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standstill planet

IN silent perplexity the four figures in the huge control-room of the spaceship Ultra stood looking down through the vast observation window upon a planet, one of five in a diamond-shape system lighted by a remote, golden-yellow sun.

To the four watchers, the self-styled Cosmic Crusaders, there was nothing peculiar about finding a planet, even in these far-flung reaches of the Milky Way Galaxy, but in their many and varied experiences they had not come upon a world like this—a world upon whose surface nothing moved.

Then at length the Golden Amazon, leader of the Crusaders, stirred a little. She was a tall, unusually beautiful woman of apparently 25, born of Earth and gifted by surgery with superhuman strength and fantastic scientific knowledge. She turned her violet eyes from the scene below and glanced toward her husband, Abna, a seven-foot blond giant who seemed as though he ought to be a permanent resident of Olympus.

"Well, Abna, what about it?" the Amazon asked. "In two hours, or less, we'll be landing—if we want to."

"If we want to!" echoed the only other woman in the quartet—the copper-haired Viona, daughter of the Amazon and Abna.

The Amazon smiled faintly. "Exploration of odd worlds and the uplifting of civilizations in trouble are our business—so I suppose this planet comes into that category. But I'm not going to make the decision single-handed."

Mexone, the tall, broad-shouldered husband of Viona, gave a shrug.

"If you want my opinion, Amazon, we just can't leave a planet like this unexamined. After all, we did see a fleet of spaceships near it, heading away into space."

"Yes . . ." The Amazon mused for a moment. "So we did."

The planet, through the telescope, had revealed its utter immobility, as far as surface conditions were concerned, and apparently the spaceships had not been on this particular planet: They had merely been travelling away from it, well beyond the atmospheric limits. But why? And why were four worlds all normal, according to telescopic observation, and the fifth one utterly paralyzed?

"Right!" the Amazon said finally, with a decisive nod of her blonde head. "We'll take a look, if only for the scientific interest of the thing."

"There's one thing I've been noticing," Abna said, with a glance toward the Amazon. "Everything's petrified on this planet, and yet it is slowly revolving in the normal way. So is that remote sun—or at least it's changing its position, which shows natural movement. Whatever's wrong with this world seems to apply only to its surface . . ." His brows knitted. "Utterly at variance with all natural law. Molecules must be in a condition of absolute suspension, yet in that case there would be zero conditions . . ." He lost himself in bottomless speculations as the Ultra neared the planet.

The passage of the mighty ship through the planet's air caused no disturbance whatever and, finally, by a series of deft manoeuvres, the Amazon brought the vessel down in one of the city's many enormous squares. Then there was silence as the atomic power plant was cut off.

The Amazon crossed to the windows and joined the others in gazing outside. Here, surrounding the Ultra, was a city that bespoke high achievement—a city of vast, skyscraping buildings, beacon towers, and flawlessly laid streets and open spaces. . . . Yet nowhere did anything move! It might have been a still, three-dimensional picture for all the animation there was.

Presently, Viona's keenly searching eyes settled on a vehicle in the street ahead. It was one of several which had evidently stopped dead in its tracks, but what made it significant was the figure half in and half out of the vehicle—a figure of a man, apparently, and entirely Earthlike in general physique.

"Whatever happened," Viona said finally, "it obviously came very suddenly."

The Amazon nodded silently, her eyes rising to

Illustration by Don Sinclair

the sky line and the flat roofs against the blue sky. It seemed ridiculous to see smoke billowing up from somewhere beyond, ridiculous because it was not moving and looked as if it were painted on the heavens.

"We're not going to learn much by just standing here gazing out," Abna commented, crossing to the switchboard. "Let's see what sort of atmosphere there is."

He made a quick analysis and then turned. "We're in luck. Atmosphere's about the same as Earth's, and so is gravity, humidity. So let's go."

At his signal each one made an examination of their various weapons, then they loaded themselves up with provisions. The Amazon came last, pulling over the external combination lock which closed the door immovably from the outside.

"Might take a look at that man half in and half out of his conveyance," the Amazon suggested, and set the example by walking down the main street toward the phalanx of stalled traffic in the distance.

In height the man was probably six feet: It was difficult to judge in his semi-crouched position. Between him and an Earthman there was no difference. Unblinking blue eyes made him look as though he had stepped out of a waxworks. . . . The Amazon peered at him intently, then passed her hand experimentally before his eyes. He did not flinch in the slightest degree. The Amazon desisted her efforts and then felt his pulse and tested his respiration. Her eyebrows rose.

"Abna . . ." There was an odd note in her voice. "Abna, he isn't dead! His heart's beating very slowly, and there's a definite amount of breathing going on."

And this same fantastic paralysis was evident among all the men and women whom the Crusaders encountered amid the stalled traffic.

"Certainly it isn't death," the Amazon said. "Otherwise the bodies would be in a state of rigor mortis. Again, we experienced no difficulty in getting through the atmosphere, which shows there is no resistance in the molecular set-up. Yet clouds don't move and everything has come to a stop."

Silence. Abna, Viona and Mexone glanced about them.

"No suggestions, I'm afraid," Abna confessed finally. "It would appear that these people are of a high order—their very civilization and the construction of this city proves it. And it would also appear that the spaceships we saw leaving the planet might have something to do with the present circumstances. Yet if it is some influence holding everything in thrall, why aren't we affected, too?"

To this there was no answer. Then finally the Amazon began to move.

"We're not going to get very far standing here forming theories," she said. "We'd better have a look at the buildings—inside them, I mean—and see if they tell us anything. Come on."

The more they wandered through vast stores, offices and machine-rooms, the more they realized that these unknown people were very much on a par with Earthlings in the way they lived. The one thing different was, perhaps, in the machine-rooms and factories.

There seemed, as exploration went on, to be an abnormal number of them for such a relatively small community. Every other building was a machine-room, containing apparatus of prodigous size and unexplained use. All of it silent — all of it watched over by overalled men and women who had been stricken motionless.

"Only thing I can think of," the Amazon said finally, "is that these machines we see everywhere caused the paralysis—but how they did it we shan't know until we analyze them. At the moment they seem to embody principles that are quite outside our scope of engineering."

"Whatever it is," Abna said, "we come back to one obvious pointer: The trouble is solely confined to this planet. The sun's moving normally and the planet itself is turning on a slow revolution. That seems to discount the theory that it's some kind of experiment with Time."

The Amazon nodded her blonde head but she did not say anything. Then Mexone made an observation.

"There's one way we could find out. The Ultra is equipped with Time-travelling apparatus. Suppose we went back slowly in Time to the point where this world is alive again."

The Amazon considered for a moment, then shook her head.

"It's an idea, Mexone, but it's too dangerous. We might lay ourselves open to being caught in the same paralysis as these people. No—we daren't risk it." She turned her unfathomable eyes from the city and looked at the two beside her. "No, what we have to do is release these people from their trap, and maybe as outsiders we're the only people that can. I don't think there ever was a more urgent job for the Crusaders."

In thoughtful silence they left the building and wandered down the main street toward the open space where they had left the Ultra. Each of them was busy with his own thoughts—then suddenly the Amazon stopped and looked at her feet.

"That's funny!" she exclaimed, frowning. She stooped and flicked her yellow-skinned hand back and forth along the road surface. Abna, Viona and Mexone looked at her, then at each other.

"Oh, there's nothing wrong with me," she said drily. "I've just noticed something—this street has a layer of dust all over it, yet we don't leave any imprints when we walk in it, and when I try to disturb it I just can't. It remains immovable."

And even at the Ultra itself there was another surprise. The vast weight of the multi-ton spaceship, and its none too gentle arrival, had not disturbed the dust on the ground surrounding it—dust that lay on top af the soil and mosslike grass.

"It's beyond me," Abna confessed, as he followed the Amazon into the control-room. "When dust can't even be disturbed it suggests tremendous scientific force at work somewhere. Do you think this planet is somehow enclosed in some sort of vibration which prevents movement—"

"And we're untouched?" The Amazon shook her head. "No, Abna—guess again. Anyway, let's have some food and then do some more thinking."

"There's one thing we can be sure of," the Amazon said, when at length the meal was ready. "Whatever it is that's wrong with this world it's happened—but is not happening now. The people are only in a kind of suspended animation. They look dead, yet their bodies can be moved and their limbs put in any position. We're agreed that Time itself isn't at a standstill, otherwise it would affect us as well and the planet wouldn't revolve." The Amazon paused and looked in front of her. "Science must have its basic laws, whether a planet be in the Earth system or the Milky Way. That being so, I can think of only one possible answer to all this. It's a practical demonstration of thermodynamical equilibrium."

"It's . . . what?" Viona questioned, puzzled, and the Amazon gave her a sharp glance.

Abna explained. "It means the condition to which all things material must aspire some day. It's the scientific name for a 'fortuitous concourse of atoms.'"

"Exactly," the Amazon nodded. "All universes and worlds are less chancy today than they will be tomorrow. In other words, a world moves constantly into a state of ever-increasing disorganization, until finally all the shuffling of energy and radiation are complete and no further interchange is possible. When that state is reached, Time as a factor ceases to apply and everything stops, unable to advance because every material change has been made."

Abna nodded slowly. "You're right, Vi, in the scientific particulars. Sometimes referred to as 'heat death.' The end of a world, of a universe . . . but you're not suggesting that such a state of affairs could occur naturally so quickly, are you? It takes millions upon millions of ages for that to happen."

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"I'm suggesting," the Amazon said slowly, "that these people have, by some grave error of judgment, produced a state of thermodynamic equilibrium on this planet. It happened so suddenly that it caught them up in itself and made them incapable of movement or advancement. At present their plight is that of the living dead."

"You don't mean they're conscious of what's going on?" Mexone exclaimed in astonishment, and the Amazon nodded.

"I'm perfectly sure that they are. Consciousness would not be affected by thermodynamics."

Abna stroked his chin slowly and then said: "I think something is wrong with your theory somewhere, Vi."

"You do?" She glanced her surprise. "Why?"

"Because our arrival hasn't altered things—and it should have done. It's an accepted premise that if you put a random element—even a pebble—into the midst of thermodynamical conditions, those conditions no longer apply because there's something new there, something that can be used for energy interchange. More plainly, a something is there that was not there before, and the whole state of perfect equilibrium is destroyed. So, our Ultra arriving ought to have released this world from the prison it seems to be in."

"Mmm, so it should . . ." She seemed about to say something further, then she paused as the alarm buzzer on the Ultra's control board suddenly sounded. All four frowned for a moment, knowing that the radar system only reacted when the scanner beam was intercepted—and on a motionless world there couldn't be anything to . . .

The Amazon jumped up and dived to the observation window. There was nothing changed outside—still the same vision of petrified traffic in the middle distance, and the massive grouping of edifices . . .

"There!" Abna exclaimed, at her side. "In the sky! Those same spaceships we saw near this world earlier on—"

The Amazon jerked her gaze upwards. At a vast height, possibly beyond the atmospheric range, there was poised a group of six spaceships.

The Amazon tried to reply, but something seemed to have hold of her tongue, her nerves, and even her mind, which made speech or even the formation of words impossible.

With an arm that felt as heavy as lead, she put a hand to her forehead, trying to still the spinning dizziness that had come upon her. She lurched, grasping uselessly at the window frame, and then sprawled full length on the floor.

Nothing seemed changed when she awakened again, except perhaps the position of the sun, which seemed a good deal lower in the sky. Slowly, as she realized movement was hers once more, she struggled to her feet—and at the same time the fallen Abna, Viona and Mexone did the same thing. Baffled by their brief relapse, the four looked out of the window. The only thing different was that the six spaceships had now disappeared and evening light was upon the city as the sun hurried towards its setting.

"What do you suppose happened to us, Vi?" Abna asked, as the Amazon stared with puzzled eyes into the sky.

"Whoever was aboard those spaceships caused it, that's obvious," Viona snapped. "Are we going to stop here and let them get away with it? Let's get after them."

"And perhaps get ourselves into a mess," the Amazon shrugged. "No—they can wait. We've things to do on this planet first, and the sooner the better."

She led the way outside and the others followed her. In a matter of minutes they had reached the nearest of one of the big factory-type buildings, and in the fading light they began a careful technical examination of the machinery.

As the daylight began to slowly die, the investigation became more difficult, but at least the four had come to a definite conclusion. These machines were quite beyond their ken. Like everything else on the planet, they were an enigma.

Finally the Amazon stopped and looked about.

"To work out the intricacies of these machines, to say nothing of the hundreds of others scattered about the city, is an impossible task. With no knowledge of the mechanics involved, we're up against a brick wall. I can only say that they're the queerest machines ever for producing thermodynamic equilibrium. The whole principle of them seems entirely wrong. They embody heat, disintegration, magnetism, and a complicated system that seems to incorporate radiation on a vast scale. None of those things is remotely connected with thermodynamics . . . They even seem"—the Amazon hesitated—"as though they might be intended as machines of defence somehow."

"But they were never used," Abna said, "because the thermodynamic trouble settled on everything. The whole thing's an utter puzzle."

"Puzzle is right," the Amazon sighed. "Well, in any event, it doesn't look as though we're going to accomplish much by just examining these machines. We want to produce a revival somehow, and it looks as though there's only one way to do it. Let's go."

CHAPTER II

BACK in the Ultra's brightly lighted control-room, the Amazon made herself clearer.

"We're agreed that the only way to restore normalcy to this world—if we accept the fact that it is really in a state of thermodynamic equilibrium—is to introduce a random element. And the only way to do that is to get a stone, or something material from one of the neighbor planets."

"Why?" asked Mexone, surprised.

"Simple. It is generally conceded—and proved—that all the planets from one particular sun contain the same materials, since they all come from the same parent body. We ourselves don't produce the random element because we are not of this planet, or even of this system, as we have already proved."

"So we fly to one of the other worlds," Viona said. "That suits me fine."



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"Which means we'll probably fly into danger," Abna said. "And all for nothing if we're wrong in our theory about thermodynamic equilibrium! If it's something else possessing this planet, getting a pebble from another world won't matter one jot."

