in the infinite black abyss, and the splendid star that was the sun began to fade and dwindle in Orion.

They passed the speed of light. The Sun and the stars behind were visible now only with rays they had overtaken; picked up and refracted in the lenses and prisms of the tele-

periscopes, to correct the distortion of speed.

Giles Habibula lived, now, in the generator room. Under the care of his fat and oddly steady hands, the geodynes ran almost perfectly. That ominous snarl of destructive vibration went unheard for hours at a time.

And the *Purple Dream* drove on. The tiny worlds of men were lost behind. Ahead, the stars of Ophiuchus slowly spread, but still not even the highest powers of the tele-

periscopes could show the faint point of Barnard's star—so dim in stellar death that it was only the tenth magnitude, as seen from Earth. And only their haunted minds could picture its lone evil world, where Aladoree had been taken.

They drove on, day after day, at the utmost speed of straining generators—and the black flier followed. Light from it would never overtake them, now. The tele-periscopes failed to show its monstrous spider-shape. Only the geodesic telltale screen betrayed it—for the telltale mechanism registered geodesic over-drive fields, instantaneously.

John Star begged Giles Habibula to nurse more thrust from the overloaded geodynes, and he watched the faint red fleck on the screen. It seemed to stand motionless, now. Whether the generators ran well or ill, its distance never changed.

"They're playing with us," he muttered once, uneasily. "No matter how fast we go, we never gain an inch."

"Just following." Gnawing worry was apparent, even in Jay Kalam's calm. "They can catch us when they like. Or maybe—if their communications equipment is up to it—they'll just signal their friends at home to have our welcome ready."

"I wonder why they don't attack us, now?"

"Waiting to see our plans, I suppose. Or, more likely, they're still hoping for a chance to get the Commander back, alive."

For Adam Ulnar was still locked in the brig, a cheerful and philosophic prisoner with no apparent remorse for his treason; he had asked for paper and was busy writing the memoirs of his long career, for the proud archives of the Purple Hall.

Hopefully now, John Star whispered, "If they won't attack, perhaps we can give them the slip."

Jay Kalam shook his dark head, slowly. "I can see no way."

ON THEY drove, into the star-glittering crystal black of interstellar space. All four of them grew haggard, from want of sleep, from the tension of effort and dread. Only Jay Kalam appeared almost unchanged, always deliberate and cool, always gravely pleasant. John Star's face was white, his eyes burning with anxiety. Hal Samdu, grown nervous and irritable, muttered to himself; he knotted his huge and useless fists, and sometimes glared at imaginary enemies. Even Giles Habibula, incredibly, lost weight until the skin hung in pouches under his hollowed, leaden eyes.

Day by day the Sun grew smaller, until it was dwarfed by Betelgeuse and Rigel, until it was a faint white star, lost amid the receding splendors of Orion.

In the tele-periscopes, Barnard's Star appeared and grew.

Runaway sun! Red, feeble, dying dwarf. Racing northward out of the constellation Ophiuchus, in mad flight from the Serpent and the Scor-

pion. Long ago christened "Barnard's Runaway Star," from its discoverer and its remarkable proper motion, it was the nearest star of the northern sky and the nearest found to have a habitable planet.

Habitable—so the censored and fragmentary reports of Eric Ulnar's expedition had described it. But the mad survivors of the expedition, rotting away in guarded hospital wards of maladies that the Legion specialists in planetary medicine could neither understand nor cure, had shrieked and whispered of a weird domain of half-known horror. The rulers of that planet were the monstrous Medusæ, and it was scarcely habitable for men.

John Star was watching that ancient, expiring sun one day, an eye of dull red evil in the tele-periscope. Its hypnotic glare brought him foreboding thoughts of Aladoree, imprisoned on its terror-haunted planet. He seemed to see her clear, honest gray eyes, horror-distended, and filmed with soul-searing fear. A cold and helpless wrath accumulated in him.

He started when Jay Kalam spoke:
"Look! Ahead of us—a green shadow!"

Even then his low, restrained voice was tense with dread of the cosmic unknown.

Ahead of them, the tele-periscopes showed that ominous and eerie shadow, swiftly growing. It shone with the strange dim green of ionized nebular gases, and the dark

spreading wings of it blotted out the stars of Ophiuchus, and slowly grew to hide the Serpent and even the Scorpion.

JOHN STAR stepped up the magnification of the 'scopes, until he could see the ugly, crawling motion of its vast writhing streams, and the angry currents of strange matter and stranger energies boiling within it.

"An uncharted nebula," he whispered at last. "We had better turn away."

Star-gazing nomads of the Earth, from the beginning, had wondered at those dark clouds against the firmament. Star-roving nomads of space, more recently, had sometimes perished in them. Even yet, however, they were little-known, and all prudent spacemen kept well away from their vast maelstroms of fire and cosmic fury.

Back at the Legion Academy, John Star had listened to a renowned astrophysicist lecturing learnedly on "Intranebular Dynamics." He knew the fine-spun theories of counter-space, of inverse curvature, of pseudo-gravitation and negative entropy. The nebulae, according to the theories, were the wombs of planets and suns and even of future galaxies; the second law of thermodynamics was somehow circumvented in their anomalous counter-spaces, and radiation trapped in their mysterious depths somehow re-integrated into matter; their final awesome destiny was to re-wind the run-down uni-

verse itself. So that famous astrophysicist believed—but he had never ventured near the dark, supernal fury of such a storm in space.

John Star gulped, and his voice came faint with awe.

"We're running too near—I'll change our course."

"No," Jay Kalam protested quietly. "Drive on toward it."

"Yes?" Wondering, taut with mounting dread, he obeyed.

The mass ahead tripped the gravity detectors. They had to drop below the speed of light, so that their search beams could guard them from collision. And that strange cloud grew.

Utterly insignificant it may have been, in the scale of cosmic space, so tiny that the System's astronomers had never discovered or charted it. The vast and little-known forces of it could make no threat to the System itself, for the inverse inflection of the counter-spaces was held to cause repulsion from the gravity-fields of suns. On the galactic scale, it was the merest fleck of curious dust.

On the human scale, however, it was big enough—and deadly.

Enormously, its dark and dimly shining arms twisted out across the stars ahead. The 'scopes began to show the terrible detail of it: black dust-clouds, hurtling streams of jagged meteoric fragments, dark banners of thin gases, all whipped with the raging winds of half-guessed cosmic forces, angrily aglow

with the eerie green of ionization.

John Star stood rigid with dread, and he felt a chill of icy sweat. But he kept their course on toward it, until they were flashing along no more than a thousand miles from the side of a darkly burning greenish streamer, which seemed to reach out for them like a kind of monstrous psuedopod.

"If it caught us—" His dry throat stuck, and he had to swallow. "Those meteor-streams—hurtling boulders! Those whirlpools of shining gas! The forces inside it—unknown!" He wiped sweat off his set, white face. "I don't think we'd last five seconds."

But Jay Kalam told him, gently: "Steer a little closer."

"Eh?" John Star muttered, hoarsely. "Why?"

SIENTLY, Jay Kalam pointed at the red forgotten spark on the telltale screen, which marked the position of the black ship behind them. It was visibly creeping up, to close the distance which had been fixed so long.

John Star caught his breath. "So they're trying to overtake us, now?"

"More than trying," Jay Kalam reminded him softly. "I suppose they're afraid we'll try to shake them off, in the edges of the nebula. Steer a little closer."

He touched the controls again, with stiff and icy fingers. The racing ship veered slightly, toward that appalling cloud of dim green fire and

darkness. A cosmic storm, in very truth—for mad winds of unseen force ripped and twisted black dust and glowing gas into shredded streamers and wild vortices and sprawling tentacles that seemed to writhe and whip with elemental fury.

"Steer a little closer," urged Jay Kalam, gently. "And we'll soon find out how much they value Commander Ulnar's life."

John Star moved the controls again, with numb, unwilling fingers, and then turned a tele-periscope on the black ship behind—for even laggard light from it could overtake them, now that they had slowed. A colossal thing, strange as the green and wetly heaving monsters that made its crew. With black rods and vanes and levers jutting in baffling array from the round black hull, it looked like a black spider flying.

The main wings had been somehow retracted, but certain smaller vanes moved slightly, now and again, as it came, as if reacting against some unseen medium to control its flight. Perhaps, he guessed, it made use of radiation-pressures.

It grew large in the lenses—dark and strange as the spatial storm ahead.

"They can't attack!" John Star gulped to moisten his throat. "Not if they want to save Commander Ulnar's life."

And Jay Kalam murmured softly: "Try it just a little closer, now."

John Star touched the helm again—and his heart grew sick.

THE bright clean song of the geodynes had been ringing like a peal of living power through the ship; he had almost felt the thrust that sent them ahead. But that song changed. Suddenly, now, the snarling vibration of unmatched units came back. Their speed fell off again—and the red spark in the tell-tale screen came up almost to touch them.

Tense and desperate, John Star guided the sick vessel closer to that stormy wall of dust and green fire and grinding stone, and Jay Kalam watched astern. He said suddenly:

"I'm afraid the Commander won't save us, after all. They're firing—something!"

Out of the belly of that black spider-ship came a little ball of misty white. It followed them, more swiftly than the crippled geodynes could take them, and grew as it came. They watched it in the lenses, frozen with wonder and terror, for it was utterly inexplicable.

A ball of opalescence. It wasn't matter, John Star knew—for no material projectile could have overtaken them so swiftly, even crippled and lagging as they were. It was a swirling globe of milky flame, splendid with rainbow sheens. It swelled behind them. It hid the spider-ship. It covered the belt of bright Orion. It filled the void behind them like a new star born.

A glowing sun—flung after them! That was quite fantastic, John Star knew. But it grew vast in space, and the hot image of it in the lenses hurt his eyes. And still it swelled, ever more terribly bright.

And it drew them!

The *Purple Dream* lurched, rolled toward it.

A sudden dizzy nausea, an intolerable vertigo, overwhelmed John Star. He staggered, stumbled back from the controls, and clutched a handrail. He clung to it, sick and trembling, while the ship spun helpless in the grasp of that pursuing sun.

They fell toward that blinding opalescence. Grimly, his jaw set against that nausea, John Star fought the spin of the stricken ship, battled his lurching way back to the controls—and found the geodynes utterly dead.

The ship dropped, unchecked in its mad plunge.

Tossing seas of white opalescence spread out to drown them, vast as the surface of a very sun. Angry, flaming prominences reached out to snare them—and then the thing was gone.

White, exploding fire half-blinded them—and it had vanished like a punctured bubble. John Star's baffling sickness ended. Space was black once more behind them, and soon his dazzled eyes could see the belted splendor of Orion. The song of the geodynes came back, and the ship answered to her controls.

John Star mopped weakly at his face.

"Never felt—such a thing!" he whispered. "Space itself—dropped from beneath us!"

"**A** SORT of vortex of disintegration, I imagine," Jay Kalam commented softly. "Some such thing was mentioned in the secret reports of the Ulnar Expedition, that were sent out to Aladoree at the fort on Mars. Only a hint—they were careful not to tell her much. But there was some reference to an energy vortex weapon—a frightful thing that warped the space-coordinates, making all matter unstable, growing from the energy of the atoms it annihilated, and creating an attraction to draw more matter in. A kind of pseudo-sun!"

John Star nodded, shaken.

"That must be," he agreed. "The distortion of space must have made the geodynes go dead." He caught a long, uneasy breath. "We can't fight them with the proton gun—not when they start throwing suns!"

"No," Jay Kalam said quietly. "I see only one thing to do—drive straight into the nebula."

