

ace
book
G-650
50¢

PROFESSOR JAMESON
SPACE ADVENTURE

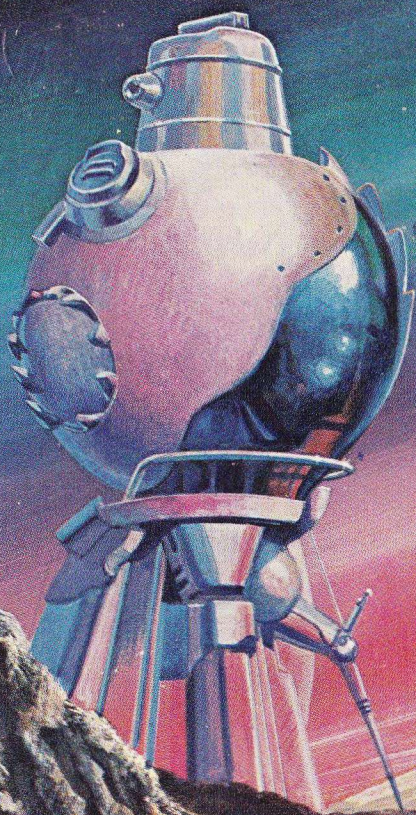
#3

space war

Neil R. Jones

**The last Earthman holds the
balance of power in a war
between machine-men**

First Book Publication

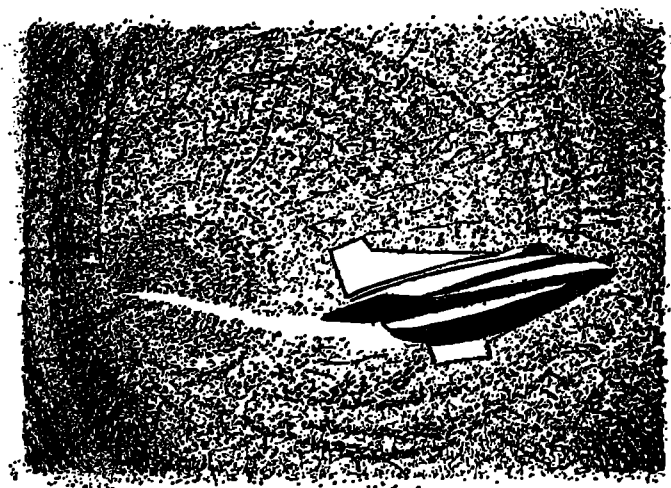


35

GRY MORROW

C O N T E N T S

ONE:	ZORA OF THE ZOROMES	7
TWO:	SPACE WAR	67
THREE:	LABYRINTH	113



ONE: ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

I

"AND WE LEFT the region of dead worlds and cooling suns, crossing space to Zor," Professor Jameson concluded.

"With no adventures between the time you left the sunless world and your arrival here?" asked Zora.

"We made several stops in the few systems we passed, but nothing outstanding befell us, nothing worth the telling."

Princess Zora of the Zoromes turned her head and looked far out upon the distant horizon, away from the apex of the mighty citadel on which she sat, listening to the adventures of this fascinating convert to the ranks of the machine men of Zor. She was a sentient, flesh

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

and blood Zorome, representative of the species from which the brains of the machine men were taken. Zora had many years yet to live before the official time arrived for the transposition of her brain to a machine body. Zor maintained a propagating species to replace the expeditions of Zoromes that never came back and renew the numbers of those depleted expeditions which did return. The machine men who had gone forth under the leadership of 25X-987 and returned under 744U-21 had finally reached Zor, the home world.

The machine men discovered that they had been gone for more than twelve hundred of 21MM392's Earthly years. Most of this time had been spent near the planet of the double sun, where more than half of the expedition had been killed; the remaining Zoromes were marooned there for centuries.

Professor Jameson, convert to the machine men, the last representative of Earth's long dead civilization, found himself with Princess Zora MCXII to whom he was relating the adventures and discoveries of the expedition; she in turn explained the mysteries of Zor and its sister planets to the interested professor.