The Amazon said: "You can take it as certain that thermodynamic equilibrium is the answer. There's proof of it. Those spaceships which attacked us didn't come beyond the limits of the atmosphere, did they? They took care not to mingle with anything of this world. Remember?"

"Well?" Abna asked, puzzled.

"Well, obviously they know that if they did so they might provide a random element and awaken things. They tried to be rid of us by some process or other, but never for an instant did they make contact with this planet or enter its atmosphere. As far as we are concerned, danger won't be anything new, and the Ultra isn't exactly without weapons."

"Okay," Abna said, after a moment's thought. "Let's be going then."

The Amazon nodded and pulled the power lever to the first notch. Immediately the Ultra put on speed, until finally the nearest of the four planets was growing in size even as it was watched, while the "standstill" world was dropping away into infinity.

"Invisibility might help us," Abna commented.

It was not often the Amazon resorted to near-invisibility as far as the Ultra was concerned, but in past experiences it had proved an advantage. She reached out and pulled a switch.

Silent, surveying the planet which grew ever larger on their vision, the quartet waited. They observed this nearest world now with growing interest, noting that in most of its details it was pretty similar to the paralyzed planet they had left. There were the same straight-line streets, the same pedestrian and traffic levels, the same parklike spaces. Only it was all alive and vital, with people and traffic on the move, aircraft in the skies, and clouds drifting in the atmosphere. A pleasant world, from the look of it, night still lingering upon it in a copper-colored crescent.

Finally, the planet was looming close. The Amazon turned to the switchboard and cut the power down to zero; then again she studied the looming world intently. Finally she looked at Abna.

"I don't quite like it," she said, and he looked up from surveying the vast, curving rim of the planet. "The lack of interception."

She made a bothered movement. "I know we're invisible, but a race that understands space travel—if this is where the spaceships came from—won't find invisibility any bar to instruments which can detect solids, such as radar. They'd locate us with that even if they couldn't see us—and they're not doing it. It makes me uncomfortable."

Abna shrugged. "Okay, so we're perhaps sailing into a trap. We'll tackle that emergency if it comes. On the other hand, this may be a planet which hasn't got space travel. If so, luck's with us."

"Right," the Amazon said finally, and again gave her attention to the switchboard. "Down we go. I'll make for that stretch of open country beyond the city. Less likely there'll be any interference there."

The Ultra came to rest finally in a cloud of dust and the Amazon quickly snapped the switches which brought back visibility to the walls, floor and ceiling. She switched off the power and then pressed the button to open the airlock. "Let's get some stuff quickly."

"There's no need for all of us to go outside, surely?" Viona asked, uncoiling herself from the window seat. "I can see a chunk of stone from here. I'll just nip out and get it."

She waited until the airlock had fully opened, then leapt lithely outside to the powdery soil. She glanced about her, noting subconsciously that the air was normal and the sunlight warm—then she dived across to the chunk of stone and whipped it up. With it in her hand, she came back into the control-room.

"A 40-million-mile journey for a piece of stone seems crazy," she commented, depositing it on the table. "Still, there it is."

The Amazon examined it carefully and then gave a nod. She turned to the airlock switch and closed it, then she gazed in surprise. Normally, the lock should have closed ponderously and sealed itself—but for once nothing happened. There was not even the usual drone of power as the current was applied.

"Everything seems to be in order," Abna said, going over the various power outputs. "No breaks, shorts, or fuses broken . . ."

"But no power," the Amazon said, her voice edgy. "It begins to look as though my earlier premonition about trouble coming might be correct—"

"Trouble is right!" Mexone exclaimed, gazing through the window. "There's something coming. Look!"

The others moved and gazed with him, their eyes fixed on an object rather like a wingless airplane approaching from the direction of the city. It moved with the velocity of a bullet, finally descending swiftly not more than 50 yards from where the Ultra stood.

The Amazon turned toward the Ultra's armory, then she suddenly relaxed again.

"No power—no weapons," she sighed. "We've nothing but the guns in our belts with which to protect ourselves," and with that she whipped out her proton guns in readiness as the others did likewise. Then they stood waiting, watching through the window as a group of four uniformed men came tramping across from the aircraft, glittering weapons in their hands.

"If they want to play games we're ready for them," the Amazon said. "In fact, it mightn't be a bad idea to settle them without waiting to see what they do—"

"That wouldn't do us much good," Abna interrupted. "We can't do a thing with the Ultra immobilized like this, so we'd better see what they want."

The sound of tramping feet became noticeable in the control-room, then without hesitation the four men entered, their guns ready. They paused as they saw the quartet waiting, their own weapons levelled. For a moment or two there was a grim silence, each party realizing that they faced an impasse.

"Keep them covered," she instructed Abna. "I'll switch in the Language Translator to the battery circuit: That at least ought to give us an idea of what's going on."

With that she began moving. The men watched her narrowly but she did not attempt anything. Still in silence they waited until she had switched over to the battery circuit and the Language Translator hummed with power.

"Speak," she invited, elaborating by signs. "Speak . . ."

She touched her mouth, caricaturing the formation of words, and pointed to the instrument. Finally her meaning seemed to be apprehended, for

one of the men spoke in a curiously musical voice. To the ear his words were pleasing if unintelligible, but to the electronic brain controlling the Language Translator they had a meaning. As fast as they were received by the instrument's mathematical structure they were converted into English and spoken by an artificial voice through a loudspeaker.

"I am Imperix Iben Drass, commander of the President's guard, and I have orders to transport you immediately to the city. Now come with us."

"We have no intention of doing so, and you can't make us," the Amazon said. "Don't forget we're armed the same as you are. If you shoot at us, those of us not killed will settle the rest of you. Understand?"

"We only obey orders," came the stony reply. "It is not our personal concern whether you come or go free. The President has ordered a nullification of energy to be placed on your ship. It is radiating at the moment from the tall towers of the city which you can just see from here. Our own machines use the planet's magnetic lines of force for power so are unaffected. In your case, all electrical and atomic energy is dead and will remain so."

The Amazon did not speak for a moment or two. She silently studied the men, and the one who called himself the Imperix in particular. The thing that surprised her was that they looked highly intelligent, smart, good-looking men.

"We do not propose to wait any longer," the Imperix said suddenly. "Come—"

He strode forward abruptly, his gun still levelled. The Amazon lashed out with her free hand and knocked the gun clean out of his fingers. He stopped his advance, his eyes on the muzzle of her weapon.

"That's just a warning," she said, nodding toward the fallen gun. "If I'd wanted, my friend, I could have killed you on the spot. However, I realize you are only obeying orders—but we don't intend to comply with them. In fact, we—"

The Amazon was not quite sure what happened next. One moment she was coldly addressing the Imperix; the next he had seized her at lightning speed, torn the proton gun from her grip, and forced her into a kneeling position on the floor with both arms forced high up her back.

Even as she tried to break free—a matter that should have been simple with her enormous strength—she saw Mexone, Viona, and even Abna quickly overpowered by a few dextrous twists of the soldiers' arms and hands. They used either a form of Judo, or were possessed of far greater strength than they appeared. Whatever it was, the Crusaders could not free themselves. More astounded than really hurt, the Crusaders found themselves dragged to their feet, each one pinned with an excruciating grip.

"This is our only method since you will not comply with orders," Iben Drass said, and with a free hand he picked up the proton guns and tossed them on the table. "Now—switch off this language instrument of yours. You're not likely to need it again."

The Amazon found one of her arms released to enable her to switch off the instrument.

Thereafter there was little the Crusaders could do. Forced to leave their guns and the Ultra exposed with an open airlock, they were impelled across the rough, pebbly ground toward the waiting aircraft. Without ceremony they were bundled into the rear cabin, and only then were they released—but one of the guards maintained a constant surveillance over them with his gun at the ready.

Under the control of the Imperix the aircraft began to rise, turned, and then streaked swiftly through the air toward the city. The Amazon, crouched on a low wall seat, slowly straightened up and looked out of the window.

Viona said: "Do you think there's anything to be gained by making a dash for it when we reach the city? If we could once get free we might find some way of wrecking the nullifying influence which is holding the Ultra, and with that done we'd surely find some way to reach it again and escape."

The Amazon gave a wry smile. "Forget it, Viona. Trying to escape from men like this—and armed as they are—is an impossibility."

The four studied the buildings, most of which seemed to be vast apartment houses. There was noticeably less sign of industry here than there had been on the paralyzed planet, but otherwise the layout was almost the same. Civilization, evidently, had reached about the same stage.

The journey finished at a rooftop where some 50 planes were parked. The door clicked and the attendant guard jerked his head to the outdoors. One by one the Crusaders climbed out to the flat roof and stood waiting, surveying the sprawling majesty of the city from their high elevation.

"Looks like we're getting deeper in with every moment," Abna commented, close to the Amazon's side. "The moment there's a chance we'd better make a break for it, preferably toward those towers over there."

The Amazon looked in the direction he indicated. In the far distance, perched on three somewhat isolated buildings which were probably powerhouses, were tall towers of skeleton metal, rearing to a height of perhaps 200 feet. Plainly they were the same towers which had been visible from the Ultra and which, so the guard had said, were responsible for the death of energy aboard the Ultra. If, somehow they could be put out of action as Viona had suggested, then perhaps—

There was no further time for speculation. As the remaining three guards came out of the airplane the Crusaders found themselves seized and led towards a trapdoor in the roof. It opened by apparently automatic means and the four men went down a long and curving spiral staircase which gave a view into a dazzlingly deep well of doors and passages along balconies.

Everything seemed to be of metal. Walls, stairs, floors, and ceiling. It was only after a moment or two that the Amazon realized the place was a prison. Then the guards opened one of the metal doors on the fourth balcony from the roof and pushed the Crusaders into the narrow room beyond. Almost before they had a chance to grasp what was happening they were watching the heavy door closing upon them and heard the click of the lock.

CHAPTER III

THE Amazon and Abna surveyed the metal walls, the solitary roof light, and finally the small barred window through which a pale sunlight was streaming.

"All the comforts of home," Abna commented bitterly, sitting on the farther end of the bunk. "What's supposed to happen now, I wonder?"

"We'll probably find out before long." The Amazon reached up and tested the strength of the window bars.

In a moment the door opened to admit one of the guards and behind him an individual who, judging from the insignia on his uniform, was a person of considerable importance.

Without saying anything immediately he made a motion to the guard. In response, the guard pushed in a barrel-like machine on a rubber-wheeled tripod. From the barrel depended a selection of cables, each one armed on the end with a sucker-disc.

The man of high rank then went through an elaborate but polite pantomime.

"He wants you to stick the cables on your skull," Abna said. "It's probably a language gadget—a less refined version of our own. You'd better do it."

The Amazon nodded to the man and put the sucker-discs on her forehead at the positions he indicated; then when his lips began to move in speech there came into her mind, as clearly as though she were hearing everything with her own ears, the exact words he was saying.

"I am Rijilon, the—er—aide, as you would call it, to the President. If you understand me, reply in your own language. The instrument will take care of the rest."

Rijilon raised a spare suckered cable and applied it to his forehead. He nodded and smiled pleasantly as the Amazon answered.

"I understand you perfectly, Rijilon. Your apparatus is simply a variation of our own Language Translator, acting directly on the brain. Perhaps I can hold more sensible conversation with you than with your soldiers. I am the Golden Amazon of the planet Earth, and these others are Abna, my husband; Viona, our daughter, and her husband, Mexone."

Rijilon inclined his head slightly as each introduction was made; then the pleasant smile faded from his face. He spoke again.

"I am informed, my friends, by the President's scientific advisers, that you recently made a landing on Zon, our neighbor world. Might I ask your purpose in doing so?"

"Purely scientific," the Amazon responded, trying to make up her mind whether the man was as pleasant as he seemed or whether he was putting on an act. "It is hardly customary to discover a world completely paralyzed—so we investigated."

"Very interesting. But why should you be so curious?" A sudden harshness came into the voice. "Is it any of your business why a planet should be paralyzed?"

"It is. The four of us are the Cosmic Crusaders. We seek to undo wrong wherever we find it, uplift races that cannot fight for themselves, and overcome scientific barriers where they ensnare a people." The Amazon hesitated, then she shook her head. "I don't see why I should explain everything, Rijilon. We came merely to—survey."

"I see. Most unconvincing, if I may say so. Having found a paralyzed world you left it and came here to survey, when your attention should have remained on Zon. You didn't come here to find a random element, perhaps? A piece of stone, with which to unlock the prison of thermodynamical equilibrium?"

The Amazon remained silent, her lips set. The pleasing smile came back to Rijilon's face.

"The guard told me about the stone you purloined from the waste land: He saw it on your control-room table. When I reasoned it out I realized why you wanted it. I realized, too, why you endeavored to conceal your coming here—your invisibility in space, and so forth. The President adopted certain measures to be rid of you on Zon, but evidently they were unsuccessful. I wish I understood why."

"We are no easily disposed of," she said.

"Apparently not, but even so . . ." Rijilon shrugged. "Let it pass: It is of no matter now. The fact remains that you are evidently determined to be friendly with the immobilized people of Zon, even to the extent of reviving them, and that we cannot permit. I go now to report to the President and have his ruling as to what must be done with you."

The Amazon was on the verge of asking several more questions, but she did not have the chance. Rijilon detached the suckered cables from her head and his own, then with a polite bow he left the cell, taking the guard with him.

"What was all that about, Vi?" Abna asked presently—and the Amazon related in detail what had transpired.

"This ruthless sort of behavior doesn't fit in somehow with a man of Rijilon's temperament. He is obviously a gentleman. It seems peculiar—"

"We're in danger," Abna said. "We must act."

"How? I've tried the window."

Abna gave a patient smile. "Vi, you're in the midst of a dream. You seem to have forgotten that we have tools in our belts even though our guns have gone."

Abna, for his part, was not hesitating any longer. Standing on the bunk, he whipped a small metal welder from his belt, powered by an atomic battery. He narrowed his eyes at the needle-thin line of vicious blue flame as it bit into the window bars. In a matter of seconds, to his delight, the metal began to liquefy, and finally it boiled. He soon had one bar out—and with the Amazon springing to help him, it took no more than five seconds longer to eliminate the remaining two bars.