"Into that storm!" John Star blinked. "The ship couldn't live a minute, there."

"A minute is a long time, John," Jay Kalam told him gently. "They've fired another shot."

"Another——"

His dry throat seized his voice.

"Turn straight in," Jay Kalam

said. "I don't think they'll follow." For a moment his mind rebelled. He stood frozen at the controls, staring at the angry banners of the nebular storm. One sick instant—and then he had mastered himself. He accepted the danger, and turned the *Purple Dream* into that appalling cloud of dim green fire and darkness.

Death grew behind them. Again a milky ball came from the belly of the black spider-ship, and swelled into a pseudo-sun of devouring atomic flame. Again the cruiser pitched and spun, with geodynes dead, helpless in that greedy grasp. Again John Star was ill.

But the abrupt turn had saved them. That hurtling globe of expanding opalescence missed them, too narrowly, and exploded far beyond them. The released geodynes pealed out again, and the ship sprang ahead—into the nearest angry arm of the nebula.

Into fury and enigma.

John Star had listened to the theories. All positive-entropy processes should be suspended or reversed, the theorists said, in the inverse-inflexure of the nebular counter-spaces. That meant that power-tubes could yield no power, and geodynes could give no thrust. It meant that rockets couldn't fire. It meant that clocks and chronometers would run backwards—and that human machines, very likely, would stop altogether.

That was what the theoretical ass-

trophysicsts said—but none of them had ever been inside a nebula, to observe the birth of matter. Only two or three daring spacemen had ever ventured on nebular explorations, into a smaller counter-space lying on the route to Proxima, and they had never emerged.

JOHN STAR caught his breath again and tried to nerve himself to meet emergency. The repulsion fields of the meteor deflector would serve to protect the hull from the nebular drift—if the masses were not too large, too numerous, or coming too fast. For the rest, the life of the ship depended on his skill.

The *Purple Dream*, with his quick fingers on the keys, sought a path through the spinning fringe of spiral arms. Whether the theorists were right or wrong, he knew the ship couldn't survive in the nebula's heart. Nothing stranger than grinding boulders would be needed to destroy them. Mysterious womb of worlds, or merely a pinch of common cosmic dust, it could also be their grave.

His flying fingers touched the keys, and the cruiser spun and darted through a dance with black and shining death. It found rifts in the curtains of dust. It recoiled from green, grasping arms. It swam through rivers of hurtling stones. It defied the grasp of the nebula, and fought like a thing alive for life.

From some remote distance, John Star heard Jay Kalam's gentle voice:

"Good work, John! I don't think they'll follow."

And the *Purple Dream* threaded onward through the mazes of the nebula. Walls of green flame were suddenly ahead; the drift lurked in the black dust-clouds, and leaped out with naked fangs of tearing stone. Hurricane-like, the half-known forces of the cosmic storm battered and tore at the ship—forces akin to the dread vortices of sun-spots, John Star suspected, and even to the deadly drag of the Medusæ's pseudo-suns.

Right or left, up or down, he drove the ship with sure fingers. The radar and the thermal detectors made a continual, useless clamor, until he shut them off. Only human skill and quickness could serve them now.

For a moment he thought they were free. The black ahead was deadly dust no longer, but the frosty dark of open space. Through that glow of eerie green, he saw the beacon of red Antares—and then the geodynes failed again.

The bright keening of the generators was broken suddenly, with that old, heart-breaking vibration. The precious thrust was lost. A black and jagged mass of rock—a nascent world, perhaps—came at them suddenly. John Star's fingers dropped on the keys, but the sick ship failed to answer.

That black-fanged rock came on through the screens. It struck the hull with a clang that reverberated

like the very knell of doom. Then there was a silence. John Star listened. He couldn't hear the geodynes—but there was no hiss and roar of air escaping. He knew the staunch hull had held.

THEN the ship began to spin. The bright beacon of Antares was suddenly gone, and the rift in the nebula closed. The same wind of force that had hurled the boulder had caught them now. It dragged them back, toward the mysterious heart of the nebula.

John Star tried the dead controls again, and stared fearfully at the chronometer—though he knew that his human mechanism would surely be stopped, quite permanently, before the anomalous forces of the counter-space set time to running backward.

"Giles!" It was Jay Kalam queerly calm, speaking into the ship's telephone. "We must have power, Giles!"

And Giles Habibula's voice came back from the speaker on the bulkhead, plaintive and abstracted:

"For sweet life's sake, don't bother me now. For poor old Giles is ill, Jay. His head can't stand this wicked spinning—and his precious geodynes never acted so before! Let him die in peace, Jay."

That mad wind of energy swept them on. John Star frantically studied his dials and gauges, and failed to analyze it. Neither magnetic nor gravitic, it must be something of the

nebula's own. Here at the unknown borderland of space and counter-space, he thought, even such familiar terms as magnetism and gravitation could have no certain meaning. He watched the chronometer again, waiting fearfully for it to turn backward and knowing he would be dead before that could happen. There was nothing else to do.

"Ah, my poor old head," came the faint and weary plaint of Giles Habibula. "Deadly ill, and spinning like a silly top. Ah, poor old Giles is sick, sick, sick—"

But the sound of the geodynes came back, at first a harrowing growl.

"Sick, sick, sick!" sobbed Giles Habibula. "Ah, a poor old soldier of the Legion, hunted out of the precious System on a lying charge of wicked treason, and dying like a dog in a mortal storm in space. Sick and—ah, *there!*"

The geodynes, abruptly, were humming clear and sweet.

The *Purple Dream* was alive again. John Star turned her out of that savage, sucking current. She nosed through a river of hurtling stones, and dove through a cloud of greenish gas; and ahead was the rift again. The black of space, and bright Antares.

They came out of the last thin streamer of the storm, into the clear dark of space. Ahead were the cold

diamond stars; and the greenish shadow of the nebula swiftly dwindled behind—in the vaster cosmic scale, it was just a speck of curious dust.

"Safe!" John Star exulted.

"**S**AFE!" Jay Kalam repeated the word, and smiled a slow, ironic smile. "And there ahead is Barnard's Star."

In the field of the tele-periscope, John Star found the Runaway Sun. It was a red and solitary eye, watching their approach with a cold, steady stare of unblinking menace.

"Yes, we're safe enough, for now." Jay Kalam smiled, a dark taut smile. "I think we're rid of that spider-ship. I think we can reach the planet, now—if we can pass the barrier the Medusæ have set up to defend it."

John Star merely looked at him, with a weary, dim dismay.

"There was something about that barrier belt in the secret reports that came to Aladoree on Mars," Jay Kalam explained. "Not much—Commander Ulnar let her know just enough so she wouldn't suspect his plot. Perhaps he could tell us something more. But I believe the Medusæ have their planet very effectively defended."

He smiled again, gravely.

"Anyhow, John, we're safe enough for now."

Chapter Thirteen

The Belt of Peril

THEY went to the cruiser's brig.

"Welcome, John." Adam Ulnar called that cheerful greeting to them, through the bars of the tiny cell. Elder statesman of the Purple Hall, Commander of the Legion, and traitor against mankind, he sat on the edge of the narrow bunk, busy with his memoirs.

"Just a moment, John." Deliberately he finished the sentence he was writing, laid his pen and manuscript aside on the neatly folded blanket, and stood up to meet them. A tall, distinguished statesman. His wide shoulders were proudly erect; his fine head, with the long white hair well-combed and flowing, was bowed to no visible burden of guilt.

"A pleasure, gentlemen." He smiled, and his fine blue eyes held a spark of ironic amusement. "I've too few guests. Come on in. Rough weather we've been meeting, by the feel of the ship."

"But we'll find rougher weather ahead," John Star told him. "Or so I imagine—from all I hear of the Belt of Peril."

That phrase had rather a remarkable effect on Adam Ulnar. His face lost its smile of wary mockery, and

froze to a rigid mask. Behind the mask, John Star sensed something like consternation. His hands clenched white on the bars of the cell. He stared from one to the other of them; and seconds had passed before he could speak.

"The Belt—" he swallowed. "You mean we're bound for Barnard's Star?"

"We're going after Aladoree," John Star said crisply. "I understand that Eric's expedition reported some kind of defensive barrier zone around the Medusæ's planet. We want to know what it is—and how to get through it alive."

THE fine wrinkles bit deeper into Adam Ulnar's face, and all the cheerful color had ebbed from it. The pupils of his blue eyes were black and big with a sick dismay.

"I don't know what it is." His voice was slow and dull with fear. "I don't know."

"You must!" John Star's voice was a brittle challenge. "You had the full reports, uncensored. Eric must have told you all about it. Let's have it!"

Heavily, the old Commander shook his head.

"Eric didn't know," he said. "Even after the Medusæ had made

their agreement to help us, in return for a cargo of iron, they wouldn't tell him anything about it. All I know is what it did to the ships of his expedition when they first tried to land."

"And what was that?"

"Enough," Adam Ulnar said. "His fleet approached the barrier zone without any warning of danger, you see—fortunately Eric had been smart enough to bring his flagship to the rear. Only the two lead vessels got into the zone. They never came out.

"What the barrier force is, his engineer couldn't discover. They believed that it is radiant energy—if so, however, it is something different in effect from any gamma or cosmic radiation known to us. The crews of those two unfortunate ships had no time to signal any reports. The ships fell, out of control. Observers on the other vessels reported that they seemed to be disintegrating—falling apart. Later, a few meteor-like streaks were observed in the planet's upper atmosphere. And that was all.

"Eric kept the rest of his fleet outside the barrier, until he had established radio and television communication with the Medusæ—which took a considerable time. Afterwards, they allowed several of his ships to visit the planet and leave it again—apparently they can open the barrier, at will."

John Star eyed him sharply.

"What else do you know?" he

demanded. "The men who landed must have learned something about it?"

The old man clinging to the bars forced a sick, yellow smile.

"The most of them could never tell what they learned." His dull voice held an echo of dread. "They're the ones who came back to die in the mental wards—if they came back at all. You see, there's something in the planet's atmosphere that isn't good for the flesh or the minds of men. A virus, a secondary radiation excited by the barrier rays, or perhaps a toxic emanation from the bodies of the Medusæ themselves—those stricken scientists could never agree on what it was. But they did prove that men can't go there and live. The effects are extremely variable, and sometimes long delayed. But the onset, when it comes, is sudden and terrible."

"Thank you, Commander," Jay Kalam said, and they turned away.

“WAIT!” The shaken voice called after them. "You aren't going on—not into the Belt?"

"We're running through it," John Star assured him.

"We shall try," added Jay Kalam, "to get through it at a very high speed. By surprise. Before those radiations—if that is what they are—have time to take effect."

Holding himself upright, with his white and trembling hands on the bars, old Adam Ulnar looked at both their faces. His pale lips

twitched. Bowed, now, his shoulders made a weary little shrug, and he finally spoke.

"I can see there's no dissuading you, John. You're the Ulnar breed, and you won't yield to danger. I believe you're really going to try to run the Belt. I really believe you're ready to land on that monstrous planet, a thing that even Eric wouldn't do."

"I am," John Star said.

"I believe you really are." That white, distinguished head nodded slowly, and a feeble spark of pride came back to the stricken eyes. "I admire your resolution, John. At least you'll die an Ulnar's death.

"Now, if you please, John, I've one last request."

"What is that, Commander?" John Star heard a sudden respect in his own voice, and something close to warmth.

"In my desk, in my stateroom, there's a secret drawer," the bleak-faced old man said huskily. "I'll tell you how to find it. It contains a little vial of poison—"

John Star shook his head. "We can't do that."