"21MM392, you have told me how 25X-987 and his expedition found your dead body in the shadow of the dying world and removed your brain to one of the machines, stimulating your mental processes into life and activity once more," Zora radiated. "You have related how half the expedition was wiped out by hypnotic impulse on the planet of the double sun. I have heard your story of the seven centuries of cosmic solitude in the wrecked space ship, waiting for the tripeds to come and release you. Yet the most interesting tale of all you have barely touched upon. Your invasion of the blue di-

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

mension, the rescue of your comrades from the ocean pit, your adventures inside the hydrosphere and your trip into time—all these interest me less than your own personal story. You have finished your account of the wandering world; now tell me about your rocket satellite and how you ever came to conceive such an idea.”

Zora’s large eyes with their long underlashes stared inquisitively at the professor. Her six tentacles undulated gracefully as she shifted herself to a more comfortable position preparatory to hearing the anticipated story of Professor Jameson’s interment in space.

Still, little thoughts in the professor’s mind, beyond the perception of Zora’s mental attunement, rapidly compared her with Earthly standards of pulchritude, the standard which had existed during the earlier half of the twentieth century. To staid, Earthly inhabitants of forty million years past, Zora would have appeared as a weird monstrosity. Yet her features, her curved, undulating lines and graceful, waving tentacles were harmonizing and symphonious to the eye.

From four pronounced callosities, two on each side of her upper body, four of Zora’s tentacles grew long and tapered to tiny tips. Two more, one in front and another in back, at right angles to the flanked tentacles, completed her six upper appendages. Below this upper area her body assumed vase-like proportions, then tapered to four short legs, unjointed, which curved outward from the base of her body to terminate in three-pointed feet.

Zora’s head was large and stately, though not out of proportion to the size of her body. A high fringe of membranous tissue grew from cheek to cheek across her head like a thin, waving coiffure. Beneath and in front of this, below a well fashioned forehead, deep,

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

dark eyes sparkled with curiosity. Long, lower lashes drooped over several inches of her face, devoid of what the professor would have described as a nose. The machine men knew such a facial disfigurement, in their travels from world to world, as a proboscis.

A diamond-shaped mouth opened in amazement from time to time as the professor told his tale of the rocket satellite. Zora possessed no external ears. Her faculty of distinguishing sound was located in the back of her head, behind the waving membrane whose thin points arose star-like from the deep-pink fringe. Her respiration process was accomplished through tiny, valved openings at the base of her fore tentacle.

"My work of a lifetime centered about rocket propulsion; I worked long and hard upon experiments, employing radium as a means of fuel," the professor explained in reply to Zora's question. "At the time I lived on Earth, space travel was only a dream, not yet realized."

"How do you know?"

"You forget the time bubble," the professor reminded her.

"Oh, yes—to be sure!"

"A fascinating idea arose in my mind one day. I thought of it so often, contemplating its possibilities, that it grew to be an obsession with me, supplanting much of my time at rocket propulsion with a new type of experiment in a radically different field," Professor Jameison continued. "The absorbing study which had so completely captivated my imagination was immunity to dissolution and decomposition of the human body. I knew the human body, like all other Earthly substances, whether rock, air, water, metal or living matter, was

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

subject to eventual breaking up of the molecular structure into its constituent atoms. It was said in my day that, should mankind cease to exist, all trace of his works including the great pyramids and all other time-defying products of his creation would within a hundred thousand years crumble into the forgotten past, due to the fact that, subjected to planetary conditions, nothing can exist forever. Of course, the readjustment of atomic structure is more rapid in the case of organic matter than it is in the case of inorganic material."

A ray of sunlight spread shafts of fire through the membrane on Zora's head as she sat absorbed in the professor's narration. He resumed his story.

"In my search for a means by which an organic body might be preserved indefinitely following death, I contemplated many ways and means, abandoning them one by one as I realized their eventual impracticability. At first I went about trying to discover a serum which might surpass that of the Egyptians, creating its subject indestructible by the various elements as well as preserving it intact in appearance. I gave up this idea, however, for I saw that not only would it require a longer lifetime than mine in which to discover such a concoction, but I realized that no liquid, no matter how perfect in its embalming qualities, would survive the more violent forces of nature such as earthquakes, volcanic action and glaciers, not to mention temperature, air, moisture and minute organisms. For a time I considered the possibilities of immersing a corpse in a great block of transparent glass."

Several airships of Zor passed low over the citadel and the professor and Zora paused momentarily to contemplate these. Then the professor once more continued.

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

"I was chasing an old art. Since the days of the Pharaohs, the human race had sought ceaselessly a means whereby their dead might be preserved against the ravages of time. Great was the art of the Egyptians in the embalming of their deceased, a practice which became lost in the chaos of Earth's changing history. It was never rediscovered. But even the embalming of the Egyptians was futile for the preservation of their dead down through the millions of years, their dissolution being just as eventual as the immediate cremation of a corpse."