A square space, extremely narrow, was left—with walls several feet thick. Abna's face became grim as he surveyed.

"We can't widen this gap: It would take hours with walls as thick as this, and I doubt if our batteries would last that long on full power, either. You might manage it, Viona—even you, Mexone. But that's all."

Viona leaped lightly on to the bunk, then with Abna's hands supporting her shoulders, she thrust her legs through the small opening. Gently she was eased through, with very little room to spare, her arms extended over her head to reduce her width to the minimum. And, at length, she had slipped through the gap and vanished. Where to, those in the cell did not know: They could only pray that she had not plunged to her death.

Anything but it, as a matter of fact. She had dropped some 12 feet to a flat roof overlooking the city, and it being too far down for her to get back to the cell window, she could only watch as Mexone's feet and legs came wriggling into view. He dropped to the rooftop at Viona's side.

Viona looked quickly about her. "Our escape doesn't seem to have been observed, anyway . . ."

She hurried to the edge of the roof and looked over the parapet on to the sprawling city.

"Nothing we can do that way," she said, as Mexone came to her side.

"To get in the building there's only one way—climb up to the roof and go down through the trapdoor where we were taken at first. And let's hope we're not seen," Mexone added.

Viona turned her back on the street and ap-

praised the lofty bulk of the prison building. It went up for about 300 feet, its smooth face marked out with the windows of cells. The only possible way up to the flat roof was by means of a thick power cable. Viona followed it with her eyes. It was attached to an aircraft beacon on the roof, and then down in a slack curve over the city itself, and its nearest proximity was at least 50 feet.

"Any suggestions?" she asked. "Beyond turning ourselves into kangaroos?"

"Only one way," Mexone said grimly. "We can't jump up to this cable, but we might be able to jump down to it. Let's see where it goes."

He hurried to the parapet and stared below. Viona joined him, then they exchanged anxious looks. The cable, after depending 50 feet above the roof on which they stood, went across the canyon of street, and after that away toward the city itself. From the parapet to the cable was a distance of perhaps 30 feet.

There was silence for a moment as they each weighed up the situation—risky in every sense of the word. Then at last Viona gave a shrug and braced herself.

"It's got to be done, Mexone. We can't stop here, and mother and dad are waiting for us to do something. If by any chance we're seen swinging on the wire, we'll make beautiful targets, but that's a risk we'll have to take."

She climbed up on the parapet and tightened the belt about her slacks. For a moment or two she stood judging the distance and tried not to look at the yawning canyon between the buildings. Then she leaped—her hands outflung.

The sensation was terrifying. She seemed to go down forever, and for ghastly seconds she imagined she'd misjudged her objective—then she hit it with one hand and swung dizzily in space as the wire jolted under the impact. Instantly she brought around her other hand and hung on desperately, aware of this awful slack hoop reaching up into the very skies.

She waited a moment or two until the swinging of the wire became steadier—then she began to move slowly upwards, hand over hand, calling on every ounce of her superb strength to sustain her in the effort.

Then suddenly Mexone must have leaped and reached the wire. It bounced so violently as his weight hit it that Viona nearly lost her grip. For a moment she hung, the dizzying depths below her, and with her eyes shut in horror—then ever so slowly the jolting of the wire began to calm down and she went on again, hand over hand, Mexone at a not very great distance behind, until at last she realized she was over the flat roof where the airplanes were parked. She glanced about her, then let herself drop. She fell heavily, breathing hard, and stood for a moment half crouched and regaining her strength.

Moments later Mexone dropped, too. He gave a relieved grin and hugged her to him for a moment.

"Done it! Everything else should be child's play compared to that."

Viona rubbed her aching shoulders and looked about her upon the parked airplanes. After a moment she spoke her thoughts.

"Rijilon said something about going to report to the President, didn't he, so he could decide what is to be done with us? We'll wait for him: He'll probably turn up before long. We'll use our metal welders in place of guns. If we can only take him by surprise we can — and will — do a good deal. Once get mother and father free and they'll know how to handle the situation . . ."

Mexone nodded, not very hopefully — then he jerked his head in the direction of a nearby group of parked machines.

"Better get behind those for concealment—" He broke off and stared at the sky over the distant city. "Look! There's a plane coming this way—Quick! Out of sight!"

Immediately they hurried, keeping low to the roof, and from the shelter of the parked planes they watched the distant aircraft drop helicopter-wise to the roof. Rijilon himself, lordly and majestic, alighted from the plane and moved with dignified tread toward the distant trapdoor. A guard —the same one who had accompanied him before—came into view a moment later, carrying the now folded Language Machine in one hand.

Viona waited until both men had disappeared through the trapdoor, then gave Mexone a glance.

"Come on—and make as little noise as possible."

When presently they gained the trapdoor opening and peered through it they beheld Rijilon and the guard half way down the first section of spiral staircase. Viona did not hesitate a moment. She jumped forward to the rail of the stairs, poised herself upon it, and then dropped with thunderbolt swiftness.

Rijilon did not do anything for the moment: He was too astounded. It was only when a sledge-hammer blow from Viona sent the demoralized guard toppling over the rail into the depths below that he came to life. He whipped out a gun, but in that time Mexone had reached him from behind and was jabbing the welder between his shoulder blades.

Viona faced Rijilon and made a motion to him. His gun dropped from his fingers to the metal stairs. Viona smiled and picked it up, levelling it, her finger just touching the unfamiliar button.

Rijilon straightened—obviously somewhat scared but still the master of his dignity. Viona came up to him, a cold smile on her face. With her own welder she indicated that he was to move.

"Get moving to my mother — the Golden Amazon," Viona ordered.

Rijilon hesitated, the words "Golden Amazon" registering in his mind. Then with a little helpless gesture he complied with Viona's wishes and marched down the stairs to the cell of the Amazon and Abna. Rijilon, grim-faced, opened the complicated lock and the door swung inwards. Slowly, ready for any trouble, the Amazon and Abna came into view—then they relaxed and smiled as they saw Viona and Mexone with their weapons levelled, Viona still with Rijilon's gun.

"Explanations come later, mother," Viona said briefly. "We've got to get clear of this building as quickly as we can—"

She gave Rijilon a shove and sent him stumbling into the cell; then she slammed and locked the door upon him.

Viona swung and raced away up the passage, the Amazon close beside her.

"We'll take that plane," Viona said, nodding to the aircraft in which Rijilon and the guard had arrived. "The cabin door's still open."

She sped across the roof and climbed into the plane's interior, her mother, Abna and Mexone close behind. Once the door was shut, the Amazon settled in the driving seat and studied the controls.

"We can discover how to fly it, surely?" Viona asked, looking over her mother's shoulder. "Didn't Imperix Ibben Drass say that they used magnetic lines of force for propulsion so the tower's nullifying energy wouldn't affect them?"

The Amazon studied the controls for a while longer, then at last she grasped a significant-looking red lever and pulled on it gently. Instantly a power plant came to life somewhere in the structure of the ship.

"Right so far," the Amazon murmured. "Now to risk a take-off."

She reasoned out which she believed was the correct lever and pulled it. The craft lifted lightly and shot diagonally toward the roof parapet. The Amazon pulled the control further back and the hurtling machine missed the stone and metalwork by a matter of a few feet. Then they were hurtling across the mass of the city at dizzying speed, until the Amazon found how to cut down the acceleration.

"Good!" the Amazon murmured. She looked ahead through the observation window. "We want to destroy the nullifying effect, but how do we know which tower it is?"

"Circle each one," Abna said, pulling an instrument from his belt. "I'll be able to discover with this detector which one is issuing a radiation. Then we'll think further."

Before long the first of the three towers came close. The Amazon moved the switches and the aircraft swung around in a steep bank, circumnavigating the first of the towers in a matter of moments. Abna stood wih his detector in his hand, watching for interference, but none made itself evident. The middle one, too, gave forth no results. But on the final one there was a distinct reaction. Abna gave a murmur of delight.

"This is the one." He put his instrument away. "Think you can lower this machine to within a few feet of the tower top? Everything depends on speed on this occasion—so I'll find the main cable, cut it with my welder, and be back in the plane immediately. After that—the Ultra as fast as we can go."

The Amazon nodded and juggled the switches. The plane went through the most amazing gyrations and aerobatics until she found the right controls. Velocity dropped to zero and she began to lower the craft, foot by foot, while Abna wrenched open the cabin door and stood ready to jump, his welder in his hand.

"Here, dad, take this." Viona thrust Rijilon's gun into his hand. "Never know what you might need."

Abna flashed a brief glance of thanks, and then jumped. He landed heavily on metal grating, struggled up, and looked around him. At the moment there was nobody in sight, and overhead, still lowering gently, was the bulk of the airplane, Viona and Mexone watching intently in the open cabin doorway.

To Abna, the top of the tower—perched 200 feet above the building on which it stood, suggested a lighthouse. There was a similar vast lamp organization in the skeleton metalwork, and a similar mass of lenses with faceted fronts. Whatever energy was being emanated was not visible to the eye, but it was there. His interest was taken almost immediately by two thick cables leading from the lamp device into the depths of the tower—going down and down amidst the skeleton metalwork until they vanished through the roof of the building proper.

Abna grinned, pressed the button on his welder, and sent the needle-thin flame of savage heat straight on to the cables. They twisted wildly, smoked, and then snapped one after the other. Two burning ends were left depending from the underside of the lamp, and the cables from the roof went tumbling downwards, wrapping themselves around the latticed metalwork as they went.

Abna hardly waited to see these things. He dived immediately for the hovering plane, and with Viona and Mexone to help him, he struggled into the cabin doorway, through it, and back into the control-room.

"Quick," he ordered. "The Ultra."

CHAPTER IV

THE Amazon did not need to be told. Even as Abna closed the cabin door she was sending the plane sweeping upwards, and as she did so she caught a glimpse of a group of overalled men rushing from the powerhouse below the tower and staring upwards.

She put on the power to the best of her ability, but even so the speed was no greater than 80 miles an hour. As yet she had not solved the mysteries of the plane's control system sufficiently to understand how to apply the curious "overdrive" mechanism and achieve the bullet velocity of which the craft was really capable.

"Say—take a look!" Viona exclaimed in sudden dismay. "To the rear!"

The others turned and looked through the window set in the tail of the craft. The vision was not reassuring. Half a dozen of the queer, wingless planes were streaking at an incredible speed across the sky, coming from the direction of the city.

The Amazon turned back to the controls and tried once again to figure out the overdrive system —but before she had got properly settled there came a jolt of the entire vessel as the first of the pursuing machines turned on some type of ray equipment.

"Try evasion," Abna said curtly, watching the pursuing fliers swarming around like wasps. "We can't make it direct to the Ultra. There just isn't time. Turn to one side—do anything."

With that he turned to the plane's defensive weapons, Viona and Mexone at his side. But here again there was the problem of unaccustomedness, the struggle to understand the workings of guns and jets of which they had no prior knowledge.

Meanwhile, the Amazon was trying every trick she could devise to avoid trouble. She set the machine darting, twisting, banking, looping—all the time getting farther and farther away from the treasured goal of the Ultra and nearer to the city from which they had fled with such difficulty.

Then finally there came a moment when the Amazon could dodge no longer. An aircraft was in front of her, and another not so very far behind. Helplessly she tried to twist from between them—and failed. Both machines jetted rays at the same moment, and within the control-room of the Crusaders' plane the roof suddenly split and the shatterproof windows crushed themselves into powder and flew out of the frames.

Something must also have happened to the plane's exterior for the Amazon found it impossible to keep control over it any longer.

In numb horror she and those grouped around her stared through the windows as the roofs of the buildings swept up to meet them—then they struck

edgewise against a beacon tower, probably for aircraft, perched on one of the taller buildings. The metalwork of the tower tore through the wall of the plane, but at least it stopped it falling. It hung almost upside down, caught on the tower like a kite on a telegraph wire.

The shock was colossal. All four Crusaders were hurled backwards to the farthest reaches of the control-room and ended up in a smother of arms, bodies and legs. Yet none of them was knocked unconscious even though they were badly bruised. Bit by bit they extricated themselves and stood with difficulty on the crazily tilted floor.

"Well, we're still in one piece, thank heaven," Abna commented at length. "And we're fortunate that these planes use magnetic force: There's no fuel to catch fire. . . . We'd better get out," he added, forcing open the cabin door which was now in the "floor."

It squeaked under his efforts but finally jerked open. He stood on the edge of the doorway and looked into the abysmal spaces below.

The Amazon joined Abna at the doorway. She looked below, then above. The wheeling planes milled around for a while like angry vultures, but they made no effort to descend into these canyons of streets between the buildings. And finally they turned and sped away across the darkening city.

"That may be a good sign—and it may be a bad one," the Amazon said, realizing Abna had been watching, too. "Perhaps they've accepted the fact that we've been killed—or they're going to head for a more convenient landing space and then they'll come and investigate. Whichever it is, we've got to move."

"And quickly," Abna agreed. "All right, we—"

He paused for a moment as the lights of the city sprang into being in all directions at once—beacon towers, windows, and streets, transforming the whole gloomy picture into one of fairyland brightness.

Without mishap they reached the roof, but they glanced warily about them in readiness for any attack. All of them realized that surely the inhabitants of this building must have heard or felt the impact of the plane when it collided with the tower, and if they were normal they would come to investigate—

"There's an escape ladder there," Viona said, pointing to its curved top against the parapet of the roof.

The four began to move towards it and then paused and looked over their shoulders, studying a group of men who were emerging from a distant trapdoor on to the flat roof. So far they had not seen the quartet in the uncertain light: Their attention seemed to be mainly directed toward the shattered plane hooked on the beacon tower.

"Quick—the ladder!" the Amazon said abruptly. "We can just dodge them—"

Successfully, as it happened. Swiftly the four slid over the parapet one after the other, still unobserved, went swiftly and silently down the side of the building, dropping finally to a narrow street.

"The Ultra's that way," Abna said, who had been studying a small compass always tuned to be in sympathy with the spaceship's magnetic prow. "We'll have to try to reach it somehow, particularly before they restore the nullifying influence on that tower we visited."