"We're kinsmen, John." Adam Ulnar's voice held a broken, pleading quaver. "In spite of our present political quarrel, you must remember that once I did a favor for you. I paid for your education, remember, and put you in the Legion. Am I asking too much in return—a few drops of euthanasia?"

"I'm afraid you are," John Star

told him. "Because I think we'll need information from you again, when we come to deal with the Medusæ."

"No, John!" the old man sobbed, wild-eyed and frantic now. "Please, John! You can't deny me death—"

"We ought to bring you the bottle, Commander." Jay Kalam gave him a lean dark smile. "Just to see what you'd do. Because you've over-played your role."

Adam Ulnar returned that sober smile. His clutching hands released the bars, and his bent shoulders straightened.

"I was trying to turn you back," he confessed. "I've no need of poison, if you do go on—I believe that death in the Belt is as quick as a man could wish." His voice still was taut and urgent. "But every word I've told you is the truth. You'll never land alive—or, if you do, you'll presently be needing that little bottle yourselves, to escape your madness and your pain.

"Bad luck, gentlemen!"

He dismissed them with a casual wave of his hand, and went back to the papers on his narrow bunk.

The *Purple Dream* drove on.

BARNARD'S STAR burned on their right. A swelling, perfect sphere, sharp-edged against the ebon void. A type M dwarf, old beyond imagination, so far gone in stellar death that their eyes could safely look upon it, with no filters behind the lenses. But its blood-red rays

smote to their very brains, with a stark impact of fateful menace.

Straight ahead was its solitary planet, a dim and fearful crescent, washed with that ominous scarlet. World of the monstrous Medusæ, of that black spider-ship, of the waiting Belt of Peril.

The ship drove on, geodynes singing keen and clear. John Star and Jay Kalam stood before the teleperiscopes, watching for the first sign of danger. The red and cloudy planet swelled ahead.

The night-side of it was utterly black, a round blot on the stars. The day-side was a curved and ugly crimson blade, stained with evil blood, clotted with dark rust. Its orbit lay close to the dying dwarf. And it was gigantic, John Star realized; many times the bulk of Earth.

Jay Kalam drew a long, awed breath.

"The forts!" he whispered. "The stations that make the barrier—that's what they must be. A belt of moons!"

John Star found them. Dim and tiny crescents, red as the monstrous planet. He found three, following in the same orbit high above the murky atmosphere of the mighty world ahead; there must be six in all, he guessed, spaced sixty degrees apart.

A ring of fortress moons! The barrier itself must be invisible radiation, but the perfect spacing of those trailing satellites was proof enough of the Medusæ's hostile and scientific craft. John Star's brooding gaze went

back to the larger murky crescent.

"Aladoree—there!" His low-breathed words were choked with a sense of incredulous horror. "Beyond those moons! Hidden and guarded, somewhere on that planet. And tortured, I suppose, for the secret of AKKA. We must get through, Jay."

"We must."

And Jay Kalam spoke quiet orders into his telephone.

"Mortal me!" a thin voice came plaintively back from the bulkhead speaker. "For the sake of precious life, Jay, can't we have a single breath of time? Must we go driving like a pack of reckless fools into new and wicked dangers, with never a blessed pause? Can't you give us a moment, Jay—just one precious moment—to snatch a bite to eat?"

"Give us all the power you can, Giles," Jay Kalam broke in gently. "Because, right now, we're diving toward the barrier zone, depending on surprise and speed."

DEAR life—not now!" gasped Giles Habibula. "Not into that wicked thing they call the Belt of Peril!"

"We are, Giles," Jay Kalam said. "We're going to try it midway between two of their forts, hoping their rays will interfere."

"Sweet life—not yet!" sobbed Giles Habibula. "Give us time, Jay, for a single sip of wine! You couldn't be so heartless, Jay—not to a poor old soldier of the Legion.

Not to a miserable, tottering human skeleton, Jay, dead on his feet from toiling day and night to keep his precious geodynes going, and gone to skin and bones for want of time to eat.

"Not that, Jay! Not to poor old—"

But John Star was listening no longer.

TENSE at the controls, scarcely breathing, he was driving the *Purple Dream* down toward that vast and evil-seeming crescent of crimson murk, aiming straight between two of those black and tiny moons. And now he saw a fearful thing. Still no visible projectile or ray had come from the fortress satellites, but he saw something happening to the ship—and to him!

The metal bulkheads, and the faces of all the instruments before him, were suddenly luminous. His own skin was shining. Bright atoms were dancing away into the air, swirling motes of many colors. The very metal of the ship, it seemed, was evaporating into iridescent mist. His own body was!

Then he felt it—a sheet of blinding pain.

For a moment he gave away to agony, sick and reeling, eyes closed. He fought grimly to control himself, and lurched unsteadily toward Jay Kalam—who was a shimmering spectre now, clad in a splendid mist of dissolving rainbows.

"What—" His gasping voice

came faint and strange, and agony clenched his teeth upon it. "What's this?"

"Radiation——" The bright spectre's voice was thin with pain. "Must dissolve the molecular bonds! . . . Ionized atoms dancing away. . . . Everything melting into atomic mist! . . . Molecular dissolution! . . . Our very nerves—destroyed!"

"How long can—?"

His voice went out. Red agony surged against his brain. Every limb and every tissue shrieked. Even the cells of his brain itself, he felt, screamed protest at this consuming radiation. Every second he thought he had felt the ultimate agony, and every second the agony increased.

He was blind with pain. Pain roared in his ears. Redhot needles of pain probed every fiber of his body. But still he fought to keep the mastery of himself. He stood rigid over the controls and drove the cruiser down.

Above the agony thundering in his ears, he heard the whine of the hard-pressed geodynes change again to harsh vibration. That ugly snarl increased, until the whole ship shuddered to it. It became terrific. He thought it would break the very hull.

BUT the vibration ended suddenly. The ship was deathly still. The geodynes had failed completely. Only momentum was left, to carry them on through the radiation-wall.

In the new silence he heard Adam Ulnar screaming in the brig.

"Disintegration . . ." came the faint, hoarse rasp from Jay Kalam. "We're going—invisible!"

He saw, then, that the solid metal of the mechanisms about him was becoming weirdly and incredibly semi-transparent, as if about to dissolve completely in the glittering mist that swirled away from them, ever denser.

HE LOOKED at Jay Kalam, through the haze of shattered jewels, and saw a ghastly thing.

That shining spectre-shape was semi-transparent now, bones visible like shadows within misty outlines of flesh. Fiery smoke swirling away from it. It looked no longer human; it was grisly death, melting into nothingness.

Yet it still had consciousness, reason, will.

A sound whispered from it, dry and faint:

"Rockets!"

John Star knew that he was another dissolving ghost. Every atom of his body flamed with unendurable pain. Red agony blinded him, shrieked in his ears, froze his body in a final rigor. Yet he moved, before it overcame him utterly.

He reached the rocket firing keys.

He was sprawled over the control board, the next he knew, weak and trembling. His sick body was limp, dripping with sweat. He dragged himself up, aware that his fearful, agonizing transparency was gone. He saw Jay Kalam, faint and

white; saw beyond him a few glistening diamond particles still floating in the air.

"The rockets," breathed Jay Kalam, his voice weak, uncertain, yet gravely deliberate as ever. "The rockets brought us through."

"Through!" It was a dry, hoarse croak. "Inside the Belt?"

"Inside—and plunging toward the surface."

He fought to recover a grip on himself.

"Then we must brake our velocity, before we smash!"

"Giles!" Jay Kalam called into the telephone. "The geodynes——"

"Don't bother me now!" wheezed the faint and plaintive protest. "For poor old Giles is dying, dying! Ah, the wicked agony of it! And the generators are wrecked, burned up! Destroyed by that fearful vibration! They can never be repaired—not even by the rare and perfect skill of Giles Habibula. Ah, poor old Giles—not all his wits and his rare and precious genius can serve him now. Doomed and dying——"

"You don't mean it, Giles!" John Star broke in. "You can fix them!"

"No, John, the things are finished, I tell you. Burned up and done!"

"That's true," Jay Kalam said. "I checked them. The geodynes are gone. We've only the rockets to keep us from smashing to smoke."

John Star dragged himself grimly to the firing keys, muttering:

"Now is when we need the fuel we left on Pluto's moon!"

Chapter Fourteen

Corsair Sun

DOWN upon the huge, expanding, yellow-red planet the *Purple Dream* was hurtling, rocket blasts thundering forward at full power to check her flight—if it could be checked short of catastrophe.

Jay Kalam watched, gravely anxious, as John Star swiftly took the readings from a score of instruments, set them up on the calculators, and snapped down another key.

"What do you find?"

"A close thing," John Star said slowly, at last. "Much too close. At very nearly the same time, three things will happen. Our velocity will be braked, we'll approach the planet, and the rockets will run out of fuel.

"But that dense red atmosphere hides the surface—I can't tell just how far down it is. If it's too near, we smash before our momentum is checked. If it's too far, we'll be falling again—with all the fuel gone. It has to be just right—or else!"

"Then," Jay Kalam calmly observed, "we await the event. How long?"

"Two hours at full power will empty the tanks."

Jay Kalam nodded his lean grave

head, and turned silently back to his tele-periscope. After a moment he tensed suddenly, and turned to point out a new red spark that had crept unseen into the telltale screen.

"Another black flier," he announced. "Out to see the fireworks when we hit, I imagine—they must have spotted us, running past their satellite-forts."

John Star picked it up on his own instrument—a monstrous shape of gleaming black metal; wide vanes moving, strange and slow, about the huge black belly of its hull. Not far above them, it was merely keeping pace with their fall, making no hostile move.

"Waiting to see us smash!" he muttered. "Or to pick us off if we don't!"

"I'm going to get Commander Ulnar," Jay Kalam said abruptly. "I'm going to let him hail them. We've very little left to lose, and everything to gain. Perhaps we can ransom Aladoree. Whatever the Ulnars have offered, the System can afford to raise it—to save her and AKKA."

John Star nodded—perhaps there was a chance. Jay Kalam brought Adam Ulnar to the bridge. The tall Commander was still white and

shaken from their passage through the radiation-barrier, but his haggard face smiled faintly.

"Congratulations, John! I never thought you'd get us through."

Jay Kalam told him in a hard, tight voice:

"I'm going to let you talk, Commander. I'll give you a chance to save your life—and to save Aladoree Anthar and her secret for the Green Hall. I'll leave the details to you. But I'm sure the Green Hall would approve any necessary ransom. And I promise you—if you can help us get Aladoree safely back to the System—I promise that you'll go free."

THANK you, Kalam." The white, distinguished head made him a slight and half-ironic bow. "Thank you for the very touching measure of your trust in me. But it's true that I don't want to die, and true that Eric has blundered very foolishly in his management of the enterprise I planned—for the girl should never have been brought here at all.

"So I'll do what I can."

Sharply, John Star studied that proud face, etched with years but handsome still. For all his hatred of what this kinsman had done, he could see sincerity there, and honor, and reassuring strength.

"Very well," Jay Kalam said. "You can hail them from on board?"

"With the ultra-wave transmitter." The Commander nodded. "The Me-

dusæ, you see, are not sensitive to sound—though Eric's men named them for some terrestrial jellyfish, they're really like nothing in the System. They communicate with short waves, directly. I know the code of signals that Eric's men worked out—I used to talk, from the Purple Hall, with the agents they sent to the System."

"Go ahead," Jay Kalam told him. "Get that ship to give us a line, before we crash. Get them to bring Aladoree Anthar safe on board, and to give us what we need to repair the geodynes. And make them open the barrier so we can get away—I don't think we'd survive another passage through it. Promise what you like—but you had better be convincing."