"Tell me," said Zora. "Were there others of your kind who practiced this art?"

"England of the seventeenth century practiced a crude method of embalming to serve a grim, practical purpose. Smugglers were hung to gibbets along the coast, their bodies coated from time to time with tar and pitch to preserve them as long standing examples for other smugglers who dared approach the English coast with their illegal trade. Some of these grisly, lonely sentinels were known to stand duty for fourteen years. Their dissolution was a drawn out affair. Unveiled, clad only in rent canvas through which protruded the emaciated knee bones, these tangible specters crumbled slowly to dust in the summer and fell away to mud in the winter. When they finally became no longer serviceable, they were replaced with a fresh specimen.

"I finally came to the conclusion that nothing on Earth is unchangeable beyond a certain limit of time, and as long as I looked for an Earthly means of preservation I was doomed to disappointment. It was clear that I could never accomplish my purpose if I were to employ one system of atomic structure, such as embalming fluid or glass, to preserve another system of atomic structure

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

when all atomic structure is eternally subject to universal change.

"Having arrived at this definite conclusion, I looked for a means by which a human body in the condition of death might be preserved to the end of all Earthly time, to that day when the Earth would return to the sun from which it had sprung. Then, quite suddenly, one day I conceived the answer to the great enigma. It popped into my mind so unexpectedly that it left me awed, for at that particular moment I was not thinking of the matter at all, engrossed as I was in a rocket experiment. It was a wild and uncanny solution, and for a moment I looked upon it as unattainable. However, I came to consider it more thoroughly.

"Any material substance, whether of organic or inorganic origin, would exist indefinitely cast into the depths of space. At that time little was known of space by mankind, yet I was certain about my theory. This stupendous idea, this wild scheme, appalled me with its possibilities. I had previously decided that—whatever solution I eventually arrived at—I would subject myself to it first in the subsequence of my death. Dead, I had nothing to lose by such a venture. Then, too, I thrilled to the pride of being the first mortal ever to penetrate the vast mysteries of the cosmic void, even though I might be lifeless at the time.

"I visualized my dead body flying off into the illimitable depth of space, enclosed in a rocket, perfectly preserved. On Earth millions of generations of mankind would live and die, their bones mouldering into the forgotten past, even as the illustrious Egyptian kings, even as the obscure, seventeenth century smugglers, until that day when mankind, beneath a cooling sun, would fade

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

out forever in the chill, thin atmosphere of a dying world. And still I would persist, perfectly preserved in death.

"The thought left me gasping in open-mouth contemplation, my brain a whirl of fantastic thoughts. Then reason asserted itself. I was no longer the imaginative dreamer, but once again a cold, calculating scientist, turning the matter carefully under the scrutiny of calm consideration. I decided to make my funeral rocket a satellite of the Earth, furnishing it with sufficient initial propulsion to place it well beyond the dangers of crashing back upon the Earth, yet keeping it well within the planets gravitational attraction. I chose an orbit fifty thousand miles out.

"My only fears were the huge meteors which careen through space at a tremendous velocity. I overcame the possibilities of a collision with one of these steller juggernauts by the installation of automatic repulsion rays in the rocket. These repulsion rays work only in a vacuum. This was another by-product of my experiments with radium as a space-rocket propellant. These rays worked only when a meteor approached, the proximity of the meteor exciting into action the automatic repulsion unit. A transformer, turning sunlight into radium energy, kept my satellite protected through forty million years. Whenever a meteor approached within a hundred miles or less these rays swerved it slightly to one side of the rocket's orbit. In the case of the large meteors, the rocket itself deviated temporarily from its orbit to allow the passing of these colossal space denizens.

"I left instructions for my nephew to bring my body from the grave vault at Grenville cemetery to the rocket satellite in my laboratory. He followed my plans to the letter. I warned him to leave the building after he had

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

set off the five minute timing device. I also told him to wait until the moon had passed that part of the south-eastern sky at which the rocket tower was slanted."

"How do you know that your plans were carried out so well?" asked Zora. "It was forty million years afterward that my people found your rocket satellite and recalled your brain to life."

"The time bubble," the professor replied. "You will remember that on the way back to Zor, we stopped on the Earth and took a trip into time."