They began moving, always following the compass Abna held in his hand. They traversed brightly lit ways, and gloomily dark narrow ones. Luck deserted them when, apparently, the city workers left their duties at the sound of a shrieking siren.

The Crusaders, crouched into a narrow doorway, watched the scene with misgivings. Men, women and vehicles seemed to be everywhere. The crisis came when a vehicle, held up in the rush, stopped alongside them. It was something like an automobile, but used perhaps magnetic force for its propulsion since the controls were limited to a series of shiny buttons. Inside the dimly lighted cabin sat a solitary girl—fair-haired and not altogether unattractive.

The Amazon moved forward, hidden from everybody else by the bulk of the vehicle. She pushed her head and shoulders through the open window and levelled the gun they had taken from Rijilon. Instantly the girl driver looked sideways, an expression of blank terror coming to her face. The Amazon gave her a reassuring smile, reached inside the door, and snapped back the catch, then with a motion to the others, she climbed into the automobile's surprisingly roomy interior.

The girl at the controls watched everything in fixed amazement. Her terror seemed to have subsided, but she was obviously sorely puzzled. Crouched behind her, the Amazon switched off the light in the roof and then said a few words.

"Keep going . . . finish your journey." She knew she would not be understood, but she emphasized her meaning with movements of the gun.

"Abna, keep your compass checked," the Amazon said. "This girl's going to take us to the Ultra, even though she doesn't know it. Which way now?"

Abna peered at the compass' illumiated dial. "Bear left, then we'll be on a straight course."

The Amazon moved her gun upwards and indicated a leftward direction with the barrel. The girl glanced at the weapon within a foot of her face, then apparently understanding the direction that had been given, she moved leftwards out of the traffic into a less busy and more dimly lighted side street.

"Okay now,' Abna said. "Straight on."

Again the Amazon signified direction by means of the gun barrel. The girl nodded her fair head hastily in acknowledgment and kept on driving directly forward between the looming walls of buildings. Then through a parklike area, across a high river bridge, and onwards again into the less busy regions.

Suddenly she applied the brakes, and with a hand indicated a party of uniformed men some distance ahead, under a hastily erected spotlight. For the first time she spoke, in a hurry of musical but quite unintelligible words.

"Road block," the Amazon said, studying the scene. "Our escape's been discovered and the police, or whatever they are, are in action. This is going to be difficult—"

She had reckoned without the girl driver. Suddenly she semed to come to a decision. From braking she changed to a tremendous acceleration, and at top speed hurtled the vehicle straight toward the group of men under the spotlight. There was a momentary vision of them with raised hands, then they scattered for their lives as the girl tore through the midst of them and went hurtling on down the road. She was actually smiling now, as though she were enjoying herself.

"Good work," the Amazon told her, smiling at her reassuringly to make up for words that she knew would not be understood. "You're one after own own hearts."

The girl gave a quick glance over her shoulder, then she suddenly swerved to the left and shot down a side street. Another frantic burst of speed, left again, and then right. The vehicle was now in the midst of suburban regions and row after row of low-built dwellings which for all their peculiar design were probably houses. Whatever they were, the girl finally pulled up outside one of them with a shriek of brakes. . . . Then she turned and looked at the Amazon urgently, pointing through the window at the same time.

"It looks as though she wants us to get out of the car and go into the house," Abna said, as the Amazon crouched and frowned over the girl's movements.

"All right—we will," the Amazon said, and opening the door, she clambered out into the roadway.

The girl went quickly up the short front pathway, opened the door with an odd-looking key, and finally led the way into a living-room. The Crusaders followed her slowly, not at all sure what they were getting into. On the threshold of the doorway they paused, astonished by the remarkably homely and natural scene which met their eyes.

The room was comfortably furnished on an Earthly style, and indirectly lighted. Seated in comfortable chairs, in the midst of reading very thin foil sheets covered with ciphers—which were presumably the newspapers of this world—were a man and a woman in unusual but casual clothes. Plainly they were the girl's mother and father. The girl burst into her voluble speech, pointing to the quartet as they stood hesitating in the doorway.

Finally the Amazon went forward, and as a gesture of friendship she put Rijilon's gun in her golden belt and smiled a greeting. She spoke a few words, even though she knew the uselessness of them.

"We mean you no harm and are extremely grateful to your daughter for the help she has given us. I am the Golden Amazon"—the Amazon pointed to herself and repeated her name—"and these are Abna, Viona and Mexone. We are Crusaders. Crusaders."

The man repeated the word slowly and then looked at his wife and daughter.

"We want to—" the Amazon started to say; then she swung sharply as there came a roar of power outside, followed by a savage hammering on the outer door.

"They've caught up," Abna said grimly. "This looks like trouble for these folks."

It was plain the teenage girl did not know what to do—and neither did her parents. Finally the Amazon made up their minds for them. She motioned for the girl to open the door, then she glanced at Abna, Viona and Mexone.

"Let our friends come in here, then we'll deal with them," she said, moving to a position behind the room door.

The teenage girl waited until they were ready, then she strode through and unlocked the outer door. Almost immediately she was back in the room, hustled before the iron grip of one of the uniformed guards.

Instantly the Amazon's right fist lashed out. Remembering the iron strength of the men she'd encountered so far, she made allowances and gave her uppercut everything she had. The effect was astonishing: The guard's head jerked back as though it were on a hinge and he slewed around helplessly against the table and then crashed to the floor to lie motionless.

The Amazon looked toward the teenage girl and her parents as they stood watching in amazement; then she added: "If there are more outside, maybe it's time they heard from us."

With that she sped into the small hallway, Rijilon's gun ready in her hand. Out in the street she beheld, from the doorway of the house, a curious type of vehicle behind the girl's deserted one—a vehicle containing four more men, including the driver.

"Ready for a clean-up?" the Amazon asked, as Abna, Viona and Mexone came to her side.

"Let's go," Abna murmured.

They moved quickly down the pathway, but the lights of the street picked them up and alerted the four men in the police vehicle to action. The driver was the first to have his gun levelled, but the Amazon saw his movement and fired the gun in her hand. It made a faint click, showed no sign of a report—and yet it crumpled the driver before he could make another move. Whatever the power in these strange guns, it was certainly very efficient.

As for the other three men, they didn't stand a chance at the hands of Viona, Abna and Mexone. Unlike the earlier guards, they were just strong men and, as such, easy game for the Crusaders. They had nothing of the superhuman strength of Iben Drass' particular followers.

"Three knocked out and one killed," the Amazon summed up as Viona, Mexone and Abna relieved the guards of their guns. Then each with a guard slung over his shoulder the four returned to the house. The quick-witted teenager seemed to be the first to grasp the point, for she opened a door that seemed to lead into a cellar. One by one the men were tumbled into it, including the guard who lay on the living-room floor—then the door was closed and locked.

"So far, so good," the Amazon commented. "You others stay here with these three. I'm going to drive that squad-car thing out of the avenue to avoid drawing suspicion on ourselves."

She went out actively and Abna turned to the three who were still watching in vast uncertainty. He motioned them to be seated, and then glanced at Viona and Mexone.

"We can't leave these good people without explaining what we're doing, or without thanking this girl for the risk she took to get us this far—yet every moment we're away from the Ultra the more chance there is of repairing that nullifying tower."

Silence. Mexone and Viona nodded worriedly and the three of another world sat in uncomfortable silence as though expecting a major disaster any moment. Then the Amazon reappeared carrying a small box.

"What's that?" Abna asked curiously, and as she dumped it on the table and flung back the lid she replied:

"I'm not certain, but I think it's a language translator on a small scale. It was in the squad car. Yes," the Amazon broke off, examining the instrument. "I was right. It is a language translator of the portable transistor type. The very thing we need. Perhaps they're a sort of generally used piece of equipment on this planet. Anyway, here goes."

In a very short time she had figured out the instrument's major details. This done, she took the suckered cables and fixed them on her forehead as she had seen Rijilon do it; then she went over to

the teenage girl and looked at her inquiringly. Only for a moment did the girl seem to hesitate, then evidently sensing that nothing hurtful was intended she sat passive as the Amazon fitted the corresponding cables to her brow and plugged a wire to what she assumed was an extension output, and then said:

"What is your name? And are these your parents?"

"I am named Thania, and these are my parents —yes." The girl's interpreted voice came clearly also through the loudspeaker attachment, and Viona, Abna and Mexone listened attentively.

"We have not a great deal of time to spare," the Amazon said, "but at least we can thank you for helping us. I should explain who we are. I am the Golden Amazon and this is my husband Abna. Our daughter, Viona, and her husband, Mexone. We come from a region of space unimaginably far away, and our purpose in space travel is to help those worlds which seem to need it . . ."

"And you believe this world of ours needs help?"

"Not this world—the world of Zon, to which we went before we came here. We have reason to believe that this world is unfriendly toward Zon and has plunged its people into a state of living death. We feel it is our duty to free them, but since coming here—for reasons too numerous to explain—we have run into hostility, particularly from an individual known as Rijilon."

"Rijilon," the girl said, "is the aide-in-chief to the President. And the President is the ruler of our—er—community. I—"

She broke off as she saw her father was making frantic signals. Finally she pulled the suckered cables from her forehead and handed them over. Her father fitted them into position and took up the story from his own angle.

"Whatever you have done, or are going to do, Golden Amazon, is not really any concern of ours, and it's more than our life's worth to fall foul of the law. We are a quiet, progressive people, and most of us are happy and comfortable, so much so that even our jails are nearly empty. Only very rarely do hostile members come among us—such as yourselves, and it is against such people that the law is continually alert. The world of Zon doesn't require help, and all of you are fools if you try to give it any. Obviously it is because of your intention to help Zon that you have fallen foul of the law on this planet . . ."

"I assume Zon shouldn't be helped because you people on this world prefer to keep it in paralyzed subjection?" the Amazon demanded.

"That is correct. . . . You have done little to endear yourselves here, Amazon. You waylaid my daughter, you forced her to take dangerous risks to avoid the law. When the law catches up we'll be endangered for aiding and abetting you. Go—I beg of you, and get rid of these bodies that you have left here. Leave us in peace."

Thania herself, who had been registering growing indignation as she listened to the loudspeaker translation, finally signalled urgently to her father and transferred the suckered cables back to herself. Her young voice came forth urgently and excitedly.

"Father and mother have old and prosaic ideas, Amazon. They're not like me: They can't appreciate that I love excitement, danger, and thrills. I enjoyed every minute of helping you, even though I didn't know what you really wanted. I've space travelled, of course, because it's a normal thing on this world, but I've never been much farther than the neighbor worlds. You must have wonderful adventures. So much more interesting than being a third-rate clerk in a government office, like I am. The biggest thrill I ever got was buying that magnetic car of mine. . . . But you four! What a wonderful life you must have."

She stopped abruptly, an expression of frozen horror on her face. She was gazing at the doorway behind the Amazon, so fixedly that the four Crusaders turned—and found themselves looking at Rijilon, as resplendent as ever, two iron-faced guards with levelled guns beside him. He smiled pleasantly enough, though there was a sting in his eyes. Stepping forward, he snatched the suckered cables from Thania's forehead and clamped them on his own. Then his cultured voice came through the loudspeaker.

"Fortunate that we have traced you, my friends. A pity your efforts haven't been more rewarding. Naturally we shall resume where we left off. It is the order of the President—an order which I never had time to explain to you before you overpowered me—that you die. That order still stands."

Suddenly the girl Thania burst into a torrent of words, her face coloring with the fury of her emotions. Rijilon listened to her in impassive calm, then when at last she relaxed, he answered her—and, of course, the translation came through the loudspeaker.

"Why exactly you should think it necessary to support these Crusaders in what they are doing escapes me, young woman. The fact remains that you and your parents have transgressed the law by giving sanctuary to these prisoners. You seem to regard them as gods, or something, because they lead a life to which you are unaccustomed—"

Again the volley of words, and evidently they must have contained something which was insulting to Rijilon's position for one of the guards abruptly stepped forward and with a single blow felled the girl to the floor. She collapsed whimpering, covering her head with her hands against further blows.

That did it, as far as Viona was concerned. She had conceived more than a liking for this fresh, bright-eyed teenager of another world.

She went into action instantly, regardless of the guns and the nearness of death.

The Amazon and Abna dealt with one guard, and Viona and Mexone with the other. Even so, they had a tremendous struggle, for the strength and resilience of the two men was unbelievable. Rijilon, a more "normal" proposition, was the prey of the girl and her parents, but he was more than a match for them. He swept Thania out of the way and dived for his gun. As Thania's parents made an effort to grab him he swung and fired quickly.

No smoke, no noise . . . but both man and woman slid slowly to the floor and became still. Thania, struggling to her feet, looked at them in helpless despair. A second later the Amazon had leaped forward, gripped Rijilon's wrist, and twisted the gun out fo his hand. The guards, weakened at last by the crushing frequency of blows they kept receiving, slid to the floor and ceased to resist.

From Thania there suddenly burst one of those torrents of words. Clearly they were a mixture of grief and fury.

The Amazon looked at the grim-faced Rijilon. Then she stooped and picked up the fallen cables of the language machine. In a moment she had established contact between herself and Rijilon once more.

"That," Rijilon said, before the Amazon had a chance to speak, "was not intended. I only intended to inflict wounds, to show them they could not flout authority—"

"Whatever you intended, they are dead," the Amazon snapped. "I can understand you wishing me dead—and my companions, but not a couple of middle-aged people of your own race. Somehow, you never struck me as that kind of man, Rijilon—Anway, you are going to be useful to us. Under your authority we're going back to the Ultra, and it's up to you to see that we are not molested. If we are, I'll kill you on the spot. I'll consider myself justified in doing that after what you've done to Thania's parents."

Rijilon gasped as the Amazon ruthlessly whipped the sucker discs from his forehead and gave them to Thania. Sniffing back her tears, the girl fixed them in position.