"I'll do what I can."

And Adam Ulnar sat down at the compact panel of the ship's transmitter, his hollowed face visibly strained and eager. He quickly tuned the frequency he wanted, and then began making sounds into the microphone—sounds instead of words, awkward grunts and clicks and whistles.

The reply which came presently from the receiver was stranger still. The voices of the Medusæ were shrill whisperings, dry and eerie, so utterly unearthly that John Star, listening, shuddered to a chill of undiluted horror.

Adam Ulnar, too, seemed to find amazed horror in what he heard. His lean jaw slackened with surprise. He

was suddenly trembling, his lax face very white and abruptly pearlyed with sweat. His staring eyes were black.

Again he made queer little sounds into the transmitter, his voice so dry that he could scarcely form them. Dry rustlings came back from the receiver. He listened a long time, staring at nothing. At last the alien chirping ceased. Mechanically he reached a white and shaking hand to snap off the transmitter, and he came woodenly to his feet.

"What was it?" breathed John Star. "What did they say?"

"Nothing good," Adam Ulnar muttered blankly. Shakenly he clutched at a handrail to steady himself. "The worst that could have happened. Yet it's something I've dreaded—ever since I heard of Eric's foolish alliance."

His sick eyes gazed at the bulk-head, seeing nothing.

"What has happened?" John Star demanded.

ADAM ULNAR rubbed a trembling hand across his sweat-beaded forehead.

"I scarcely dare to tell you, John. Because you'll blame me for it. And I suppose I am to blame—it was I who sent Eric out here with the expedition, so he'd have a chance to make himself a hero. Eric the Second!" He chuckled, without mirth. "Yes, I'm to blame."

"But what have they done?"

His glazed eyes came to John Star's face in mute appeal.

"Please don't think I planned it, John! But the Medusæ have tricked Eric—and the rest of us, it seems. They bargained to help us restore the Empire, in return for a shipload of iron. Now it seems they intend taking a good deal more."

His gaunt frame shuddered.

"They told me more of their history, just now, than Eric ever learned—and it's quite a history. They're old, John. Their sun is old. Their race was old, on that ghastly planet, before our Earth was ever born. They're too old, John—but they don't intend to die."

"The remarkable motion of Barnard's Star, they tell me now, is a thing of their own accomplishment. Because the mineral resources of their own planet were used up long ago, they've arranged to visit others. In their career across the Galaxy, they live by looting the worlds they pass, and sometimes plant a colony—that's to be the fate of Earth, they tell me."

He shook his white head with a sick, slow motion.

"Please, John," he whispered, "don't think I ever intended that!"

John Star and Jay Kalam stood voiceless with shock. The thing was unthinkable, but John Star knew it must be true. Reason insisted that the Medusæ would scarcely join an interstellar war for a single cargo of iron. And Adam Ulnar's horrified remorse appeared sincere enough.

Dazed, John Star pictured the

doom of humanity. The System couldn't fight a science that built these black spider-ships of space and armed them with atomic suns for weapons; a science that fortified a planet with a belt of artificial satellites, and guided a star itself like a red corsair across the Galaxy.

No, the System didn't have a chance—not with the Legion of Space already betrayed by its own Commander's treason, and AKKA already in the hands of the monstrous enemy.

"Please, John!" Adam Ulnar's broken voice was thin with a sick appeal. "Please don't think I intended this. And now, if you please—I really want that little vial."

HARSHLY, John Star rasped: "You don't deserve to die!"

"No, Commander," Jay Kalam told him gravely. "You must live—at least a little longer. If we survive the landing, you may yet have a chance to help undo your treason." He led the stumbling prisoner back to his cell.

Rockets still roaring, the *Purple Dream* fell. Intended only for the delicate maneuvering of takeoffs and landings, the rocket motors were never designed for such a task as this. Braking the terrific velocity which had brought them safely through the radiation barrier was a job for the geodynes—but the geodynes were gone. John Star stood

rigid by the controls, fighting for the last ounce of power from the last drop of fuel; fighting to stop the cruiser in time.

The black spider-ship dropped after them. The efficient Medusæ watched—curious, no doubt, to observe the effects of their barrier rays on the wreckage of the ship. And ready, certainly, with some new weapon, if these rash invaders did survive the landing.

Thick red mist came up about the *Purple Dream*.

The black flier following became a dim vast shadow in the murk. All else was lost. And still the cruiser fell, toward the unseen world beneath the red-lit clouds. The rockets paused in their even thunder, came back, barked in a loud back-fire—and stopped.

"The fuel is out," John Star whispered. "Still falling—and nothing we can do!"

Hands knotted with an agony of powerless inaction, he peered into the thick, red-lit mist ahead. His straining eyes made out a surface—something smooth and glistening. It flashed up to meet them.

"A sea!" he breathed. "Going down——"

Panic choked him, but he heard Jay Kalam's voice, soft and calm even in the last moment of their plunging fall:

"Anyhow, John, we've got to the planet where Aladoree is."

Chapter Fifteen

Under the Unknown Sea

SO WE'RE stuck on the bottom of a mortal sea?" observed Giles Habibula.

His mood was not rejoicing. He had the voice of a well-grown and lusty tomcat protesting a weighty tread on its tail.

John Star nodded soberly, and he continued bitterly: "Twenty long, loyal years I've truly served the Legion, since that evil day on Venus, when——"

He checked himself, with a roll of his fishy eye, and John Star prompted:

"How was it you came to join?"

"Twenty years, lad, old Giles has served in the Legion, as stout and true a blessed man, and—ah, yes, in good life's name!—as brave a soldier as ever was!"

"Yes, I know. But——"

"Old Giles has put his past behind him, lad." His voice turned reproachfully plaintive. "He has redeemed himself, if ever a daring hero did. And look at him now, bless his precious bones!"

"Accused for a wicked pirate, when for twenty long years he's never done more than—when for twenty eternal years he's been a noble

warrior in the Legion. Ah, yes, lad, look at old Giles Habibula. Look at him before you now!"

His voice broke; a great tear trembled in the corner of his fishy eye, as if terrified by the purple magnitude of the nose below, hesitated and dared and splashed down unheeded.

"Look at poor old Giles! Hunted like a dog out of his own native System. Driven like a rabbit into interstellar space. Hurled headlong into this planet of ghastly danger and crawling horrors. Stuck to spend the rest of his cheerless days of suffering in a wreck on the bottom of an evil sea!"

"Pitiful old Giles Habibula! For years he's been feeble, tottering, with gray hairs crowning his mortal head. He's been ill and lame. He's been forgotten, stuck away at a lonely, desolate little outpost on Mars."

"Now he's trapped to starve and die in a wreck on the bottom of a fearful yellow sea! Where's the precious justice of that, lad?"

HE BURIED his great face in his hands, and trembled to sobs somewhat resembling the death-struggles of a harpooned whale. But it was not long before he straight-

ened, and wiped his fishy eyes with the back of his fat hand.

"Anyhow, lad," he wheezed wearily, "let's have a drop of wine to help forget the frightful miseries that are piled upon us. And a taste of cold ham and biscuit. And there's a case of canned cheese I found in the stores the other day."

"And I'll tell you about that time on Venus, lad. It was a brave adventure—if I hadn't stumbled over a wicked reading lamp in the dark! For poor old Giles Habibula was clever, then, and nimble as you are, lad."

"No, we've no way to move the ship," John Star repeated, standing with Jay Kalam, a little later, on the bridge. "She lies in shallow water, though—according to the pressure-gauges, she's less than a hundred feet down."

"But we can't get her to the surface?"

"No. The geodynes are dead, and the rocket-fuel gone—if we had those drums we left on Pluto's moon! And the hull is too heavy to float. Wasn't designed for water navigation."

"Still," objected Jay Kalam, thoughtfully grave, yet with a calm determination that meant more than another's utmost vehemence. "Still, we can't give up. Not so long as we're alive and on the same planet with Aladoree."

"No," agreed John Star, quietly decisive. "If we could release her, just long enough to find materials

and set up AKKA, we'd have the Medusæ at our mercy."

"That is what we must do—what we shall do."

"And now," he added, "let's talk to Adam Ulnar."

They found the man sitting wan and dejected on his cot in the brig, still dazed from the shock of the Medusæ's revelation. The regal pride of the Purple Hall had left him. He was staring blankly at the wall, dry lips moving. At first he was not aware of them; John Star heard the whispered words:

"Traitor! Betrayer of mankind."

"Adam Ulnar," called John Star, torn between pity and scorn for the shaken creature who stared up at them with a kind of listless fear. "Are you willing to help undo your crime?"

A LITTLE flicker of interest, of hope, came into the dull, tortured eyes. But the Commander of the Legion shook his head.

"I would help," his voice was dully droning, lifeless, "I'd do anything. But it's too late. Too late, now."

"No, man!" shouted John Star. "It isn't too late. Wake up!"

Adam Ulnar got uncertainly to his feet, his haggard face anxious.

"I'll help. But what can be done?" he asked.

"We're going to find Aladoree, and set her free. Then she can wipe out the Medusæ with the power of AKKA."

He sank back, and his voice was wearily bitter:

"You are fools. You are lying in a wrecked ship on the bottom of an ocean. Aladoree is guarded in a fortress that would be impregnable to all the fleets of the Legion—if the Medusæ haven't already tortured the secret from her and done away with her! You are idle fools—though not such fools as I was——"

"Tell us what you know about the planet," rapped Jay Kalam. "The geography of its continents. And about the Medusæ. Their weapons, their civilization, where they would be likely to imprison Aladoree."

Adam Ulnar looked at them dully, out of his apathy of despair.

"I'll tell you the little I know—though it will do no good. I was never here, myself, you know. I had only the reports that Eric's expedition brought back.

"This planet is much larger than Earth. About three times the diameter. Its rotation is very slow, its day about fifteen of Earth's. The nights are fearful. A week long, and bitterly cold—a type M dwarf hasn't much heat left, you know."

His stare was drifting blankly past them; John Star urged him sharply:

"The continents?"

"There is just one large continent—about equal in area to all Earth. There's a strip of strange jungle along the shore, savage and deadly. It grows, Eric said, with amazing rapidity in the long day, and it swarms with fierce, unearthly life.

"Along the east coast, beyond the jungle, is a towering mountain range, more rugged, Eric said, than any in the System. West of the mountain is a vast, high plateau, lifeless, cut up by wild canyons. Beyond is the valley of an immense river that drains almost the whole continent.

"The Medusæ have only a single city left—life is hard on this dying planet, and the most of them have migrated to the other worlds they've conquered—as they mean to conquer ours. That city is located somewhere near the river's mouth—that's as near as I can place it."

"**A LADOREE?**" prompted John Star anxiously.

"She would be in the city, no doubt. A quite amazing place, Eric said, huge by human standards. All built of black metal. Surrounded with walls a full mile high, to keep back the dreadful jungle. There's a colossal fortress in the center, a gigantic tower of black metal. They'd be likely, I imagine, to keep her there—guarded by weapons that could annihilate all the fleets of the System in an instant."

"Anything else you know?" urged Jay Kalam, as the hunted eyes fled back into vacancy.

"No. Nothing else."

"Wake up! Think! The System is at stake!"

He started.

"No—yes, there's one thing I remember, though it won't do you

any good to warn you. The atmosphere!"

"What about the atmosphere?"

"You saw that it's reddish?"

"Yes. What—isn't it breathable?"