"Tell me, what is it like to die?"

"You just lose consciousness," said the professor.

"But what of this afterlife which certain intelligent types throughout the universe constantly affirm. Do you recall an afterlife?"

"Not definitely," the professor replied, "though strange, hazy impressions were scattered about my mind, like vague memories, when my brain cells were stimulated into activity from their long sleep."

"Then you recall no life beyond death?" queried Zora, toying with this subject of mystery which interested her.

"The idea has been suggested during my Earthly life that the ectoplasmic afterlife cannot exist independently until after a partial decay of the protoplasmic cells, so in view of the fact that my body suffered no decomposition whatever during its forty million years sojourn in space, my particular case does not prove the non-existence of an afterlife."

"What did it seem like to wake up and find yourself a machine man?"

"It was very strange," the professor replied. "When my senses returned, I thought that I was still lying in my death bed—that I really had not died at all but was

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

returned from the region of dark shadow and oblivion into which I had relapsed. Imagine my consternation and dumbfoundment to find myself what I am now, a cubed body, four metal legs, six metal tentacles, and my brain incased in a conical superstructure. Most amazing was my ability to look in all directions at once with the row of eyes completely encircling the base of my metal head, an eye in the conical apex affording me even upward vision. My sudden gift of mental telepathy was also surprising."

"Someday, I, too, will be a machine man," said Zora.

"How many years?"

"Roughly, around ninety of Zor's revolutions about the sun. It all depends upon my mental development and physical condition. We are generally strict about that. It is not necessary for me to wait; it is merely preferable. We find that life as an organic Zorome is pitifully small in comparison to our anticipated career as a machine man. I shall make the change when my life-time as a flesh and blood entity commences to decline."

"It seems strange that you will be a machine man," spoke Professor Jameson, casting mental emphasis on the male appellation, "though I understand that the brain alone is sexless, dependent on a body to furnish such idiosyncrasies."

"Although the machine men of Zor are immortal to ordinary conditions, occasional accidents will befall a metal head from time to time, and a propagating source must be maintained to keep the species from becoming extinct."

"We lost many on the planet of the double sun," said the professor. "Including myself, there were five converts to the ranks of the machine men. Of the four tri-

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

ped, we lost one of them in a battle at the center of the hydrosphere."

"Converts do not always prove so satisfactory as you and the tripeds, 21MM392," mentioned Zora, a troubled frown crossing her face.

"You mean that they fall below the mental standard?"

"Not that so much. Their ambitions become colossal. They do not follow the simple philosophic ways which we Zoromes find are the best means of continuing a sustained, unfluctuating existence, free from civilization's rises and falls. On your turbulent planet someone was all the time fighting for greed and petty honors. At this very moment we are in hostile relations with a world of metal converts—converts we are now sorry we made."

"I had not heard of them before," said the professor. "Tell me about it."

"It all happened since 25X-987 started from Zor with the expedition on which you returned, 21MM392. For a long time before, we Zoromes had contemplated making machine men out of a race of intelligent creatures on the planet of a system several light years from our own. We selected certain mental types; the operations were successful. We gradually built their numbers into several thousands, giving them long life and prospective immortality, and we taught them the conquest of space.

"But unscrupulous and ambitious types among these Mumes of Mumed tricked and cheated their way past our inspections. Several substitutions were made, and a malign, self-centered opposition grew under clever propaganda instilled by the ambitious malcontents. The first break between Zor and Mumed arose when insistent demands came from the Mumes to create more machine men than we considered prudent and satisfactory.

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

"We at once discontinued our conversion of them, but they had acquired from us sufficient knowledge and art to make their own brain transpositions. They immediately severed all relations with us, warning the Zoromes to stay away from Mumed.

"We did stay away, knowing full well that their isolation, coupled with our disregard would prove a most satisfactory end to our regretted experiment. But this isolation did not persist. Spaceships, manned by both machine men and living members of their species, came and raided Zor quite unexpectedly. They were seeking various scientific knowledge and apparatus their dreams of empire and dominance had demanded."

"Were they successful?" Professor Jameson inquired.

"By the surprise of their attack, yes," Zora explained. "But now Zor and its sister worlds are well protected. Expeditions were sent to Mumed to chastise and warn them against any further depredations, but it was found that the planet had become a bristling fortress of defense, its atmosphere and surrounding space well protected."