"Listen to me, Thania," the Amazon said quietly. "Your mother and father are dead. I don't want to sound brutal about it, but that is a fact. And you're not in a particluarly safe position, either. Once we have gone the law will catch up with you and you'll be lucky if you escape with your life. You must come with us."

Thania gave a start. She stared in amazement. "Come—come with you? Be a Crusader, do you mean?"

The Amazon smiled faintly. "Possibly even that could be done but that isn't our concern at the moment. I'm thinking of your safety. We're going back to the Ultra now, and Rijilon here will be forced to be our guarantee of safety. Now, what is your answer?"

Thania did not hesitate for long. Her tear-filled gray eyes became suddenly eager.

"Yes, I'll do it, and be glad to. It would be even more wonderful if only mother and father . . ." Her voice broke as grief took over again.

CHAPTER V

THE Amazon watched the basement door close and Abna snapped the lock into place—then she took the sucker cables from Thania and put them back on Rijilon's forehead. In cold silence he listened to what she had to say.

"Go in the direction I shall indicate. We're going to use that heliplane of yours. If when we get to the Ultra, there are any signs of guards about, you will dismiss them under any pretext you care to mention. I'm just warning you, Rijilon: Don't make a single wrong move or it will be the worse for you. As you have heard, the girl Thania is coming with us. Understand?"

"May I ask if you are intending to carry out your original plan once you've reached the Ultra? Flying to Zon with a piece of stone? I beg of you not to do it, Amazon. I beg of you—"

Rijilon went on talking in his own tongue, but it meant nothing, since the Amazon had wrenched away the cables. She folded them into the box and fastened the lid.

"We'll take this with us: It may be useful," she said. "I'm going to leave it to you, Abna, to check the course as before. We'd better be off before worse things befall us."

One by one they boarded the heliplane, which was in the street, red lights around its body giving warning of its presence.

The Amazon climbed into the control cabin. The others came quickly after her as she waved Rijilon to the machine's driving seat. Although she had had experience by now of piloting one of these machines, she preferred to leave it to an expert.

"Due south—straight ahead." Abna studied the compass in his hand.

The Amazon nodded, tapped Rijilon on the shoulder, and by hand signs indicated an upward movement, then a straight course. With a grim face the aide switched on the magnetic controls and the plane rose slowly from the street; then when it was at a height sufficient to clear the building tops it began to advance through the darkness, keeping on course as Abna gave directions and the Amazon relayed them by pantomime. And, gradually, the brightly lighted mass of the city was left behind and there loomed ahead the dark regions of the surrounding land.

The journey to the Ultra was only a short one, and to the surprise of those within the plane, except Rijilon, the spaceship was picked out clearly in blazing arclights, while around it there stood a party of guards, gazing upwards at the moment toward the slowly descending heliplane.

"Looks as though we've got a reception committee," Abna commented.

"Evidently," the Amazon agreed. "Here are your orders, Rijilon. Tell these guards that we have been captured and that they can now dismiss. Get rid of them as quickly as possible. Thania here will know what you say."

"Very well, Amazon. I'll do that. But can I not ask you again not to attempt doing anything with Zon? It's vitally important that you shouldn't."

"I daresay it is—to you," the Amazon agreed; then she snapped: "Our plans are laid and we're going through with them."

She and the others pressed well back out of sight of the cabin doorway as Rijilon unlocked it. What he said to the guards was unintelligible, but judging from the expression on Thania's dimly visible face he didn't attempt any trickery. And presently the guards began to drift away, uncoupling the arclights.

The Amazon crept forward and watched the scene of movement in the dim starlight, until finally the last vehicle had departed over the rough land toward the distant city. Only then did she signal the others outside. They moved at once and joined her outside the heliplane. The only one who remained was Rijilon, still in the pilot's seat.

Quickly they fled through the darkness, expecting but not receiving some sign of attack from the heliplane's weapons. Evidently Rijilon was content to let them escape, or else he felt that the darkness made his objectives uncertain.

The five reached the Ultra finally, Viona taking charge of the excited Thania. Abna led the way through the open airlock—still as it had been left—and into the great control-room. He snapped the lighting switch over from battery to mains and to his delight illumination burst forth immediately.

"We're okay!" he exclaimed, swinging to the Amazon as she came in. "That nullifying tower hasn't been put back into service yet."

The Amazon hurried to the switchboard and breathed a sigh of thankfulness as the power plant instantly responded as she closed the switches. Finally she glanced toward the central table on which there still reposed the chunk of rock exactly as Viona had put it there.

"That completes everything for the moment," the Amazon said. "We'd better depart—and then freshen up and have a meal."

Once she was clear of the planet and the course set for 40 million-mile distant Zon, the Amazon cut down the speed of the Ultra and relaxed for a while with the others. In any case, there was no desperate hurry to reach the standstill planet now they had got what they wanted in the shape of a random element.

Washed, and refreshed with a good meal, all five felt better able to exchange confidences, and as far as Thania was concerned — now attired in one of Viona's spare black space uniforms—there was no difficulty in regard to speaking since the Language Translator was switched on, and would remain so until the girl had a good knowledge of English.

"All things considered," Abna said, "we did well to get away with that lot as we did, and I imagine the most discomfitted person in the whole business will be Rijilon, who had promised the President we would be disposed of."

The Amazon looked thoughtful. "I can't quite understand Rijilon. He's a man of intelligence and courtesy, and yet he treated us as bitter enemies. Neither can I understand why he should be so anxious to stop us going to Zon and reviving it—except, of course, that it undoes all his work as far as paralyzing the planet is concerned. I assume he was responsible in the first place. Do you happen to know the facts, Thania?"

The girl shrugged. "I know there was a decision by the President to immobilize the world of Zon, and our scientists put it into effect. What they did I can't say."

"We know what they did," Abna said grimly, "but we're not at all sure why they did it. On the face of it, Thania, it looks as though the people of your planet constituted a danger to Zon, and because of that danger, the people of Zon built a vast defensive system on their planet—only to be outwitted again as a paralysis descended upon them, engineered by Rijilon."

Thania looked thoughtful. "Somehow," she said, "I cannot imagine the people of my planet being a danger to anybody. They are a peaceful, progressive people—and so for that matter are the inhabitants of the other planets in the system. One or two groups of peoples on the other worlds are unpleasant sometimes but they're certainly not a danger. I confess I don't understand the mystery of Zon in the least: It's a matter that's only understood by the government."

"I think," the Amazon said slowly, "that as yet we have only touched the fringe of the problem regarding that planet. Some day we'll find out why that paralysis happened, and that can only come by reviving the people of Zon themselves and questioning them."

There was a brief silence. The Ultra flew on through the gulf, the hum of the atomic power plant the only thing disturbing the quiet. Thania looked dreamily toward the observation window, her young eyes full of a thousand thoughts as she studied the star-studded enigma of the Milky Way. Then presently she spoke:

"You said that perhaps I might become a Crusader? Did you really mean that, Amazon?"

The Amazon smiled. "Of course I meant it—providing you are prepared to undergo certain surgical transformations which will affect both your body and your mind. It will not be painful, but it may be against your wishes."

"You mean change a normal person into a super being?"

"You might call it that," the Amazon agreed. "Your general physique is altered to give you the great strength necessary in the tasks we perform, and brain surgery links up certain areas of the brain which in the normal way are never used. The finished effect is, as you say, a super being. Do you wish this surgery to be undertaken?"

"I do. Definitely I do.

"Then come with me." And they left the room. The others began talking.

"In regard to Thania—" Abna started to say; then he suddenly broke off and stared through the observation window. "Spaceships—and not far behind!" he ejaculated. "A complete fleet of them! It must be Rijilon pursuing us. I must have a word with your mother."

Turning, he hurried through the various corridors of the mighty vessel until he came to the laboratory. The Amazon was quietly working at the switchboard, controlling the automatic apparatus which was performing surgery on the anestheticized Thania on one of the long tables.

"Rijilon and a fleet of machines are on our tail. What do you suggest I do with them?"

The Amazon reflected. "My first retort to that is—destroy them. But I hesitate to do that unless we are attacked. There must be a very vital reason for them travelling after us, knowing as they must that the Ultra has a very destructive armory. Try contacting them by radio and switch in the Language Translator to the circuit. That way they'll make sense to us, and we to them. We may as well see what they want. I'll be with you soon."

Abna hurried out and returned to the control-room. As quickly as possible he connected the Language Translator to the radio equipment and then switched on, watching the perceptibly nearer fleet as he waited for the apparatus to warm up. Finally he spoke:

"Abna speaking from the Ultra. Why are you pursuing us? Over."

There was a brief pause, then the recognizable voice of Rijilon came through the loudspeaker of the Language Translator:

"This is Rijilon speaking. I have new orders from the President which I am instructed to pass on to you. We are nearing Zon, so there is little time to lose. The President is willing to overlook your behavior on our world and gives you complete pardon—including the girl Thania—if you wish to come to our planet and discuss scientific matters. But immunity from the death sentence originally imposed carries the proviso that you must avoid all contact with Zon. Over."

"Why do you bring a fleet to qualify a statement like that?" Abna demanded. "Over."

"I have brought a fleet of war machines to dissuade you by force from approaching Zon if you do not comply with the President's offer. At least restore the girl Thania to us. There's a vital reason why you should. Over."

"There's no reason at all," Abna retorted. "She's decided to throw in her lot with us and abandon her home planet. And that decision remains. You're wasting your time, Rijilon. Over and out."

After a moment or two, invisible rays came from the pursuing machines, making their presence felt by a series of violent impacts. Abna glanced at Viona and Mexone and gave a grim smile.

He turned to the switchboard, moved the speed control through a couple of notches, then smiled as with a mighty surge the Ultra shot forward, leaving the fleet dropping away into space. . . . Yet another notch, and another, and the Ultra was hurtling at an enormous velocity straight toward Zon as it loomed ahead.

Abna turned at a sudden sound and the Amazon came into the control-room. Beside her was Thania

"Everything in order?" Abna asked, and both Thania and the Amazon nodded.

"The operation has been successfully completed. From now on consider yourself a Crusader," the Amazon said, patting Thania on the shoulder. "And we're glad to have you among us— Now, Abna, how did you make out with Rijilon? What did he want?"

Briefly, Abna summed up the situation. The Amazon listened, meanwhile looking through the window upon the hurtling fleet in the distance. They were still pursuing, hopeless though they must have realized their task was. The Amazon frowned as she watched.

"I still say it's all very strange," she said at last. "The situation, for them, seems to be almost a desperate one: They've got to stop us reaching Zon and reviving it, no matter what the cost. . . . I wonder if we've got our facts wrong somewhere?

"If they want Zon eliminated, why didn't they destroy everybody instead of paralyzing them?" the Amazon questioned, her violet eyes thoughtful. "I'm becoming uneasy about the whole thing."

Usually it was Abna who counselled caution, but this time he did not—surprisingly. He said bluntly:

"You're simply being swayed by Rijilon's persistence, Vi. We're going to follow out our plan as we made it."

So the journey to Zon continued at overwhelming speed, until finally the Ultra was cleaving through Zon's motionless air, sweeping down toward the spreading vastness of the paralyzed city. Thania surveyed the scene below in awe, fascinated by this first-hand view of a world she had only heard about up to now.

CHAPTER VI

THE radio buzzed for attention. In surprise the five looked at it.

"It'll be Rijilon again," Abna said, after a moment. "He'll have to buzz in vain."

He returned his attention to the control board, slowing down the Ultra's speed as swiftly as possible. By the time he finally had slowed the great vessel down enough to permit of landing, Rijilon's fleet had caught up and were visible in a swarm just beyond the limits of the atmosphere.

"Here we go," Abna said finally, and brought the vessel down in one of the parklake spaces. Then he snapped the switch which set the airlock opening ponderously.

The Amazon crossed to the table where lay the stone. She hesitated over picking it up and instead turned to the radio which still insistently demanded attention. She switched it on, plugged in the Language Translator, and then spoke.

"You have had your answer from Abna, Rijilon, and there is nothing more to say. Over."

"But there is!" came Rijilon's urgent voice. "I beg of you not to disturb that world of Zon, Amazon. If you do so you will release from sleep the cruelest race ever known in any system of worlds, a race armed with engines of destruction mighty enough to shatter every world in the system. That was the avowed intention of the Zonians before we found a way to paralyze them. We could have killed them, but mass destruction is not the President's wish, so we decided on immobility produced by thermodynamic equilibrium. Over."

The Amazon watched Thania as she strayed to the open airlock and looked interestedly outside. Then she said:

"You mean . . . You mean that the numberless machines on this planet are really weapons of aggression, not defence? Over."

"That is exactly what I mean. We tried to eliminate you at first, not realizing that you were in ignorance of the true facts. Now we know differently we beg of you to confer with us again, on a different standing. But please leave Zon alone. Over."

The Amazon glanced at Abna and he slowly nodded. "Better do as he says. Looks as though we'll stir up a hornet's nest if we start throwing a stone in this thermodynamic pool—" He broke off and gave a start. "Great heavens, Thania! Look!"

The Amazon spoke briefly into the microphone. "Hold on a minute, Rijilon. Something's happened. I'll be back. Over and out."

Darting across the control-room, the Amazon came to Abna's side. He was staring out into the parklike space, across which Thania was walking, evidently intent on investigating for herself. There was nothing wrong in this, as such— The trouble was that things were happening around her. Everywhere she moved, the mosslike grass was losing its stiff appearance and little eddies of dust were commencing to arise. Even the atmosphere had a trace of movement, enough anyway to set the leaves of the branches moving.

"What's going on?" Viona asked curiously, coming over with Mexone and joining her mother and father in the airlock. "Things don't look so quiet around here as they did before."

"They're not," the Amazon replied curtly, "nor will they ever be again. We've done the very thing Rijilon was warning us against."

Viona stared. "Done it? But how? That stone's still on the table—"

"The stone doesn't signify any more. Thania herself is as much a random element as the stone is, and unintentionally she's become the key which has unlocked this motionless prison."

For a moment there was a horrified silence, but there was certainly no doubt that the Amazon was right. With every second, disturbance was increasing—and would continue to do so—for with the extra energy of Thania's body to work on, the shuffling of atoms could start again into a new pattern. It would be only a matter of hours before the disorganization would have affected every molecular pattern on the planet and restored it back to life.