IT CONTAINS oxygen. You can breath it. But it's filled with the red gas. It does the Medusæ no harm—but it isn't good for men. It's an artificial organic gas, they told me when we talked. They generated it to control the climate—to cut heat radiation at night. They mean to fill the air of Earth with it, no doubt. But it isn't good for men. . . ."

He collected himself with a visible effort.

"You remember that wound on your shoulder, John? That was caused by the same red gas. Squirted on you in liquid form. The Medusæ have learned what it does to human beings. The men of Eric's expedition. . . ."

The gaunt man shuddered. "Their trouble came from just breathing this atmosphere. It didn't bother them at once, except for a slight discomfort. But later there was a mental derangement. Their flesh began to rot. And there was a good deal of pain. And then. . . ."

"Your doctors treated me, after I was burned on Mars," John Star broke in suddenly. "What was that they used?"

"We had worked out a neutralizing formula. But we haven't the ingredients on board."

"We can live, though, for a time, in spite of it?"

"For a time," he echoed dully. "Individual reactions varied, but usually the worst complications were delayed for several months."

"Then it doesn't greatly matter."

"No," Adam Ulnar spoke with a dull and bitter emphasis. "No, you'll find death, if you manage to leave the ship, in a million quicker forms. Life on this planet is very old, you know. The struggle for survival has been severe. The result is a fauna—and a flora—fit to live with the Medusæ. You'll never survive, outside the ship."

"But we're going to try," Jay Kalam informed him.

"The *Purple Dream*," John Star announced a little later when they were all five gathered on the narrow deck just within the air-lock, "is lying on the bottom of a shallow sea. The water is only about eighty feet deep. We can't move the vessel, but we can get out——"

"Get out!" echoed gigantic Hal Samdu. "How?"

"Through the air-lock. We'll have to swim to the surface, and try for the shore—with the water only eighty feet, it's likely enough that we're just off some coast. We'll have to strip for it. And we won't be able to burden ourselves with weapons or supplies."

"We could exist indefinitely here on board. Plenty of air and supplies. Perhaps we can survive only a few minutes outside. We may not even

reach the surface. If we do, it will be only to meet the dangers of a world where even the air is slow poison."

"My precious eye!" broke in Giles Habibula. "Here we're all stuck to die of slow starvation at the bottom of a fearful sea of evil. And that isn't enough! You want us to swim out like mortal fishes at the bottom of this wicked yellow ocean?"

"Precisely," agreed John Star, without a flicker of emotion.

"You want poor old Giles to drown himself like a brainless rat, when he's still got plenty of victuals and wine? Poor old Giles Habibula—"

"You're a fool, John," said Adam Ulnar, with dull and savage emphasis. "You'll never get ashore. You never heard the tales that Eric's men brought back. You don't know the sort of life—plant as well as animal—that fights for survival in the long, red days. How can you live through the nights? You were born on a kind world, John. You weren't evolved to survive on this one."

"Any of you may stay on board, who wish," Jay Kalam interrupted quietly. "John is going. And I am. Hal?"

"Of course I'll go!" rumbled the giant, reddening with slow anger. "Did you think, with Aladoree at the mercy of those monsters, that I'd stay behind?"

"Of course not, Hal. And you, Giles?"

THE fishy eyes of Giles Habibula rolled anxiously; he trembled spasmodically; sweat came out on his face; in a dry voice he spoke, with a sudden effort: "Mortal me! Do you want to go away and leave poor wretched old Giles Habibula here to starve and rot on the bottom of this wicked ocean? Life's precious sake!" he rasped convulsively. "I'll go! But first old Giles must have a taste of food to put strength in his feeble old body, and a nip of wine to steady his torn and tortured nerves."

He rolled unsteadily away toward the galley.

"And you, Commander?" demanded Jay Kalam. "Are you going?"

"No." Adam Ulnar shook his head. "It's no use. Competition has bred some very successful life forms in the seas here, I believe, as well as on the land."

The four entered the air-lock, stripped to the skin, carrying their clothing, proton guns, a few pounds of concentrated food, and—on Giles Habibula's insistence—a bottle of wine; all wrapped in a big watertight bundle.

They sealed the heavy inner valve and John Star opened the equalization tube through the outer; a thick stream of water roared into the little chamber, flooding it, rising ice-cold about their bodies, compressing the air above them. Merciless pressure squeezed them.

The infush stopped, with water

about their shoulders. John Star spun the control-wheel of the outer valve, but the armored door stuck fast.

"Jammed!" he gasped. "We must try it by hand."

"Let me!" cried Hal Samdu, surging forward through the chill water, his voice oddly shrill in the dense air. He set his great back against the metal valve, braced himself, strained. His muscles snapped. Agony of effort twisted his face into a strange mask. His swift breath was harsh and gasping.

John Star and Jay Kalam added their strength, all of them struggling in cold water that came to their chins, fighting for breath in the hot, stale air.

The valve gave abruptly. A rush of water swept them back. Air gurgled out. They filled their lungs out of the trapped air-pocket, dragged themselves out through the opening, and swam desperately for the surface.

DARK water, numbingly cold, weighed on them crushingly.

John Star fought the relentless, overwhelming pressure of it; he fought a savage urge to empty his tortured lungs and breathe. He struggled upward through grim infinities of time. Then suddenly, surprisingly, he was upon the surface of the yellow sea, sobbing for his breath.

Flat and glistening, an oily yellow-red under the cold red sky, the unknown sea stretched away into murky crimson distance. It lifted and fell in long, slow swells.

At first he was alone. Jay Kalam's head burst up beside him, dripping, panting. Then Hal Samdu's red hair. They waited, gasping for life, too breathless for speech. They waited a long time, and at last Giles Habibula's bald dome came up, fringed with thin white hair.

They swam on the yellow sea, and breathed deeply, gratefully—forgetful that every breath was slow poison.

The blank surface lay away from them, a waste of silent desolation. The sky was a cold lowering dome of sullen crimson; the sun burned low in it, an incredibly huge disk of deeper, sinister scarlet. A dying dwarf, old when the Sun of Earth was born, it seemed too cold to warm them.

"Our next problem!" panted John Star. "The shore!"

"The bundle," muttered Hal Samdu. "With the guns. Didn't float!"

Indeed, it had not appeared.

"My blessed bottle of wine!" wept Giles Habibula.

Then they were all silent. Some large, unseen body had plunged above the yellow surface near them; had fallen back with a noisy splash.

Chapter Sixteen

Black Continent to Cross

THEY waited, treading water, getting back their breath, while they watched for the precious package which held their clothing and weapons and food, and Giles Habibula's bottle of wine.

"It isn't coming up," John Star despaired at last. "We must strike out for the shore without it."

"It leaked, I suppose," said Jay Kalam. "Or hung in the valve."

"Or it may have been swallowed," wheezed Giles Habibula, "by the monster that made that fearful splash. Ah, my precious wine——"

"Which way is the shore?" demanded Hal Samdu.

Away from their bobbing heads reached the oily, heaving yellow sea, unbroken by any landmark. Oppressively low overhead hung the gloomy sky, thick with the murk of that red poison gas. Far across the sea burned the vast, sullen sun, a blood-red ball. A light breeze touched their faces, so faint it hardly scarred the yellow surface.

"We've two possible guides," observed Jay Kalam, keeping afloat with a calm, unhurried efficiency of motion. "The sun, and the wind."

"How——?"

"The sun is low but rising. It must, then, be in the east. That tells us direction.

"As for the wind, there would surely be a sea-breeze on the coast of a continent so large as Adam Ulnar described. At this time in the morning the wind should just be rising from the sea, as the air over the land-mass begins to warm and ascend."

"So we swim with the wind? Toward the west?"

"Our best chance, I think, though the reasoning is based on a very incomplete astronomical and geographical knowledge of the planet. Too bad we couldn't have got a glimpse of the continent, through this murk, as we fell. For it could easily be that we aren't near the coast at all, but simply over some shoal. But I think our best chance is to swim with the wind."

They struck out away from the red sun. John Star with a steady, effortless crawl. Hal Samdu breaking the water with slow, powerful strokes. Jay Kalam swimming with a deliberate, noiseless efficiency. Giles Habibula puffing, splashing, falling a little behind. For a time that seemed hours, they swam, until he gasped out to them imploringly:

"For sweet life's sake! Let's rest a bit! What's the mortal hurry?"

"We may as well," agreed Jay Kalam. "The shore may be within two miles. Or it may be two hundred, or two thousand."

They treaded water for a time, and then swam on again with slow, weary determination.

AT FIRST they had noticed nothing unusual in the air. But John Star presently became aware of an irritation of his eyes and nostrils, an oppression in his laboring lungs. He found himself coughing a little; presently he heard the others coughing. The unpleasant fate of those survivors of Eric Ulnar's expedition came to his mind, but he kept his silence.

It was Giles Habibula who spoke: "This red and fearful air! Already it's choking me to death! Poor old Giles! Ah, it's not enough that he should be flung into the unknown ocean of an alien, monstrous planet, to die swimming like a luckless rat in a tub of buttermilk.

"Ah, mortal me! That's not enough! He must be poisoned with this wicked red gas, that will make a raving mortal maniac out of him, and eat the very flesh off his poor old bones with an evil green leprosy! Poor old soldier——"

A tremendous splash cut short his melancholy wheezing; a huge, tapering body, black and glistening, had plunged above the yellow surface behind him, and dived cleanly back.

"My blessed bones!" he gasped. "Some fearful whale, come to swallow all of us!"

Unpleasantly aware that they were drawing the attention of the unknown denizens of the yellow sea, they all swam harder—until the creature leaped again, in front of them.

"Don't exhaust yourselves," Jay Kalam's calm voice came above their frantic splashing. "We can't distance it. But perhaps it won't attack."

Then Giles Habibula sobbed abruptly: "Another monstrous horror!"

They saw a curving, saw-toothed black fin, cutting the oily yellow surface not far away. It swept toward them, cleaved a complete circle about them, and vanished for a time, only to appear again and cut another circle.

"They're making us a precious circus," wheezed Giles Habibula. "And then, no doubt, a wicked feast!"

"Look, there ahead!" boomed keen-eyed Hal Samdu, abruptly. "Something black, floating."

John Star soon made it out, a long black object, low in the water, still veiled in the sullen, red-yellow murk.

"Can't tell what it is. Might be a log. Or something swimming."

"My mortal eye!" shrieked Giles Habibula suddenly; and he fell to furious splashing, purple-faced, desperately groaning for breath.

"What's the matter, Giles?"

"Some—frightful monster—nibbling away—at my blessed toes!"

They swam doggedly on, toward that black and distant object.

John Star felt a harsh, stinging rasp against his thigh; he saw his own blood staining the yellow water at his side. "Something just took off a sample bit of me!"

"They must be just investigating us," said Jay Kalam. "When they find we don't fight back——"

"That is a log, ahead!" shouted Hal Samdu.

"Then we must reach it, climb on it——"

"—before these wicked creatures eat us up alive!" finished Giles Habibula.

D RIVING leaden-weary muscles to the utmost, they struggled on. John Star was toiling for air, every breath a stabbing pain, every slow stroke a supreme act of will. The others, he knew, were as near exhaustion; Hal Samdu's red ugly face was savage with effort; Jay Kalam's white and set; Giles Habibula, panting, splashing desperately, was purple-faced. But each fought doggedly on, in his own way.

The yellow surface for a time was clear. Then the black, saw-toothed fin came back; it cut the water in a deliberate curve, and came slicing directly at John Star.

He waited until it was near; then he splashed suddenly, shouted, kicked out at it. His bare feet came laceratingly against sharp scales. The

fin turned, vanished. For a while the surface was again unbroken.