"They will eventually try and conquer Zor," said the professor. "It is obvious. Something should be done to forestall them."

"At present," said Zora, "constant work is being done in the matter of espionage thanks to our recent application of an invisibility treatment to our spaceships. This is a new discovery contributed by one of our recently returned expeditions. When the Mumes become aware of what we are doing, they will try to counteract our invisibility in some way or other. Do not underestimate them. They are cunning and shrewd, especially those who have been made machine men."

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

"Why not disintegrate their world," Professor Jameson suggested, remembering the world of the dying sun they had destroyed on their way back to Zor.

"That has been suggested before, 21MM392, but we are reluctant to do it. It would disrupt the entire system and would prove fatal to a race of creatures on Ablen, a neighboring planet of Mumed. I refer to the Ablenox, whom the Mumes have enslaved. If all else fails and the safety of Zor and its civilization is menaced, the Ablenox will have to take their chances." She paused a moment, then continued. "A ship under Bext has just returned from Mumed. Several of their bases were wrecked and a grim warning left, that further acts against Zor would result in space war."

"Who is Bext?"

"Bext is my lover," was Zora's startling announcement. "He has come back from Mumed to be a leader among the Zoromes."

"Your lover!" Professor Jameson exclaimed. "Do flesh and blood Zoromes risk themselves so?"

"Certainly," replied Zora, drawing herself up proudly. "Though a crew of machine men always accompanies them to protect their mortal bodies against harm."

"But even so, such a venture is dangerous," the professor observed. "Bext and his fellows must breathe and be allowed the conveniences otherwise necessary to organic life."

"He came back to me unharmed," said Zora. "And he accomplished his mission."

"Your lover," mused the professor. "It is strange. I knew long ago that an organic race of Zoromes existed, but I was never aware that sentiment existed among you."

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

"Did you not tell me that love was a prime motivating force on Earth?" queried Zora, a bit imperiously. "Do you think then that we are so backward as not to be versed in the finer arts of sentiment? You seem surprised!"

"I am surprised," the professor admitted, staring covertly at the snapping eyes of the princess. "Not because I underestimated you, however. Rather the opposite."

"What do you mean?" queried Zora, a bit confused by the professor's noncommittal allusions.

"I believed the Zoromes far too practical and mentally stabilized to pursue the veiled fantasy and deluding grandeur of love."

"Deluding?" challenged Zora indignantly. "What is there deluding about it?"

Professor Jameson regarded her a bit pathetically, then whimsically, before forming his reply. "Stripped of its glamor, its falsities, its hypnotic fascination, love is the irresistible instinct to fulfill a biologic urge, half a species seeking the other half, bringing about the eventual propagation of the species and fulfilling nature's law. Love rarely yields its fluorescent promises, for—like the bright petals of a carnivorous flower—it entices its victims to serve the wholesale ambitions of a far-seeing destiny."

"It is easy for a passionless mechanism to think that out so scientifically!" snapped Zora. "You were not always a machine. Were you ever in love?"

Professor Jameson felt amused at Zora's scathing sarcasm. His sense of humor represented a radical departure from his fellow machine men, a state of mind they rarely understood. But the final question of the princess stirred long dormant memories, taking him back-

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

ward more than forty million years, to the little village of Grenville. His attitude sobered. How well he recalled his one and only love affair, the inspired devotion of a young man for his promised one.

"Yes," he admitted. "I loved once and was loved."

"Tell me about it!" urged Zora with sympathetic interest.

"There is little to tell," the machine man replied. "I was young, ambitious, happy, my mind full of the ideals and hopes of youth. It was in this frame of mind that I met Mara, the most gorgeous semblance of womanhood it was my fortune ever to lay eyes upon. Her loveliness, her gentle charm, her sweet fascination, overwhelmed me and dizzied my senses. I fell hopelessly in love with her. I told her of my love one night soon after we met."

The unforgettable scene flashed across the interminable abyss of time and was clearly shared by the mental perceptions of Zora. She visioned a small lake in the soft, ethereal light of a low hung moon. Along a shimmering path of moonlight, reflected from the calm surface of the water, dripping oars shed jewels sparkling with silver, gently propelling a small boat, the prow spreading undulating ripples to either side.

As seen through the professor's eyes, the memory envisioned a white, wraithlike object sitting opposite him. The oars were lifted, allowing the boat to drift slowly on its momentum. The vision, unmoving, came gradually nearer. The professor had evidently changed his position. The boat, unguided, drifted aimlessly, turning so that the moonlight shone full upon Mara's face.