"Thania!" the Amazon called suddenly. "Thania!"

At the sound of her name the girl turned, pointed to herself, and then obeyed the Amazon's signals to come back to the Ultra. She walked through the stirring grass and entered the control-room smiling, apparently not in the least aware that she had done anything wrong.

"Keep your eyes on her, Abna," the Amazon said, and hurried back to the radio equipment. She picked up the microphone. "Rijilon, the unexpected has happened. We haven't thrown this stone upon Zon, but something even more alarming has happened. Thania herself stepped on to this world and at this moment it's showing signs of revival. Over."

"Leave it quickly," came Rijilon's urgent voice. "We will do all in our power to repair the damage. Come away! Join us, if you wish—otherwise fly

away into space as far as you can go. Over."

"That we shall never do,' the Amazon retorted. "We'll join you as fast as possible. Over and out."

She pulled out the contact with the Language Translator and restored it to normal, then she turned to Thania. By this time the girl had guessed that she was responsible for something usual. She gave the Amazon a troubled glance.

"Have I done something I shouldn't, Amazon?"

"To put it briefly," she said, "you've become a random element. I'll explain to you . . ." and she gave the full scientific details. Thania listened in silence, her surgically sharpened brain capable of taking in the meaning of thermodynamic equilibrium, and the need for an outside source of energy to start again the process of shuffling and entropy.

"I'm most dreadfully sorry, Amazon. I never realized . . ."

"No, Thania. How could you?" The Amazon patted her arm reassuringly. "It was just one of those things. Let's say it's a sort of chain reaction, which you have started. I'm afraid your departure from the scene won't make any difference. Look below—even in this short time."

Thania did so—and so did Abna, Viona and Mexone. There was no doubt about the change that had come over the world of Zon. In the canyons of streets, traffic was commencing to move and a myriad dots—living beings—were shifting and altering as they found life once again.

"Nothing we can do," the Amazon shrugged. "We'd better accept Rijilon's hospitality, such as it is, and see what he has in mind."

Though she had inward doubts about the man after having crossed swords with him, she had, nevertheless, the inner conviction that he would keep his word about the amnesty the President had granted. Anyway, she was prepared to risk it—and with this in mind, she turned the Ultra slightly in its course until its nose was heading toward Rijilon's fleet, still drifting in the distance.

She switched on the Language Translator. "Rijilon? Amazon speaking. Come alongside and we'll anchor your airlock to ours, then you can join us. Over."

Rijilon's voice came through the loudspeaker. "I am coming alongside as you have instructed, Amazon. Over and out."

The quintet watched as one space machine detached itself from the remainder of the fleet and moved swiftly into position. When at last it was alongside, the Amazon switched on the magnetic grapples and the vessel was drawn flush against the Ultra's vast bulk. The airlock opened, and so did that of Rijilon's ship, leaving a clear corridor from one control-room to the other.

While this was proceeding, Abna switched the Language Translator back to normal and then stood watching as the dignified Rijilon came slowly across from his own ship and inclined his head slightly as he saw the Amazon regarding him.

"I am grateful, Amazon, that you have decided to trust me," he said. "In all truth, I meant what I said on the radio. Now we are faced with a common danger—the revival of Zon. But you still have the opportunity to leave this system and abandon its troubles entirely."

"We never abandon trouble: We face it," the Amazon replied. "What exactly do you propose doing?"

"We must return to my own world at once. Every second of delay makes the ultimate task harder."

It was some hours later when the Ultra and Rijilon's fleet at last touched down on his world—Karg, by name. Rijilon conducted the five of them to an edifice in the city centre—not a very long journey since they had landed at the city's official space-and-air park. Once within the building they were conducted down a series of passages lined with watchful guards, and ultimately into what were plainly the chambers of the President.

And at a broad and very normal-looking desk was the President himself, a middle-aged man with graying hair, the most notable thing about him being his friendly smile. Here was no tyrannical personality but a man of obvious charm and gentility.

"The Golden Amazon and the Crusaders, sir," Rijilon said, when a voice translator had been switched on. "They decided to accept your offer of amnesty and have audience with you. The planet is reviving."

"So I understand. The telescopic division has just reported it to me. Our friends here deposited the stone as intended, then?"

"No," the Amazon put in. "That was brought about by a combination of most unfortunate circumstances which I'll explain later. For the moment your main concern should be—and probably is—to rectify the damage."

"We should try the paralysis again before restoration gets too firm a hold," Rijilon suggested.

The President nodded. "Do that, then, and report progress to me. And do it at once."

Rijilon gave a salute and then departed. The President waved to chairs and then sat back, his blue eyes searching each Crusader in turn.

"I am afraid," he said finally, "that we meet under rather strained circumstances. Upon the first occasion when you arrived I issued orders for your death, mainly because I believed you were in league with Zon and were determined to revive the inhabitants of that planet."

"That was our original intention," the Amazon shrugged. "It was still our intention up to the time when Rijilon contacted us in space. Only then did we realize that there must be some vital reason for withholding our hand. . . . But we have never been in league with the Zonians."

"They are the vultures of our five-world system," the President said bitterly. "We had the ingenuity and science to paralyze them in their tracks before they could destroy us—a feat which we accomplished by taking them by surprise. Now you have undone all that work. Might I ask what happened exactly?"

The Amazon explained the circumstances. "It couldn't be helped," the Amazon said. "That's one reason why we'll try to help you to rectify the damage we've done, but we must know what we're fighting."

"You are fighting a race of people who have created a mechanical world and are determined to clothe it in the vestments usually attributed to a planet—namely, air and water."

The Amazon frowned. "Created a world? Where? I haven't seen it."

"You won't have done so. It is of black, non-reflective metal and exists about 80 million miles from Zon itself, outside our five-world system. The Zonians were just on the verge of completing their plans for this mechanical planet of theirs when we stopped them."

"Why should clothing this synthetic planet with air and water affect you?" Abna asked.

"It affects us because the air and water will be that of our own world, and the three more or less friendly neighbor worlds who are around us. It is the avowed intention of the Zonians—which fact we learned from our intelligence department—to strip every world around them of air and water and transplant it to their metal planet."

The Amazon said thoughtfully: "I begin to see what you are up against. But the reason for this metal planet? How big is it? What do the Zonians want it for?"

"How big is it?" The President reflected. "About six times the size of Zon itself—a good deal bigger than all the planets in this system put together. A masterpiece of cosmic engineering and, so far as the intelligence department has been able to discover, they need the planet for two reasons—one to solve the problem of their own overcrowded population, and two, to use the planet as a scientific base and leaping-off point for the deeps immediately beyond this system. Zon is an older planet than the others and, of course, its civilization is more advanced and more congested because of it."

"I can understand them needing the resources of four planets, excluding their own, to clothe this metal world in air and water," the Amazon questioned, "but why did they go to the trouble of making a giant world? With their scientific ability, wouldn't they have found it easier to attack the planets in their own system, wipe out the populations, and take over?"

"Certainly they could do it, but in the process they would lose untold members of their race, and there isn't one of them who isn't a useful scientist to the community. By whipping away air and water from their neighbor worlds they are safe from attack, or at least more so than they would be if they engaged in open warfare. Now perhaps you can see the danger in reviving a planet like that?"

"Indeed I do," the Amazon assented. "From the very first moment we arrived on this planet I somehow could not see any of you, from your Imperix to your aide, being ruthless killers." The Amazon held forth her yellow hand. "We understand each other now—we are ranged against a common foe."

CHAPTER VII

AN instrument on the President's desk whirred softly for attention. He snapped a switch and spoke. Instantly there came the familiar voice of Rijilon, his normal language translated immediately by the language machine. In silence the five Crusaders listened.

"We have made the first moves in an attempt to reparalyze Zon, sir, but they have proved ineffective. The planet is now almost completely recovered and we have lost the former advantage of surprise. What are my orders?"

The President gave a worried frown and hesitated. Then before he could answer, the Amazon leaned across toward him.

"Tell him to stop wasting his time. Maybe we can do something."

The President nodded and said into the instrument: "Attempt nothing further for the moment, Rijilon. I'll give you fresh instructions when I've decided what has to be done."

The President switched off and then looked up as the Crusaders got to their feet.

"Just what do you propose doing?" the President asked, and at that the Amazon shrugged.

"At the moment I'm not quite sure, but at least we can review the position in your laboratory with your scientists. Our science is apparently about level with yours, but we also have certain devices which are even ahead of you—and they may be for the Zonians. One weapon in particular, our Zero-Thought Amplifier, could be used if everything else fails, but it is so vastly destructive and ruthless that we always hesitate to use it. For the moment we'd better confer with your laboratory technicians."

Within 10 minutes the quintet was in the midst of the machines and instruments of the city's main laboratory—an enormous building in the centre of the city, with myriads of adjoining laboratories and ante-rooms. In charge here was Railus, who, as the Crusaders were conducted into his presence, was in the midst of consultation with Rijilon himself.

A language translator in operation, the Amazon spoke:

"Our science is at your disposal, and I hope your science is at ours. Between us we might be able to do something. The immediate problem, as I see it, is that the attempt to produce a second paralysis has failed."

"Completely," Railus said. "I'm afraid we have lost the initiative completely. Come and look for yourselves."

Turning, he led the way through the midst of the machines and armies of technicians into a large adjoining chamber. There was only one instrument in it, a huge assembly of girders and reflecting mirrors which reached to the lofty, doming roof—a telescopic reflector. When the lights dimmed, upon a vast, three-dimensional wall screen there appeared a view of Zon itself, and Railus operated a series of switches to bring the view closer.

The transmitted scenes were self-explanatory and the Crusaders studied them in grim silence. If ever a planet had come back to life, this one had. Activity and industry were everywhere.

Finally Railus switched the scene off and led the way back into the laboratory where the language translator stood.

"Railus, what is the immediate danger? Obviously, Zon is completely restored, so what do you think the Zonians will do next?" the Amazon asked.

"You know of their plan to denude us and our neighbors of air and water. We don't know which world they'll strip first but I think it will be this one, in revenge for rendering them powerless. They know it was our world which caused it, and it's natural to think they'll take reprisal and strip the neighbor worlds later."

Railus motioned to an ante-room, carrying the language translator with him on its stand. Once within the office, the Crusaders and men of Karg sat down at a table, dominated by the Amazon. From her tense, analytical manner she was obviously in the midst of deep scientific thought.

"To take air and water from this planet some kind of magnetic power will have to be used by the Zonians," she said, "and it is against that that you have to prepare. As I see it, we need to do as we do on the Ultra—counteract the magnetism with repulsion. The matter of magnetism should not be difficult for you since you even fly your spaceships on magnetic lines of force. What we have to do, is find out the exact formula for their magnetism. There would seem to be only one way to do that. We—the Crusaders, I mean—must go to Zon and see what we can discover."

Rijilon laughed shortly. "I'll warn you, Amazon, if you do that you will never be heard of again and your Ultra will probably be destroyed."

The Amazon shrugged. "There are ways and means, my friend, and we have ample armory with which to protect ourselves. . . . And the sooner we get on the move the better. Convey our compliments to the President and tell him what we are trying to do. . . ." She got purposefully to her feet. "Ready, you others?"

They nodded, and within a short time were once more inside the Ultra, hurtling away toward the distant world of Zon.

"I don't want to question the rightness of what you're doing, Vi," Abna said, looking at her, "but what sort of plan have you in mind?"

"Just this: We can go among them on the pretext that we wish to help them in their destructive plan against Karg. We can easily say we have been held prisoners on Karg and were sentenced to death, which is true. We can say we have just managed to escape, using Thania as a hostage to ensure that we got away safely."

Thania gazed in surprise as the Amazon's words were translated by the ever-operative Language Translator.

"I, a hostage?" she asked in surprise, and the Amazon glanced at her.

"That will be your role in our plan of campaign, Thania."

"Wouldn't it be quicker and more efficient to simply wipe out Zon and all it contains with the Zero-Thought Amplifier?" Mexone asked bluntly. "Surely we're justified since the Zonians are planning to destroy Karg and the neighbor planets?"

"I don't doubt that we're justified," the Amazon replied, "but we'll only use the Amplifier as a last resort. We don't want to set ourselves up as the arbiters of life and death: We only want to stop wrong being done."

Viona beckoned Thania to her side, and augmented by Mexone, they did their best to give the Kargian girl a grounding in the English language. As for the Amazon, she took no part in the "lesson." She either spent her time at the switchboard or else the window, until after a while Abna drifted over to her.

"Something's puzzling me," he murmured, and the Amazon glanced at him in surprise.

"Usually you're only too glad of a chance to be violent, and it's usually me who has to restrain you. This time everybody thinks it would be simpler to use the Zero-Thought Amplifier and have done with it, yet you refuse to do it. Why?"

"We have only the word of Rijilon, Railus and the President, and we believed what we were told. I prefer to be sure for myself."

CHAPTER VIII

As the formerly "standstill" planet came closer, Thania, Viona and Mexone gave up their efforts at English to watch developments out of the window. Abna stood at the side of the Amazon as the Ultra, moving at only a crawl, touched the outermost edge of the planet's atmosphere and thereafter began to descend toward the principal city.

This, at least, was the Amazon's intention—but suddenly a dozen spaceships swept up from the depths, ringed the Ultra completely, flashing a solitary light from their prows, which could only be interpreted as a stop signal.

The radio buzzed for attention. Abna switched it on. A cold, unfriendly voice spoke. "State your business here."

The Amazon said briefly: "We come as friends."

"Friends? From the world of Karg? That is difficult to believe."

"We came from Karg, but not because we are inhabitants of that planet. We are actually from a far distant galaxy and we landed on Karg expecting friendly co-operation. We did not get it. We escaped death by using a Kargian girl as a hostage, who is now with us. We wondered if friendship with you might be possible."

Long silence, then: "Your story would bear closer scrutiny, and so would this so-called hostage from Karg. I shall come aboard your vessel as a neutral observer, which means you will not attack me, nor shall I attack you. You understand?"