On they swam, every breath a torturing flame, every stroke an agony. The black log came near, a huge rough cylinder, a hundred feet long, covered with coarse, scaly bark. On its upper side, at one end, they could see a curious greenish excretion.

Ahead of them, something splashed again. The curved black fin looped its silent way between them and the log.

They swam on, drawing the energy for every stroke from sheer desperation. The curving rough surface was above them. John Star was all but grasping for it, when he felt sharp jaws close on his ankle. A savage tug dragged him strangling under the surface.

He bent himself double, hands jabbing at a hard, sharp-scaled body, free foot kicking. His hands found something soft that felt like an eye. His fingers gouged into it; jabbed, hooked and tore.

The thing writhed under him, rolling and twisting furiously. He jabbed again, kicked desperately. His ankle came free; he struggled for the surface, strangling. His head burst above the yellow water, and he cleared his eyes to see the curved black fin cutting straight at him.

Then Hal Samdu's giant hand clutched his arm from behind, hauled him up; he found himself seated with the others on the great black cylinder of the log.

"My mortal eye!" wheezed Giles Habibula. "That was a wicked narrow—"

He stopped with a gasp, his fishy eyes bulging; Jay Kalam observed quietly:

"We've a companion on board."

JOHN STAR saw the thing he had already observed as a greenish excrescence on the other end of the log. A huge mass of muddily translucent, jelly-like matter, that must have weighed several tons, in color a dull, slimy green, it clung to the black bark with a score of shapeless pseudopods.

Slowly, with baleful, unknown senses, it became aware of them. Semiliquid streams began to flow within its formless bulk, as they watched in puzzled horror; it thrust out extensions, flowed into them, and so began an appalling march down the log, toward them.

"What is the fearful thing?"

"A gigantic amoeba, apparently," said Jay Kalam. "Looking for dinner."

"And he'll find it," estimated John Star, "at his present rate of motion, in about half an hour."

The four men, naked, exhausted and defenseless, sat on their own end of the log, watching thin green arms thrusting out, and slow streams of semifluid jelly flowing to swell them. The whole hideous bulk never seemed to move, yet was ever nearer.

How would it feel to be engulfed in it? To be seized by the shapeless,

creeping arms, drawn into the avid, boneless mass, inch by inch, smothered and consumed. John Star caught his breath, and tried to shake off that hypnosis of slow horror, and peered around him desperately.

Sullenly red was the sky above. An angry, brighter red, the enormous, sinister disk of the sun burned low in the east. The wind, freshening out of it, ruffled the surface of the yellow sea. Yellow horizons melted into reddish haze. Around and around the log, in endless circles, sliced a curved, saw-toothed fin, ever searching, patiently waiting.

The colossal amoeba reached the middle of the log.

"When it gets here," suggested John Star doubtfully, "we might dive off and try for the other end again."

"And be swallowed alive in the mortal water!" predicted Giles Habibula dolefully. "Old Giles is going to stay where he can see what eats him."

"The wind," said Jay Kalam, hopefully, "is drifting us toward the shore—I hope. And it should be near, or there wouldn't be driftwood."

The creeping horror was three-fourths of the way down the log when sharp-eyed Hal Samdu shouted:

"The shore! I see land!"

Far-off, under the smoky red horizon at the rim of the yellow sea, was a low dark line.

"But it's miles," said John Star.

"We must get past this monster, somehow——"

"We can rock the log," suggested Jay Kalam. "Turn it. And run past while our fellow-passenger is underneath."

"And likely spill ourselves off to feed the wicked things in the water, when it turns over!"

BUT they stood up, perilously, on the rough bark, and stepped in unison, at Jay's Kalam's word, from side to side. At first their huge craft showed no visible motion; the great amoeba continued its unhurried flowing.

Gradually, however, under their combined weight, the log began to spin lazily back and forth, each time a little farther. The wet bark was slippery; Giles Habibula sprawled, once, and gasped in terror as John Star dragged him back:

"Bless my bones! Poor old Giles is no nimble monkey, lad——"

The black fin cut close beneath; his fishy eyes rolled after it.

The nearest reaching arm of formless, avidly flowing, green jelly was not five feet away, when the log passed the point of equilibrium; it turned suddenly, and set them scrambling desperately on hands and knees to keep on top.

"Now!" breathed Jay Kalam.

Clinging to one another, they scrambled unsteadily along the wet surface, toward the other end, safe again for a time. But the great mass of hungry protoplasm appeared

again above the log, green and dripping. Its senses somehow found them. It flowed again.

Twice they repeated that awkward maneuver, before the log touched bottom.

A black world lay ahead, ominous and dreadful.

The yellow shallows lapped on a beach of bare black sand. Beyond the beach rose an amazing jungle—a dark wall of thorns. Straight, dead-black spines, flaming with innumerable huge violet blooms, bristling with thousands of barbed and savage points. An impenetrable barrier of woven swords, easily a hundred feet high.

Above the gloomy jungle of thorns rose the mountain ranges; immense peaks towered up, rampart behind gigantic rampart, a rugged, precipitous, sky-looming wilderness of crags, bare, grimly and lifelessly black. The last somber wall drew its ragged edge across the crimson, sullen sky midway to the zenith.

Black sand, black jungle of thorns, black barrier of nightmare ranges, under a scarlet sky; the world ahead was shadowed by a spirit of hostile malevolence; it slowed the heart with nameless dread.

"Ashore!" exulted John Star, as they splashed through the shallows, waving a mocking farewell to the amoeba on the log, so narrowly cheated of its prey.

"Yes, we're ashore," agreed Jay Kalam. "But, you observe, on an eastern coast. The city of the Me-

dusæ is somewhere on the west coast, the Commander said. That means we have this jungle to cross, and those mountains, and all the continent beyond."

"Ah, yes, a black continent ahead,

full of mortal horrors," wept Giles Habibula. "Ah, me, and we've no weapons, we're naked as blessed babes. Not even a bite to eat! Poor old Giles, destined to starve on the alien shores of evil——"

Chapter Seventeen

The Rope in the Jungle

“WEAPONS," began Jay Kalam, "are what we must first——"

John Star caught his breath with pain as something jabbed into his bare foot, and broke in with a wry smile:

"Here's one to begin with. Edge like a razor—warranted!"

He picked up the thing he had stepped on, a wide black shell, with a curving edge. Jay Kalam examined it seriously.

"Good enough," he said. "A useful blade."

He looked for others, as they walked up the beach, and found one for each of his companions. Giles Habibula accepted his disdainfully:

"Ah, for life's sake, Jay! Do you expect me, with this feeble thing, to cut a way through those frightful daggers and bayonets waiting for us ahead—waiting to slice us into bleeding ribbons?"

He pointed at the black thorn-jungle.

"And so we're armed," Jay Kalam told him. "As soon as we can cut a spear apiece."

They approached the black, violet-flowing barrier of thorns and spines and hooked spikes. Many of the blades were ten feet long; the close-grained wood seemed hard and sharp as steel. Naked and sensitive as their bodies were, it was not easy for the four to get near the blades they had selected; it proved less easy to cut and shape the ironhard wood with shells.

Weary hours had passed before each of them was equipped with a ten-foot spear, and a shorter, triangular, saw-toothed dagger. Hal Samdu shaped himself also a great club from a piece of driftwood.

"Ah, so now we set out to cross a whole fearful continent on our bare, blessed feet——" Giles Habibula had begun, with a last regretful look back toward the yellow sea, when his fishy eyes spied something. He ran heavily back toward the beach.

It was their bundle he found,

drifted ashore while they worked.

"Our clothes, again!" exulted John Star. "And real guns!"

"And my blessed bottle of wine!" wheezed Giles Habibula, laboring to open the bundle on the sand.

Their hopes for weapons were dashed. The package had leaked; their clothing was sodden, most of the food ruined, the delicate mechanism of the proton guns quite useless from contact with the corrosive yellow water.

Only the bottle of wine was completely undamaged. Giles Habibula held it up toward the red sun, regarding it with a fond fishy eye.

"Open it," suggested Hal Samdu. "We need something——"

Giles Habibula swallowed regretfully, and slowly shook his head.

"Ah, no, Hal," he said sadly. "When it's gone there'll be no more. Not a precious drop of wine on the whole evil continent. Ah, no, it must be preserved for an hour of greater need."

He set it down firmly but carefully on the black sand.

DISCARDING the useless proton guns, they finished as much of the food as remained edible, and gratefully donned their half-dry clothing—even under the continual radiation of the near sun and the blanket of heat absorbing red gas, the atmosphere was far from tropical. John Star rudely bandaged the lacerations on thigh and ankle that he had sustained on the way ashore.

Giles Habibula stowed the bottle of wine in one of his ample pockets, carefully wrapped against breakage. And they plunged into the jungle.

Thick, fleshy black stems rose close about them, twisted together overhead in an unbroken tangle, bristling with knife-sharp, saw-toothed blades. The dense roof of thorns hid the crimson sky completely; merely a ghastly bloodhued twilight filtered to the jungle floor.

With infinite caution they picked a way under the tangle of blades, and even caution did not save them. Clothing suffered; each of them was soon bleeding from a dozen minor cuts that throbbed painfully from the poison of the blades. And soon they met a danger more appalling.

"One advantage," Jay Kalam was observing, "is that if the thorns hinder us, they also hinder any enemies that—ugh!"

A little choking cry cut off his grave voice. John Star turned to see him carried off the ground by a long purple rope. Hanging from the crimson gloom above, it had wrapped itself twice about his body, and clapped a flat, terminal sucking-disk to his throat. Struggling savagely, he was helpless in the contracting, inch-thick tentacle. Swiftly, it drew him up into the tangle of black thorns.

John Star leaped after him, dagger lifted, but already he had been carried out of reach.

"Throw me, Hal!" he gasped.

The giant seized him by knee and

thigh, flung him mightily upward toward the red-lit roof of thorns. With one grasping hand he seized a coil of the tough purple cable. Immediately it shortened, drawing him higher, forming another loop to throw about his body.

Hanging on with one hand, he sawed at it with his dagger in the other, above Jay Kalam's shoulder. Tough purple skin cut through; a thin, violet-colored fluid streamed out and down his arm—sap or blood, he did not know. Hard fibers, inside, formed a core that did not cut so easily.

A coil slipped about his shoulders, constricted savagely.

"Thank you, John," Jay Kalam whispered faintly, voiceless, but without panic. "But turn loose, while you can."

He sawed and hacked away, silently.

SUDDENLY there was red in the streaming fluid—it was, he knew, Jay Kalam's blood.

The purple cable contracted spasmodically, with agonizing, bone-cracking force.

"Too—too late! Sorry—John!"

Jay Kalam's white face went limp.

He made a last, fierce effort, as unendurable pressure forced the breath from his lungs in a long gasp of agony. The live cable parted, they fell.

They were, the next John Star knew, outside the jungle.

He was lying on his back, in a

little glade covered with some soft, fine-bladed plant, of a brilliant and metallic blue. Below, over the top of the black thorn-jungle, he could see the oily yellow ocean, a glistening golden desert under the low and sullen sun.

Above towered black mountain ranges. Vast sloping fields strewn with titanic ebon boulders. Bare, rugged, jetblack precipices. Barrier of peaks beyond barrier of somber, Cyclopean peaks, until the jagged dark line of them scarred the red and murky sky.

Jay Kalam lay beside him on the blue grassy stuff, still unconscious. Hal Samdu and Giles Habibula were busy over a little fire by the edge of a tiny, flashing stream that crossed the glade. Incredulous, he caught the scent of meat cooking.

"What happened?" he called, and sat up painfully, his body aching from the inflamed wounds of the jungle thorns.