Starry eyes reflected the wonder of the night, matching the glory of the far off stars so thinly spread throughout

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

the ghostly diffusion of a moonlit sky. A tenderness and expectation was apparent in the upturned face and parted lips. The face came closer, startling close, and dark lashes closed softly over the approaching eyes. The face loomed nearer until it became blotted from the moonlight by a shadow, a shadow accompanied by encircling arms. As if a shade had been suddenly drawn the vision quickly disappeared.

"We became engaged," the professor continued. "The wedding was set for a day in June."

The professor paused. Something in the old memories had returned to him, passing swiftly only to be gone once more. Zora, sensing imminent tragedy to be related, did not urge the machine man; she waited, respectfully.

"Mara took sick, and like a fragile flower dimmed away slowly. I could do nothing for her. Still young, a creature of celestial beauty, she passed away. Tears did nothing to bring her back. The bloom of life, mysterious life, had fled. In its place was an image, devoid of sentient entity. Her hands were hard and cold like marble. She was buried on what was to have been our wedding day."

Zora caught her breath. Her heart was full of sorrow, a sorrow the machine man, devoid of a living heart, could no longer feel.

"Her memory lives with me always," said Professor Jameson. "I never wanted anyone else. I have often wondered if she were not waiting for me. My body was long ago destroyed, right after 8B-52 recalled my brain to activity. If there is a soul, it must exist in the brain. I have often wondered, should my brain be destroyed,

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

if I would find her waiting for me in a place where time does not exist."

"That happened forty million years ago, before the seeds of our life had ripened beneath our flaming sun," said Zora. "It is a tremendous length of time."

"The depressing influence of the dying Earth and the thoughts of Mara almost drove me to jump headfirst from a high cliff. It was terrible when I found that I was the last man on Earth, a brain in a metal cast; that mankind had gone from the face of the planet ages past. But the kindly persuasion of 25X-987 and his forceful logic swayed me in favor of a life of interplanetary exploration and adventure, else I would not be here with you today."

II

"HERE COMES Bext!" exclaimed Zora.

A Zorome came walking out upon the great edifice, a male of the flesh and blood species. Unlike Zora, his body curves were less accentuated; the fringe of membrane on his head was a red so deep it bordered on light purple, especially noticeable when sunlight struck it. As was customary with the male Zoromes his walking appendages did not curve out from his body and he possessed no eyelashes.

After a meeting with Bext and a short discussion concerning the trouble with Mumed, Professor Jameson left the two Zoromes and went in search of 744U-21. As he disappeared around a broad column, his last sight of Bext and Zora revealed a confusing intertwining of tentacles.

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

During the following days Professor Jameson learned much of Zor and its sister planets. They were five in number, turning on their endless orbits around the flaming sun. The machine man visited all of them and came to know their individual histories and peculiarities. With the exception of the innermost planet, Poth, they all possessed rotations, each planet's year divided into days.

Poth was the only one not inhabited by either the organic Zoromes or their machine-men ancestors. However, the planet contained valuable mineral deposits and the darkened half was partly built up and utilized for refining.

Next in order from the sun came Trach, so hot that only machine men were able to stay there. It was a huge manufacturing base. The planet was waterless, an endless, barren desert of blowing sands, towering mountain peaks, and cavernous canyons that merged often into broad abysses which may once have been filled with water. The atmosphere barely warranted the name. From space it was a greenish ring surrounding the planet, possessing the ability to absorb and hold the heat of the flaming sun but incapable of sustaining any life. Machine men were indifferent to this. As long as they were not subject to excessive heat or intense cold, they cared little about the conditions surrounding them.

Third from the sun was Grutet, the smallest world of the system. The professor estimated it to be not more than eight hundred miles in diameter. When the Zoromes conquered space navigation they found the world without an atmosphere. Later, as their knowledge progressed, they manufactured one, fertilizing the planet's mantle and giving it plant life, the necessary balance.

But the planet's gravity was so slight that the atmos-

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

phere gradually drifted away throughout the centuries, especially during the periodic passings of a particular comet. This comet was destroyed by the machine men, but even so the tiny world still continued to lose air. And so the machine men undertook a colossal venture. They enclosed the entire planet in a hermetically sealed metal container. On examination, the professor had discovered this metal to be an alloy which closely resembled chromium.