"I understand," the Amazon responded. "Draw alongside and anchor your airlock against ours. We will observe the neutral code as long as you do."

There followed the usual manoeuvring, then presently the Zonian ship was in position and the airlock switch moved the thick door to reveal the Zonian control-room. There were six men in it. They had hard, unpleasant faces and pulled-down mouths. Their eyes were sharp and keen, an effect emphasized by the long peaks of the uniform-caps they wore.

Then presently one of them entered the Ultra's control-room and looked about him—the quick, all-embracing look of a soldier and man of action.

At length the Amazon made a move. She crossed to the radio equipment, restored the Language Translator to normal, and then looking at the Zonian, explained. "You may speak and be understood, even as you must now be able to understand me."

"I am Nio," he said curtly, laying a hand palm down on his broad chest in a curious kind of salute. "Commander Nio, in full control of this space fleet. I do not find your explanation very convincing."

"It is nonetheless true," the Amazon said coldly, decided by now that she did not like Nio in the least degree. "I am known as the Golden Amazon of Earth, a planet so far distant you would not be able to comprehend the gulf. These other three"—she identified them—"are my colleagues, and here is the Kargian girl Thania, whom we are using as a hostage."

The piercing eyes looked from one to the other, then at length Nio seemed satisfied. He relaxed a trifle and began to pace slowly about the control-room with an air of complete self-assurance.

"And you came to Zon to see if co-operation might be possible? Co-operation in what sense? You don't suppose you could teach us anything in the nature of science, do you? On the other hand, we certainly shan't hand any information to you."

Nio smiled cynically and stopped his pacing. He had come face to face with the Amazon and now stood surveying her, his feet apart and his hands on his hips, his whole attitude one of domineering arrogance.

"Apparently you expect quite a deal, Amazon! Understand now, and for always, that we are a race unto ourselves, and wish no co-operation or exchange of views with any other race—much less so with a woman who is probably very much in league with Karg, in spite of what you say to the contrary."

The Amazon said nothing, but there were danger lights glowing in her eyes.

"And the rest of you," Nio continued, swinging suddenly on his heel and surveying Abna, Viona and Mexone each in turn. "Let me tell you something!" Nio slapped his hand in vicious emphasis on the table. "Up until recently our world was paralyzed by a scientific trick which we were not quick enough to break. It is doubtful if the Kargians could think of a trick like that by themselves: It is far more likely that you—the so-called experts in science—helped the Kargians to paralyze us."

"On the contrary," the Amazon said. "We revived you. That thermodynamic prison of yours was unbreakable until we brought in a random element and released you. We would hardly do that if we were not friends, would we?"

Nio thought for a moment, then suddenly his right hand flashed out and gripped the arm of Thania. He whirled her to him fiercely.

"You — whatever your name is. You are a woman of Karg, are you not?"

"I — er —" Thania stared at his hard face in fright. "Yes, I am of Karg. My name is Thania."

"Tell me," Nio whispered, "who are these people, and what do they really want here?"

"Only to co-operate," Thania said.

"They plunged our world into apparent death, didn't they?"

"No. My own people did that . . . I have nothing in common with these four. I am their hostage, as they've already told you."

Nio pondered for a moment and then flung Thania away from him. She stumbled to a standstill beside the Amazon.

In the background, Abna clenched his fists but he didn't act. He caught a brief glance from the Amazon which, knowing her as he did, implied that she had not yet finished with the cocksure commander of the Zonian fleet.

"Why exactly you are here I do not seem able to discover," Nio said at length, "but I am prepared to think that it is for no good reason."

Nobody spoke. Nio looked irritated, and then suddenly he whipped a gun from its holster and held it steadily. His eyes moved from one to the other.

"I don't intend to waste any more time. I demand to know your reason for being here."

The Amazon shrugged. "Well, since you put it that way, you cannot expect us to observe neutrality if you don't." She glanced quickly at Abna. "Shut the airlock, Abna, and cut the others off."

He leaped to the switchboard, but before he could do anything, Nio swung toward him. "Leave those switches alone, my friend! If you don't . . ."

Nio got no farther. Viona, standing immediately beside him, lashed out her right hand and knocked the gun from his hand. He muttered something and dived for it, to fall his length as Mexone tripped him up. In those few moments other things happened, too. The men in the adjoining space machine leaped to their feet, intending to come to their commander's aid, but they had reckoned without Abna. He seized the foremost man as he came hurtling through the narrow tunnel, picked him up and flung him into the midst of his fellows. Simultaneously, the Amazon closed the airlock switch and switched off the magnetic grapples. There could only be one outcome to that—the leechhold of the Zonian ship was broken, as also was the air current between it and the Ultra. It went reeling away into the gulf as the Ultra's airlock closed.

"Evidently your colleagues need no longer worry you—or us," the Amazon said, turning from the window to face Nio. "You have only yourself to blame. You should have respected your promise not to become hostile."

"You overlook the rest of my fleet," Nio snapped. "You also overlook that you are in the midst of them."

"We'll deal with that if we have to," Abna said grimly; then he looked at the Amazon. "Well, Vi, what now? This fellow's no use to us, is he?"

"I'm not sure." The Amazon's smouldering eyes were fixed on him. "He obviously knows plenty: He may even know what we wish to discover. We can but see . . . Viona, cut off the radio. It's possible that Nio's soldiers may be overhearing what we're saying."

A switch snapped. Nio shifted uncomfortably, looking at the five ranged around him.

The Amazon said calmly: "You can tell us one thing: What kind of magnetism do you intend to use against Karg in order to steal its air and water?"

Nio's expression changed. "How do you know about that?"

"So it is true then?" the Amazon asked. "Thanks for confirming it. You are a man of high standing in the Zonian order of things, therefore you'll probably know what is intended and the kind of magnetism to be used—and when. I would suggest you tell us. It may be worth your life to do so."

Nio hesitated for a moment, then unexpectedly he flung himself forward, seized Thania—who was nearest to him—around the waist, and dragging her with him he backed to the radio set and switched it on. This done, he pulled the girl's gun from her belt and dug it in her back.

"Your Kargian hostage is proving quite useful," he commented. "Any attempt to stop me telling my fleet to destroy your ship will result in the girl dying instantly. I realize you won't want that to happen: She's too useful to you."

"Even assuming your fleet could destroy the Ultra, which is most unlikely," the Amazon said, "you'd be destroyed with it. Or did you think of that?"

"Certainly. My own life is useful only for the glory of Zon. If I die rather than betray a secret, it matters but little."

Nio smiled coldly, hugging Thania tightly to him with one powerful arm. He turned to the radio and snapped on the microphone. Thania understood his words, even if the others did not.

"Commander Nio speaking. Are you receiving me? Over."

"Receiving you, Commander. What are our orders? Over."

Thania, during his words, gave the Amazon a beseeching look. The Amazon nodded quietly—and in consequence nobody was more astounded than Nio when he abruptly found himself flying over the slim teenager's head, to crash with numbing force on the floor of the control-room.

The radio loudspeaker chattered noisily, evidently demanding an answer from Nio—then it became quiet as the Amazon switched it off. She looked at Thania, slowly advancing toward Nio, and gave her a smile of encouragement.

Silence. Thania still gazed, her hands slack at her sides. Then Nio got slowly to his feet.

"This is nothing but a ridiculous interlude," he snapped, "and I have a radio order to give—"

He dived abruptly for the gun he had dropped, and Thania moved, too, with lightning speed. In a matter of seconds she had swept Nio's feet from under him with a scythe-like movement of her arms. Then even as he fell those same arms locked under

his chin and the girl's knee was dug firmly in the small of his back.

"Very nice, Thania," the Amazon said, nodding her approval. "Now maybe we can make him talk."

The Amazon was smiling icily as she spoke and Nio was just commencing to realize the predicament he was in. Here were no ordinary people—as many others had discovered before him.

"Just speak," the Amazon suggested gently; then she gave a helpless lurch as something struck the Ultra from the outside with stupendous violence. She looked up quickly.

"A bomb of some kind," Abna said, peering through the window. "The fleet's mobilizing for attack."

Another terrific concussion followed. This was far worse than the earlier jolt—an atomic onslaught from outside that slewed the Ultra around giddily and brought a crackling sound from the plates. Instantly, Abna, Viona and Mexone were thrown from the control chairs of the weapons they were controlling, and the Amazon pitched helplessly into a corner. Thania, torn from her grip of Nio, went slithering along the floor and struck her head violently against the base of the switchboard.

The next thing she realized was that she was being jerked up by Nio, a gun prodding in her ribs.

"Over there," he snapped, waving his gun toward the wall. "You're too dangerous to—"

Nio never saw what happened next. With amazing speed, even faster than the Amazon herself at her best, Thania whipped up her right fist and planted it straight under Nio's jaw. Light exploded inside his head, blinding pain went through his neck, then his heavy body fell with a thud and remained motionless. Thania stared down at him in surprise.

"Congratulations, Thania," Abna said rather drily. "You've broken his neck. I'm afraid he won't tell us anything now."

"So the very thing we've wanted we've lost," the Amazon said regretfully. "Well, if we've done nothing else, we've given you a workout, Thania. You're completely one of us now—"

She staggered again as once more the Ultra lurched, then her eyes glinted.

"I'll put up with this no longer," she snapped, and with a quick stride went over to the protonic gun and settled herself in the saddle.

Her eyes narrowed as she looked through the sights. Of the 11 or so machines flying around the Ultra, one in particular was bristling all manner of different-colored beams, while bombs themselves were visibly being released at tiny, gleaming points of light that came straight for the Ultra.

The Amazon pressed the protonic gun's button. Instantly a rain of protons slammed into the midst of the annoying vessel and it exploded outwards from the centre in a mass of boiling metal and intolerable flame. A direct hit, which evidently had also exploded whatever bombs it had on board. At that violent disintegration, the rest of the vessels changed course and then began to streak downwards toward their home planet. Viona and Mexone grinned as they watched them go.

"That seems to have scared them off," Viona commented. "Maybe they'll realize next time that tackling the Ultra isn't so easy as it looks."

Abna came into the control-room from the main passage and glanced across at the Amazon.

"Nio disposed of," he announced. "I used the ejector-trap. Apparently we've won the first round."

"And lost it," the Amazon sighed. "We haven't got the secret of the magnetism we wanted, and we certainly can't descend to Zon and pose as friends after what's happened—so it looks as though the only thing to do is to return to Karg and tell them we've failed in our mission."

CHAPTER IX

TWO hours later, when the Ultra was more than half way back toward Karg, something happened—and it caught the five in the control-room by surprise. There was a vast jerk from the Ultra, a groaning from the atomic power plant, and then a noticeable slowing down. Instantly the Amazon was at the switchboard, checking the dials, with Abna immediately behind her.

"Funny," the Amazon muttered, frowning. "We've lost 5,000 miles an hour of our speed, and it's still dropping. Look!"

Abna nodded tensely, his eyes on the main velocimeter. The red needle was swinging slowly backwards on its graded scale.

"There's a sort of blue haze out here," Viona said, surveying through the observation window. "And I can't see any sign of a planet or dead star which might be exerting its influence . . . just a blue haze. It can't be a star anyway," she added suddenly. "We'd have noticed it on our way out."

"What's that?" Thania demanded, pointing down toward her own planet. "In the haze—a sort of bulge on the side of Karg—"

"Bulge?" Viona stared at it and then gave a start. "Good heavens! What is it?"

The Amazon and Abna hurried to her side and watched the phenomenon for a moment. Something was definitely swelling like a small pear from the limb of the distant world, stretching outwards into infinity and surprisingly enough coming straight toward the Ultra.

"I've got it!" Abna exclaimed abruptly, snapping his fingers. "It's frozen air and water being dragged from Karg—magnetic power which shows a blue haze is stripping the planet as one might peel a banana. The magnetic drag is slowing us up."

"You mean the Zonians have acted already?" Thania exclaimed in horror.

"Doesn't seem to be much doubt of it, does there? We know that they had everything ready even before paralysis overtook them. They have had time by now to adjust themselves. Anyway, there's no doubt about that." And Abna nodded to the growing gray-white ball hurtling through the void.

Suddenly the Amazon leaped to the switchboard and pulled the power lever to its farthest notch.

"We'd better turn aside—if we can," the Amazon said, with a quick glance. "For one thing, we don't want to be dragged to Zon, and for another, we want to get out of the way of that frozen water and air when it arrives. It may prove dangerous, and our outer plates have already taken a good deal of punishment from those bombs used by the fleet—"

She began to operate the controls swiftly, then paused as Abna caught at her arm.

"Wait a moment, Vi; there's something we might as well do first. We're right in the midst of the magnetic stream so we can take a reading of it—find out its frequency, power, and all about it. We missed getting it from Nio, but we needn't miss this. There are other planets to be considered, and we might as well have the formula as not. . . ." Abna scribbled busily, then at last he nodded. "Right! I'll work it out properly later. I've got all the details. Start swinging us aside."

"Easier said than done," the Amazon muttered, resuming her activities with the controls.

Just how difficult a task it was became apparent in a few moments as, exerting every prestige of power in the plant, the Amazon struggled to force the Ultra off-course—and out of the magnetic influence, and also out of the way of the onrushing frozen air and water.

"We can't do it," the Amazon said finally, relaxing slightly. "We haven't enough power. In a few moments we'll stop altogether and then begin to move backward toward Zon—"

"No, we won't," Abna retorted. "There's one chance yet, and one we've never needed to take—but we will now. We'll triple the power of the plant." And he darted to the passageway that led to the great storage holds.

Abna came back in a hurry, two large copper cubes in his arms. He nodded quickly to the Amazon and she switched off the power long enough for him to place the cubes in the power plant's matrix. In those few moments the Ultra slowed down alarmingly.

"Okay," Abna said curtly. "Switch on—full power."

The Amazon obeyed, and this time the power plant screamed as it overran itself. Fuses blew and were instantly replaced. Precious seconds were gained while the fuses held out, seconds in which the Ultra's ponderous mass swung off course and actually accelerated slightly against the magnetic drag.