"Ah, so you're awake at last, lad?" Giles Habibula wheezed cheerfully.

"Well, lad, Hal and poor old Giles got the two of you out of the mortal jungle, after you fell back wrapped in the end of that evil tentacle. It wasn't so far. Here in the valley, Hal threw his spear at a little creature grazing on the blue grass, and I struck sparks with stones to make a fire.

"That's the story, lad. We're through the jungle. But we've got these mortal mountains to climb, when you and Jay are able, and good

life knows what dreadful terrors are lying in wait beyond. Ah, if that wicked purple rope is a fair sample—

"Mortal me, lad! This life's too strenuous for such a precious feeble old man as Giles Habibula, that deserves to be sitting somewhere in a blessed easy chair, with a sip of wine to lift his dear old heart from the woe that weighs it down."

HE CAST a fishy eye at the bulge in his pocket.

"Ah, yes, I've one mortal bottle. But that must wait for the hour of greater need—it will come, soon enough, life knows, with a continent of wicked, crawling horror just ahead!"

Up the mountain barrier they clambered, when Jay Kalam and John Star were able. Over tumbled heaps of colossal black boulders. Up sheer, rugged slopes. Mountain range after wild range they mounted, always to find a wilder, more rugged range beyond.

Slowly the enormous, scarlet sun, which was their compass, wheeled across the gloomy crimson sky, through the long week of its progress. Often they were hungry, and often thirsty, and always deadly

tired. The air grew thin and colder as they climbed, until they were never warm, until the least exertion meant exhaustion.

Sometimes they killed the little animals that grazed the blue grass, to cook them while they rested. They drank from icy mountain torrents. They slept a little, shivering in the sunshine, one of them always on guard.

"We must go on," Jay Kalam urged forever. "The night must not catch us here. It will be a week of darkness and frightful cold. We couldn't live through it here."

But it was already sunset when they mounted the last divide. They looked across a vast plateau, lifeless so far as they could see, black and grimly desolate. It was piled with masses of dark rock, riven and scarred from old volcanic cataclysm. A wild waste of utter black. In the darkling sky hung the dying sun, its sinister disk already bitten with fangs of ebon stone.

"We would die, here, surely," said Jay Kalam. "We must go on."

And they went on, breathless in the thin, bitter air, as the sun's red disk was slowly gnawed away by the western horizon, and a chill wind rose about them.

Chapter Eighteen

Night and the City of Doom

FOR hours they hastened on, across that high black plateau, the bitter promise of approaching night increasing in the air. The huge dome of the sun went down before them. It was gone. In the lurid crimson twilight they came to the chasm's rim.

Sheer walls dropped a full thousand feet. A mighty gorge crossed the plateau, a huge, cliff-walled trench filled with red, murky dusk.

"A river," Jay Kalam pointed out, "with forest along it. That means firewood and the chance of food. We might find a cave in the cliffs. We must climb down."

"Climb down!" snorted Giles Habibula. "Like a lot of human flies!"

But they found a slope that looked less menacing. John Star led the descent, clambering down over heaps of fallen, colossal black rocks, sliding down banks of talus, scrambling and dropping down sheer precipices. All of them were bruised and lacerated against jagged rock; all of them took reckless chances, for the dread night came swiftly.

Only the faintest crimson glow marked the slash of sky between the

canyon walls when at last they stumbled into the strip of strange black forest at the bottom. They were trembling with cold, violent as had been their exertions; ice-crystals already fringed the river.

Giles Habibula started a blaze, while the others gathered dead wood among the cruel-bladed trees.

"We must find shelter," said Jay Kalam. "We can't live outside."

With torches they explored the frowning canyon wall. John Star came upon a round, eight-foot tunnel. He shouted for the others, and entered, flaring torch in one hand and spear in the other. The air had an acrid fetor and he found great strange tracks on the sandy floor.

The cavern proved vacant. At the rear was a twenty-foot hollow.

"Made to our order," he cried, meeting the others in the entrance. "Some creature has lately used it, but it's gone. We can carry in firewood, and wall up the entrance—"

"Mortal me!" shrieked Giles Habibula, who had been cautiously in the rear. "We're trespassing, and here comes the frightful owner!"

They heard a crashing in the fringe of dark trees, as the thing

came up from the river. Then torch-light gleamed yellow and green on a crown of seven enormous eyes, glistened red on close-scaled armor, glinted black on terrible fangs.

It met them at the tunnel-mouth; they had no time to choose to fight or not. John Star and Jay Kalam and Hal Samdu braced their long black spears against the floor to face its charge. Giles Habibula shouted, scrambling back behind them and holding up his torch:

"I'll give you light!"

A river-creature, it must have been, by day, wont to hibernate through the dreadful night. It was serpent-like, thick as an elephant, covered with hard red armor; it had innumerable limbs, the foremost armed with savage talons.

JOHN STAR'S spear, set against the floor, was driven by the force of its charge into the side of its armored snout.

With a screaming, evil-odored blast of air and sound, the creature tossed up its head, splintering the shaft against the roof. A black tongue, hooked with cruel spines, darted at him. He ducked too late. It impaled his shoulder through garments and flesh, yanked him spinning toward black-toothed, yawning jaws.

He struck with his torch the seven great eyes set in a crown of armor, and thrust it ahead of him into that hot, reeking maw.

The monster screamed again. The

tongue lashed, flailing him from side to side of the passage; it drew him back, numb, bleeding, half-conscious, into that black, fetid throat.

Hal Samdu's spear came past him, sank deep in the roof of the yawning mouth. He was vaguely aware of the gigantic club, raining pile-driver blows on the crown of eyes and the armored skull. Then he saw the black fangs, closing down.

His shoulder was bound, when he came to; he was lying by a fire in the cave. The others were busy, carrying in firewood, and great pieces of meat from the huge carcass at the entrance.

"'Tis fearful cold, outside, lad!" Giles Habibula informed him through chattering teeth. "Snowing, with a wicked blizzard roaring down the canyon. The river's already ice. Poor old Giles is too feeble for such a life as this, bless his dear old bones! Killing dragon-monsters in the wilderness of a world where men never ought to be!"

Even by the fire in the cave, the long night reached them with cruel fingers. When they at last emerged again, after the long, grim battle with merciless cold, they found the river a racing torrent. Fed by melting snows, it rose almost to the cave.

"We shall build a raft," decided Jay Kalam. "And follow the rivers across the continent to the city."

WITH improvised tools of stone, they laboriously fastened fallen logs together. The slow sun had

already reached the zenith when they poled the clumsy vessel out into the rushing stream, to begin the voyage to the black and unknown city by the western sea.

Four painfully built rafts they lost. Two broke up on the rocks, leaving them to struggle ashore as best they might, through angry, icy rapids. One was wrecked by a green, lizardlike water animal. One they abandoned—at the last instant—before it went over a mighty fall, sudden, roaring cascade.

The onslaught of the red gas in the air was less sudden and severe than John Star had feared. They all developed persistent coughs, but nothing more alarming. He came to suspect that Adam Ulnar had exaggerated the danger.

Week-long days came and departed, and eternal nights of savage cold, when they fastened the raft and came ashore to fight for food and warmth.

Below the thundering fall the canyon was a Cyclopean gorge; the river ran between black and topless walls in perpetual red twilight. Then they came out upon a larger stream, that carried them away from the mountains, and out across an interminable plain. For endless days they floated between low fringes of black vegetation—plants that died in the bitter nights, and grew amazingly again by day.

The river grew wider, deeper, its yellow torrent swifter. The somber, menacing jungles along its banks

mounted even higher, the animal life in water and jungle and air grew larger and more ferocious. With spear and dagger and club, with fire and bow and fist, they fought many times for possession of the raft.

They had become four lean, haggard men—even Giles Habibula was skin and bone and plaintive protest—black from exposure, ragged, unkempt, shaggy, scarred from many wounds. But they had gained an iron endurance, a new courage, an absolute confidence in one another.

Through all of it, Giles Habibula carried his bottle of wine. He defended it when the camp was attacked by a great flying thing, with splendid wings like sheets of sapphire; a thing that sought their bodies with a deadly, whipping sting. He dived for it when the green river-creature destroyed the raft. Many times he held it up to the red heavens, gazing at it with bitter longing in his fishy eyes.

"Ah, dear life, but a sip of it would be precious now," his plaintive voice would wheeze. "But when it's gone there'll be none—not a blessed drop of wine on the whole evil continent. Ah, I must save it for a greater need."

THEY were drifting one day near the middle of the river, vast now, a deep, mighty yellow flood, ten miles wide. Awesome walls of black jungle towered along its banks; barriers of violet-flowering thorns, interwoven with deadly purple vines;

brakes of towering canes that whipped out at anything moving like living swords; gigantic trees laden with black moss that was blood-sucking death. Above the jungle hung the low, smoky sky, the red sun huge and sullen in the west.

Hal Samdu, at the steering-sweep, roared suddenly:

"The city! There it is!"

Like another black mountain it rose, dim in the red murk, colossal beyond belief. Above the jungle, its smooth walls leaped up, infinitely, incredibly up, to strange ebon towers and huge fantastic mechanisms. A black metropolis, designed by madmen and built by giants.

Breathless wonder and awed unease overcame the four ragged men on the raft, gazing at the city they had crossed the abyss of space and a savage continent to reach. They stood with heads back, gaping mutely at the unguessable, titanic mechanisms that topped the summits of its walls.

"Aladofee!" muttered Hal Samdu, at last. "There!"

"So Adam Ulnar thought," said Jay Kalam. "In that higher central tower—can you see it, dim in the red, above the rest?"

"Yes, I see it. But how can we get there? What good is my club—against those machines on the walls! We are no more than ants!"

"Ah, that's the word, Hal!" said Giles Habibula. "Ants! We're nothing but miserable creeping ants! Ah, me, those wicked walls look a mile

high, indeed! And the evil towers and those fearful machines half a mile more on top of them! Nothing but silly little ants! Except—a precious ant could climb the walls!"

The others kept silent. They stared over the river's yellow, raging floor, over the dark jungle barrier, at the black, unbelievable mass of the city against the sky. Jay Kalam stood grave with thought. John Star pictured the girl Aladoree as he last had seen her, gray eyes demurely cool, hair a sunlit glory of brown and red and gold. Could her quiet, fresh beauty really be still living, he wondered, shut up in the mass of somber metal ahead?

The mighty current carried them on. Beyond a bend they saw the base of the black walls, rising sheer from the yellow river; plunging up a full mile, a vertical, unbroken barrier of dead-black metal.

Hours went by, and the yellow tide bore them on.

THE city marched up out of the crimson haze, ever more awful, the bulk of it swelling to blot out half the red sky with gleaming black metal, the titanic machines that crowned it frowning down with the threat of unknown death. A palpable atmosphere of dread and horror hung over that unearthly metropolis, a sense of evil power and hostile strength, of ancient wisdom and monstrous science, for it had endured since the Earth was new.

The four ragged creatures on the

raft gazed on those marching walls with a hopeless horror. Their minds sank prostrate with realization that, unless their puny efforts could free the girl imprisoned there, the makers of this pile of black metal had also shaped the doom of mankind.

The city seemed dead at first, a somber necropolis, too old for any life. But presently they saw movement along the walls. A black spider-ship spread titanic vanes, and rose silently from a high platform to vanish in the red sky eastward.

"We must cover ourselves," said Jay Kalam. "They might be watching."

He had them screen the raft with broken branches, to look like driftwood. And the river carried them on toward the mighty wall. They were gazing upward in awe-struck silence when Hal Samdu cried:

"See them moving! Above the wall!"