Massive uprights, over two hundred feet in height, spaced far distant from one another, loomed and arched in all directions to support the endless roof. The machine men duplicated all kinds of climate, including rainfall, synthetically. The ceiling was luminous to render perpetual daylight, while in various sections of the tiny world were transparent facings to allow penetration of the sun's rays.

It was a curious world where the machine men of Zor and their flesh and blood counterparts resided together. Access was gained through gigantic air locks. The professor was told that if Grutet should ever cease its rotation the chromium jacket would crush inward upon the planet instantly. Centrifugal force and atmospheric pressure from within carried most of the support, the columns largely maintaining a stabilizing effect.

Fourth from the sun was Zor itself, cradle of the life and civilization which had reached its Utopia, where an eternal life as a machine man lay in prospect for each individual at the end of his organic span of years.

Zor, the mother world, was the most magnificent of all. It was artistic and exacting to an extreme. If the tiny, chromium-plated Grutet was the most brilliant and

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

dazzling object in this system, surely Zor was the most geometrically beautiful.

Viewed from afar it was just another glowing planet, but Professor Jameson recalled the wondrous surprise that had greeted his eyes when the returning spaceship approached within distance where topographical features became detailed. Zor appeared as a large sphere brilliantly decorated in exact geometrical designs. The telescopes transformed huge oblongs into vast seas. Radiating lines became broad rivers whose courses were guided by artificial channels. Tiny spots of delightfully varying colors were found to be important centers of life, while inset triangles proved on close examination to be vast plains of metal, the work of centuries.

Zor was second in size, its diameter a quarter again as great as that of Earth, its density about the same. The home world was given over entirely to the cultural things of life. When the machine men spoke of Zor, they generally meant the collection of six planets; but when they spoke of home they meant the planet Zor itself. Here reigned the royal families from which new recruits were constantly added to the ranks of the machine men.

Dompt lay far outside the orbit of Zor and was the largest planet of the system. It boasted a pleasing climate; the organic population of the system would doubtless have preferred this world, were it not for the excessive gravity which prostrated them with exhaustion, threatening their lives. Gravity nullifiers were necessary. All organic Zoromes were compelled to carry them constantly. To the machine men, this excessive gravity meant only an added expenditure of the energy with which they could constantly recharge their metal bodies. Their parts

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

wore out sooner on Dompt, and it was necessary to replace them oftener.

Dompt was a factory world; also a gigantic storehouse and museum for the many wonders brought back by the expeditions from myriad worlds afar. Museums, whose floors partly nullified Dompt's forceful gravity, held perpetual thought transmitters which repeated their long tales endlessly.

This planet possessed the only satellites of the entire system, two tiny moons that orbited so close together as to be influenced by each other's attraction, revolving around one another while still holding a steady orbit about the planet Dompt. They were unimportant apart from their curiosity value. Suggestions had been made from time to time that they be disintegrated to facilitate interplanetary navigation, but sentiment for the friendly little spheres acted as a brake against their actual destruction.

It was the organic Zoromes, inspired by a sense of tradition and romance, who desired the maintenance of the twin moons. This highly respected minority generally had their wishes in these matters. That, too, was tradition.

Ipmats was the outer world, cold and chill, far removed from the crisp, stimulating climate of Dompt and still more distant from the summery warmth of Zor. Machine men alone lived on this bleak planet with its perpetual ice and snows, its barren, rocky vistas like the Siberian steppes, its subdued sunlight from a small orb in the sky, and its foul, unbreathable atmosphere.

To all this the machine men were totally indifferent. They liked an occasional return to the other planets,

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

but for one who could not feel the discomforts of such a world Ipmats was startlingly beautiful, in a sad, terrifying sort of way. Ragged mountains punctuated the skies, rising in grim procession, jagged and unending. Between lay the valleys of snows and creeping glaciers. At night, the stars shone scintillating and cold, while roaring blizzards did not obscure them from the sight of the machine men. The rare visits paid this forbidding boundary of the planetary system by organic Zoromes were performed in armored spacesuits, if they emerged at all from their roving spaceships.

This outermost world was the base for interstellar travel. All expeditions were outfitted on Ipmats for their ventures into the far flung boundaries of the universe. All modes of warfare, both offensive and defensive, were brought here and subjected to constant experiment and change. The glowering, blustering fury of Ipmats had been well chosen to guide and foster the efforts of cosmic travel. It was a spot where the fates of worlds might rest. It had been this world that suffered the attack from the Mumes.