So it went on—seconds gained and fuses blown. Replacement of fuses, and on again. But little by little the Ultra was moving diagonally as well as forward, tearing herself out of the vastly powerful magnetic stream being projected from Zon—

It seemed a matter of hours to the straining, sweating five in the control-room, but actually it was only a matter of minutes, until the Ultra suddenly gave an enormous spurt, so violent indeed that all five fell backwards and to the floor, pinned there by a violent and instantaneous acceleration.

What had happened was plain enough to the Amazon. The Ultra had finally pulled out of the stream of magnetism with an exertion equivalent to three times the full power of the atomic plant. Suddenly meeting no resistance, she achieved within seconds the maximum power of the tripled plant and was almost instantly moving at hundreds of times the speed of light through space.

It was only the degravitators and stabilizers built into the vessel that saved the five, otherwise, moving at that unthinkable velocity, they would have been crushed into and merged with the very metal floor on to which they had been flung.

As it was, the Amazon began to move slowly, every slightest movement taking her ages to accomplish. Perspiration streaming down her face, she gripped the power lever and pulled down and out.

Instantly the crushing weight vanished as acceleration ceased. The ship was still moving at incredible velocity, but with the force of acceleration gone, there was no longer its drag to contend with. The stabilizers acted as they had always done, set at Earth-norm attraction.

The others slowly got to their feet.

"Whew!" the Amazon muttered, drawing the back of her hand over her streaming face. "We wanted to move and we certainly did! The thing is that we've lost Thania's system of worlds completely for the moment."

As Abna cut off the power plant and restored it to normal, the Amazon looked out of the window. The Ultra was still moving with unbelievable speed, and only slightly began to slow down as Abna switched on the power again in reverse.

"We'll have some hours getting ourselves straight," Abna announced finally. "It will take that long to slow up. Once we've done that, we'll try to find our way back to Karg. And I say 'try' advisedly, because we're light years away from any known landmark."

CHAPTER X

IT was some three hours later before the Ultra finally became "manageable" again, and at the end of this time she had slowed down to zero.

Then the Amazon steered a fixed course toward Karg, where at last they landed.

All was desolation, but they were delighted to find a small group of survivors living in a hastily constructed town of huts.

When Abna told them they had a plan to build repulsion towers to deflect the magnetic stream and would now apply it to Biuz, they said it was too late. That planet had also been devastated. Only Tron and another planet remained intact.

"Our difficulty seems to be time," said Abna.

There was a thoughtful pause, broken at length by Thania.

"As yet," she said, half apologetically, "I am not thoroughly experienced in the ways of the Crusaders, therefore I hesitate to make a suggestion. . . . Just the same, I have one."

"Such as?" the Amazon asked.

"Well, it does seem to me, as a looker-on, that you are devoting more attention to a complicated scheme than a simple one. You want to build a repulsive system, which will take a long time. Time in which the Accursed Ones will beat you to it. There's an easier way than that."

"There is?" Abna looked at her in surprise.

"I am thinking of high-powered nuclear bombs," the girl said. "We have them, and you know what they are and their tremendous destructiveness. The Zonian magnetism drags everything from the surface of a planet—that we know. Buildings, people, oceans, and air. Suppose it also drew a quantity of nuclear bombs as well? Suppose the entire stockpile of the bombs owned by Karg are arranged on top of the Ultra, with the firing mechanism open and ready for action? What will happen? Those bombs will be whipped off when they catch us in the magnetic stream, and be drawn back to Zon. When they arrive, they'll explode. And if here are several hundred of them, which there will be, Zon will be in a pretty sorry state when they have all exploded."

There was an amazed silence for a moment, silence chiefly because the girl had suggested so simple and yet so devastating a plan. Finally it was Abna who spoke.

"I can't think why the girl isn't right, Vi!" he exclaimed, turning to the Amazon, "because to have their magetism working, and receive stolen air and water, their own protective screen will have to be out of action. They're certain to attack Tron next but will wait until they get the Ultra between Zon and Tron before they send out their magnetic stream, hoping to get two birds with one stone. But the magnetism will be deflected, when it hits Tron, by the repulsion towers we'll tell them to build. And we can fight it in the Ultra with our triple power plant."

"Thania," the Amazon said slowly, putting an arm about her slim shoulders. "I think you have

the answer—if you happen to know where the stockpile of bombs is kept."

The girl nodded. "Yes, I know.

Two hours of digging, using tools and disintegrators from the Ultra, led them finally to the bomb vault.

"There!" Thania said, pointing to row after row of metal racks set into the walls. "Those are the bombs."

After the bombs had been stored in the Ultra, the Amazon made the Ultra invisible and they headed out into the void to perfect their plan.

At once, the Crusaders set about the task of preparing their "surprise packet" for the ruthless Zonians. Day by day, and week by week—checked entirely by the chronometers, since there was neither day nor night in the accepted sense—they prepared the bombs for action, a frighteningly dangerous task which demanded all their care and steadiness.

And as each bomb was made "live" by Viona, Mexone and Thania it was transferred through the roof trap to Abna and the Amazon, working in spacesuits on the Ultra's exterior to stack the bombs in readiness. They worked on the job at intervals, carefully stacking the gray "pears" within a loose rack, so that they could be whipped away without hindrance when the magnetism struck them.

An exacting and nerve-racking job with only the everlasting stars and distant blazing nebulae for their surroundings, otherwise there was nothing but eternal space. Each knew that they worked with instant death in their thickly gauntleted hands if they chanced to make a mistake, or stumble in their magnetic boots. Half an hour at a time was all they could trust themselves to do, then they had to return below for relaxation and the recovery of their nerve.

After several weeks they turned back. From a hardly moving position in the distant void, the Ultra began to gather speed—but gently, as the bomb load was remembered. Mirrors reflecting the scene outside showed that the bombs were motionless, held, of course, by the mass of the Ultra itself and bound by common law to move at the same velocity as it did.

"Nevertheless," the Amazon murmured, as they came within a million miles of the planet Tron. "I'll be mighty thankful when we've rid ourselves of our load of eggs . . ."

She glanced through the observation window and gave a sigh of relief. Tron looked exactly as it had done before: There were no signs of its having been ravaged by magnetic beams as yet.

"And from the look of things," Abna said, studying the scene through the high-power telescope, "they've got those towers built all right. I can see six of them on the side of the planet facing us."

He left the telescope and crossed over to the radio. He switched in the Language Translator and then spoke. Within a few moments a voice answered.

"I am receiving you clearly, Abna of the Crusaders. For my own people I have only to report that the 12 towers have been built at strategic points, so arranged that they will surround our planet with a shell of magnetic repulsion whenever you give the signal. Over."

Abna said quietly: "I am giving that signal now, my friend. Keep watch with your telescope. When all this is over, you can do one thing for my colleagues and myself as recompense for what we have done for yours. Over."

"Anything, friend Abna, that may be within our power. Over."

"You will radio Karg and Biuz, pay them our respects, and tell them that a world awaits them where they can build again and without fear. I refer to the gray metal world which the Zonians have created, and for which they have stolen air and water. We would send the message ourselves, but it is possible that our last great struggle may hurl us out of this system entirely and we shall not attempt to come back. You will do that? Over."

"We will do that, yes. And may the gods watch over you in this battle of yours. Our eternal thanks and thoughts go with you. Over and out."

"This is it, then?" the Amazon asked quietly.

"Yes—when we're sure they've got that magnetism going on Tron." Abna looked out the window and then glanced at the detectors on the switchboard. It was not long before Tron became suffused with pale lavender color and the instruments on the board, directed toward the planet, gave a reading which showed a high magnetic intensity.

The Amazon steered the huge ship in the direction of Zon, so many millions of miles away. When at last the navigation reading showed that the vessel was in a direct line between Zon and Tron she pulled the switch which gave the Ultra visibility once more, as well as cutting down to almost zero speed.

"Up to them now," she said, as the others congregated around her, all of them tensely expectant. "We can do nothing but wait—and watch."

"Good." Abna looked at the spare copper blocks for tripling the energy of the power plant if need be. "We're okay—a sitting pigeon apparently, but the most dangerous pigeon any scientists of any world ever encountered."

The chronometer flicked through the seconds, steady and remorseless. Half an hour passed. An hour. Then—

"Look out!" Abna ejaculated suddenly. "The meters are reacting . . ."

He had hardly time to make the announcement before things happened. Through the window there was a bright core of brilliance making itself evident as a projection from Zon. Moving with the incredible speed of light, it was across the gulfs in seconds, engulfing the Ultra in a lavender-tinted haze and hurtling after that straight for the world of Tron. What happened there the Crusaders had not time to observe: They had enough to do inside the Ultra.

Caught by the magnetic beam, the ship suddenly started to move with rising acceleration toward Zon. Abna remained by the window, staring intently outside—then he gave a whoop of delight as he saw a mass of gray specks hurtling ahead of the Ultra, drawn irresistibly by the magnetic force, and because the bombs were smaller and had less mass, they travelled far faster than the Ultra's huge bulk.

The power plant suddenly came into action, whining shrilly in reverse, and—as on that other occasion—the Amazon strove with a slow increase of power to turn the huge vessel aside out of the stream. And again, as before, the power plant was not up to the struggle demanded of it.

"Have all the bombs gone?" the Amazon demanded, and Abna glanced at her from by the window.

"A lot of them have. I can't be sure— Hey, Thania, what are you doing?" He broke off in amazement, as he saw the girl struggling quickly into a spacesuit and helmet.

She raced out of the control-room before anybody could stop her and fled through the main passageway. Instantly Abna, Viona and Mexone were after her—but they arrived a few seconds too late to grab her. The door of the air-chamber slammed in their faces and they could only watch in horror through the glass panel as the youngster quickly climbed the metal ladder to the roof and pushed up the huge trap.

The view of her was extraordinary, silhouetted against a violet haze from the beam, which in itself blotted out the stars. She climbed up a few rungs of the ladder, looked along the surface of the Ultra's roof, and then climbed down again. She shut the trapdoor and reopened the slide door of the air chamber.

"You reckless little idiot!" Abna snorted, when she had pulled off her helmet. "Do you realize that you could have been pulled out of that manhole like a cork out of a bottle?"

Abna dived along the passageway, the roar of the power plant dinning in his ears as he entered the control-room.

Thania came in, dragging her spacesuit and scooping the tumbled blonde hair from her face. The Amazon only glanced at her.

"Nice work," she said briefly. "You're a girl after my own heart, Thania. "Bombs all gone, you say?"

"Yes. Every one of them."

"Good!" The Amazon's eyes gleamed. "Now I can manoeuvre in a bit more comfort—and to get out of this magnetism I'll certainly have to manoeuvre to good effect. If we get dragged back to Zon behind the bombs as they explode— Whew!"

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Abna snapped off the power, put in the extra copper cubes, and then snapped the power on again. Immediately Viona, Mexone and Thania took up their positions behind the fuses, ready to go into action the second they were needed.

As on that other occasion, the struggle was severe. The fuses blew time and again, and the Ultra lost precious ground as the fuses were rapidly replaced. The Amazon hung on to the levers, the dials reading maximum power—but in the immense tug-of-war between the Ultra and the magnetism there was no doubt that the magnetism was slowly winning.

"I don't think," the Amazon whispered, "that we're going to make it in time. They've got a terrific pull this time: Even greater than last—"

Abruptly her words ceased. Looking through the window with the others, she saw a flash from distant Zon—a brilliant blue-white flash. It was followed immediately by another; then suddenly the entire universe seemed to blaze with incredible flame as Zon was transformed from a planet into what looked like a first magnitude star.

"We've done it!" Viona cried in delight. She got no further. Suddenly the pull from doomed Zon stopped dead. Immediately the enormous pull of the Ultra in the reverse direction had the effect of flinging the five to the floor, exactly as had been the case before when they had played tag with the magnetism.

But this time the Amazon was prepared. Pinned to the floor, she managed nonetheless to reach with her hand an extension cable to the switchboard. There followed a click and instantly she was floating weightless into the upper reaches of the control-room, the others somersaulting and gyrating weirdly around her.

She smiled, pulled herself to the floor by gripping the switchboard projections, and then snapped over the normal switches. The stabilizers responded instantly and the five came back to normal.

"Nice work," Abna commented. "How much distance did we cover in that hop?"

He moved to the window and gazed out; then he frowned. There was no trace of Zon—or even of any planet in the system. In one huge leap the Ultra had leaped out into the void and was now hurtling through it at a steady velocity.

"Just as well I told them on Tron that we wouldn't be back," he commented, relaxing. "Well, I think we can truthfully say it was a job well done."

"Beyond doubt," the Amazon agreed, joining him with the others. "And our good wishes for the future go with those people of Tron, Karg, Biuz and the outermost world."

For a moment there was silence. It was broken finally by Thania.

"Well?" she asked brightly. "What do we do next? This is a grand life as long as there's something happening. When there isn't anything, it must get pretty dull."

"That's what I think," Viona said, with an impish smile.

The Amazon sighed and glanced at Abna. "Even if we could get old, Abna—which we can't—we'd never be allowed to with Viona and Thania on the go. As for what's next, I don't know. Just have to see if anything turns up that seems exciting or interesting."

There was silence for a moment as Thania looked out on to the endless reaches of space. Then presently she turned, her face puzzled. She pointed through the window.

"What's that?" she asked in surprise.

The others looked in the direction she indicated. There was something in the infinite distances which they could not quite understand—a vast cosmic nebula, it seemed to be, but the curious thing about it was that it was shaped like a man. A huge, cloudy man, apparently dressed in luminous draperies and with his hands and arms extended as though supplicating for assistance.

"Some trick of the light," Abna said uncertainly. "It just can't be a man that size, and—"

He stopped. Suddenly the man had ceased to exist and in his place was a gigantic face—a hazy face, certainly, but there was no denying the details.

"Something odd going on out there in space," the Amazon said at last. "Faces and men don't appear and disappear like that without very good reason. . . ." She glanced at Thania. "It looks as though things are not going to be so dull, after all. We'd better take a closer look."

Thania gave a brief, delighted glance and with a smile the Amazon turned to the switchboard and reset the Ultra's course.

THE END