And the others could presently distinguish the creatures that moved, still tiny with many miles of distance—the ancient masters of this aged planet!

John Star had glimpsed one of the Medusæ on Mars, that thing in the gondola swung from the black flier, whose weapon had struck him down. A swollen, greenish surface, wetly heaving; a huge, ovoid eye, luminous and purple. But these were the first he had fully seen.

They drifted above the wall like little green balloons. Their eyes were

tiny dark points in their bulging sides—each had four eyes, spaced at equal distances about its circumference. From the lower, circular edge, like the ropes that would have suspended the car of a balloon, hung a fringe of black and whiplike tentacles.

JOHN STAR could see the superficial likeness, the dome shape, the fringing tentacles, that had earned them the name Medusæ.

In the distance they did not look impressive. There was about them a certain grotesqueness, a slow awkwardness. They didn't look intelligent. Yet in the way they moved, floating apparently at will above the black wall, was a power and mystery that made for respect. And in the knowledge that they were the builders of this black metropolis was room for awe and terror.

The raft drifted on until the black wall shadowed them. Smooth metal towered sheer to the zenith, hiding the machines and the drifting Medusæ. The raft scraped hard metal where it rose from the water; then the boiling yellow current tossed them back again.

"We'll land," said Jay Kalam, "in the edge of the jungle below the wall."

They threw aside the screening branches, and seized long sweeps; they fought for the shore, where the river drew away from that metal precipice.

Chapter Nineteen

Giles Habibula and Black Disaster

THEY abandoned the raft when it touched bottom, taking only their crude weapons, and Giles Habibula, his priceless bottle of wine. Hal Samdu stood in the shallows, a giant hand knotted about his club, staring at the dark barrier shadowing the black jungle ahead—staring, helplessly shaking his head.

"How——?"

"There'll be a way," promised Jay Kalam, though even his confidence seemed a little strained. "First, let's get through the jungle."

They attacked the living wall, dared the death that lurked within it. Spear-sharp, poisoned spines. Blood-sucking moss. Coiling tentacles of purple vines. Blooms of fatal perfume. Animal death, that crawled and leaped and flew.

But the four had learned in a savage school to meet that jungle on even terms. A dozen hours of swimming and floundering through sucking mud, of hacking deadly vines and creeping through *chevaux-de-frise* of venomous thorns, of meeting with level spear or lifted dagger the hungry things that charged from the undergrowth or

rose from the mud or dropped from above, and they emerged from the riverbed upon the higher plain—Giles Habibula still with his bottle of wine.

Close on the right hand rose the wall, sheer and black, a mighty, overwhelming mile of it. The plain reached off to the left, covered luxuriantly with fine-leaved grass, a bright metallic blue. It sloped up in the murky distance to blue hills. From blue hills to black city ran the aqueduct.

Jay Kalam's thoughtful eyes surveyed it, a straight channel of dull black metal, miles long, which was carried from hills to ebon city on ancient, soaring arches.

"One chance," he said gravely. "We shall try."

They skirted the jungle to keep out of sight, marched twenty miles, and climbed into the blue hills. They had eaten, slept for a time, but it was still many hours till sunset when they came under the immense dam of black metal below the reservoir.

No guard was visible, but they crept up very cautiously beneath the dam. They climbed slippery, wet walls and flanges of black metal, until they came to the lip of the uncovered channel. Below roared the

cold clear torrent from the floodgate, three hundred feet wide, dark and deep.

"The water," Jay Kalam observed laconically, "gets into the city."

He dived. The others followed, leaving all but their thorn-daggers. The clear icy torrent rushed them along the black channel; the mighty dam drew back; the city's ramparts marched to meet them. They kept afloat as the yellow river had taught them, and tried to save their strength.

Ahead, in the black wall, appeared a tiny arch. It grew larger, and abruptly swallowed them up. They were in roaring darkness; the arch framed a bit of crimson sky, swiftly dwindling. The steady current plunged on into utter darkness.

Thunder drummed against their ears, increasing, deafening.

"A fall!" warned Jay Kalam.

HIS shout was swept away. They shot into a battle of mad waters. Plunging torrents battered them. Merciless currents sucked them down. Savage whirlpools spun them under smothering foam. All in roaring blackness.

John Star gasped for breath, strangled in the foam. He fought the current that carried him down. Down and down! Resistless pressure crushed his body. He endured the agony of suffocation. Desperately he tried to swim, and wild water mocked him. It carried him up—and down again.

When he came up a second time,

he contrived to stay afloat; he swam away from the chaos of the fall. They had poured into a vast, cavernous reservoir, completely dark. Its vast extent he could guess only by the rolling thunder of reverberation from its roof.

He shouted as he swam, and heard with keenest joy Giles Habibula's plaintive wheeze:

"Ah, lad, you lived through it! It was an awful time, lad. A fearful thing, when it sucked me down. Ah, me, poor old Giles is too feeble, lad, to be diving over mortal waterfalls, in this wicked dark."

"But I've still my precious bottle of wine."

Hal Samdu hailed them, then. A little later they came upon Jay Kalam. They all swam away from the thunder, and came at last to the side of the tank which was slick, unclimbable metal.

"Ah, so we must drown, like so many kittens in a blessed bucket!" wailed Giles Habibula. "After all the dreadful perils we've been through. Ah, mortal me!"

They swam along the slimy wall, until they came blindly to a great metal float with a taut chain above it—it must be, Jay Kalam said, the mechanism that measured the level of the water. They climbed the chain.

It brought them up at last, with weary limbs and blistered hands, to the vast drum upon which it was wound. There they saw a feeble gleam of red, and they crept toward it along the great axle-shaft of the

drum, wet and slippery with condensation.

Scrambling over the immense bearing of the shaft, they found a little circular hole in the roof of the tank—it must have been left for attention to the bearings. They climbed through it, Giles Habibula sticking until the others pulled him out, and so at last, on top of the reservoir, they were fairly within the city, the fabulous city of the Medusæ.

THEY stood on the lower edge of a conical black metal roof, a dizzy drop of two thousand feet below them, and the slope too steep for comfort.

Standing there on that perilous brink, John Star felt a staggering impact of nightmare strangeness and bewildering confusion. Buildings, towers, stacks, tanks, machines, all loomed up about him, a black fantastic forest against the lurid sky, appallingly colossal. The tallest structures reached, he soberly estimated, two miles high.

If this black metropolis of the monstrous Medusæ had order or plan, he did not grasp it. The black wall had seemed to enclose a regular polygon. But within all was strange, astounding, incomprehensible, to the point of stunning dismay.

There were no streets, but merely yawning cavernous abysms between mountainous black structures. The Medusæ had no need of streets. They didn't walk, they floated! Doors opened upon sheer space, at any level

from the surface to ten thousand feet.

The stupendous ebon buildings had no regular height or plan, some were square, some cylindrical or domed, some terraced, some—like the reservoir upon which they stood—sheerly vertical. All among them were bewildering machines of unguessable function—save that a few were apparently aerial or interstellar fliers, moored on landing stages—but all black, ugly, colossal; dread instrumentalities of a science older than the life of Earth.

The four stood there for a little time in a shaken bewilderment, caution forgotten.

"Bless my precious eyes!" moaned Giles Habibula. "No streets. No ground. No level space. All a tangle of wicked black metal. We'll get nowhere unless we sprout some blessed wings!"

"That must be the central tower," observed Jay Kalam, "the black fort Commander Ulnar spoke of. Still miles away."

He pointed to a square, forbidding, tremendous pile, towering up amazingly in the red and murky distance, a very mountain of black and alien metal, landing stages which carried colossal spider-ships and large machines of unguessable use, projecting from its frowning walls.

Weary, hopeless, he shook his head.

"We must get back," he whispered, "and hide till dusk."

"Or the monstrous things," ap-

prehensively promised Giles Habibula, "will see——"

"One, I think," broke in John Star, "already has!"

Hundreds, perhaps, of the city's masters had been in view from the moment they came on the roof, greenish hemispherical domes drifting above the confusion of black metal, dark tentacles dangling. All had been far away, insignificant by comparison with their works. But now one had lifted abruptly over the point of the conical roof.

Giles Habibula dived for the hole through which they had emerged. He stuck; before the others could help him the Medusa was overhead.

THE sheer size of it was shocking. Those in the distance had been tiny by comparison only. Its green dome, wet and slowly palpitating, was twenty feet through, the hanging, ophidian tentacles twice that in length.

It was infinitely horrible. Vast, bulging mass, gelatinous and slimy, translucently green. Scores of hanging tentacles, slowly writhing—efficient and quite beautiful, no doubt, in the eyes of their owner.

Gorgon's eyes!

Long, ovoid wells of purple flame. All pupil, rimmed with tattered black membrane. Mirrors of a cold and ruthless wisdom, old when the very Earth was new. John Star was not in fact turned to stone. Yet the sheer, elemental horror of that purple stare set off some primeval fear-

response. It paralyzed his limbs with tingling cold, slowed his heart, stopped his breath, drenched him with sweat of terror.

Fear-numbed, they stood motionless, until the tentacles had whipped about them, snatched thorn-daggers from their nerveless hands, and pulled Giles Habibula like a cork from the hole. They were lifted, vainly fighting the hard thin tentacles.

"My mortal wine——" panted Giles Habibula.

It dropped from his pocket. Like a plummet it fell into the chasm below; it fell two thousand feet.

"My blessed bottle of wine!" And he sobbed in the coiling ropes.

Moving by what force they did not know, by what amazing conquest of gravitation; the creature swept aloft with them, above the titanic black disorder of the city, toward—John Star noted it with a certain grim satisfaction—toward the central citadel.

They fought the fear that numbed them.

"Something about that brain," gasped Jay Kalam, even as they were borne away. "Powers that we can't guess. Makes you feel pretty futile."

It carried them into the stupendous building, through a door opening on sheer space, five thousand feet up. Through a colossal green-lit hall. It stuffed them through a rectangular opening in the floor, dropped them without ceremony.

Sprawling in a black-walled room,

twenty feet square, they found beside them a man—or what had been a man.

Emaciated, ragged, it was sleeping on its face, breathing with long, rasping snores. John Star shook it, after the Medusa had vanished from above the locked grating overhead, woke it. Stark, feverish terror stared from red eyes in a pallid, haggard face.

It uttered a shrill, hoarse scream of agonized terror; clawed in wild, blind insanity of fear at John Star's hand.

And John Star himself cried out, for the thing, the remnant of a man, was Eric Ulnar.

The handsome, insolent officer who would have been Emperor of the System, become this twisted and pitiful wreck!

"Leave me be! Leave me be!" The voice was thinner and wilder than anything human. "I'll do what you want! I'll do anything! I'll make her tell the secret! I'll kill her if you want! But I can't stand any more! Leave me be!"

"We won't hurt you!" John Star tried to soothe the quivering thing, shocked as he was by the import of its cries. "We're men. We won't harm you. I'm John Ulnar. You know me. We won't hurt you."

"John Ulnar?" Red, fevered eyes stared, wild with a sudden, frantic hope. "Why yes, you're John."

The trembling thing, abruptly shaken, clung to his shoulder.

"The Medusæ!" That wail held more than human woe. "They tricked us! They're murdering mankind! They're bombing the System with red gas, to eat men's bodies away, and make them insane. They're murdering mankind!"

"Aladoree?" demanded John Star. "Where's she?"

"They make me torture her!" sobbed the weak, wild voice. "They want her secret. Want AKKA! But she won't tell. And they won't let me die till she tells. They won't let me die!" it shrilled. "They won't let me die!"

"But when she tells, they'll kill us all!"