During the intervals between his visits to the other five worlds of Zor's system, the professor was much in the company of Zora and Bext. He accompanied the latter on several cruises beyond the orbit of the sixth planet. The situation concerning Mumed was tense, and the Zoromes were constantly on the lookout for any belligerent tactics the Mumes might devise.

The professor found himself often in the company of Zora. She exhibited a never ceasing wonder at the anecdotes concerning his life on Earth and the colorful pages out of Earth's history. The professor also rather vaguely traced the history of mankind beyond the twentieth cen-

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

tury from what he had learned during the experiments with the time bubble.

He was telling Zora of mankind's exodus from Earth to a distant world of Sirius, five million years after his own time, when 6W-438 broke in upon them, evidently agitated.

"The Mumes have attacked!"

"Where?" demanded Zora and the professor simultaneously.

"The cruisers!" 6W-438 replied. "A large force of Mumes have captured Bext's craft!"

The color drained from Zora's face. Her eyes widened, while her tentacles fluttered nervously. She said nothing, her mental processes temporarily stunned.

"Did they destroy the ship?" asked Professor Jameson.

"No," 6W-438 answered. "Bext's ship was well in the lead. After getting it in their gravitational power they headed back in the direction of their own system. A wide ray of devastating energy was left behind to protect them from immediate pursuit."

"Then the crew was taken prisoner," the professor suggested.

"Evidently. But Zor will not stand idly by and let them get away."

"Organized pursuit will be too late to head them off," said the professor. "I understand that their ships are as fast as those of Zor."

"Exactly."

"Bext!" cried Zora, anxiously. "He must be brought back before it is too late!"

A great furore echoed from one end of the planetary system to the other over this impudent act, to show their disdain of the Zoromes. They had purposely cap-

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

tured one of the ships designed to keep watch against their intrusion. The affair had been carefully planned, and boded ill of what was still to follow. It was apparent the Mumes had been bent on capturing the leader who had wreaked havoc on one of their principal centers as retaliation for their raid on the outermost planet of Ipmats.

A rumble of war rolled ominously from Poth to Ipmats, centering about the home world. After this last defiant challenge the machine men of Zor suggested the entire destruction of Mumes. Yet secondary consideration always brought out the danger to the simple, thriving race of Ablenox, two worlds distant. It would mean their destruction also, for such a cataclysm would shake the entire orbital system and alter it profoundly.

The demand rose for the rescue of Bext. Zora, beside herself with fear and anxiety for her lover, threatened to seize a ship and start for Mumed herself. A council of war finally reached the decision that a detailed examination of Mumed be made. It was rumored that the Mumes had become proficient in the use of dangerous weapons with which the machine men of Zor were unfamiliar. Swift victory might not be so readily realized.

Professor Jameson heard with satisfaction the decision to send two invisibly clad spaceships to the planet Mumed. A double object supplied the motive. First of all, the two unseen ships must learn all that could be discovered concerning the planet's defenses. If Bext still lived, he was to be found and brought back to Zor.

744U-21 was chosen to head one of the ships. He came to the professor. "I am taking my old crew, 21MM392. We who have survived the horrors of the planet of the double sun, who outwitted the menace of the hydro-

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

sphere's depth, and conquered the dangers of the sunless world, are off this time on a trip of espionage. We must restrain ourselves from aiding Bext until the last minute before we leave."

"If he still lives," continued the professor.

"I believe he does," 744U-21 affirmed. "The Mumes were too careful to take him alive. He was taken that way for a purpose, and it is logical to presume that the purpose is a protracted one."

"Information?"

"Possibly."

"Who mans this other ship?" the professor asked.

"24J-151, 55D-22, 893F-63—fifteen in all."

"This invisibility," Professor Jameson asked. "How does it work?"

"It is a bath, a strange coating which completely covers the ship's entire hull. It is something like the x-rays you once told me about. This coating of ours is much more powerful and serviceable. Besides comprising a highly indestructible substance, it possesses the power of creating transparency from outside. Looking at the spot where a coated ship was descending, the Mumes would see nothing at all. Those in the spaceship will notice no difference, for they would be as visible to each other as always. Everything beyond the ship would seem normal. Like Zlestrim's time bubble, the transparency works but one way. In this case, however, the conditions are reversed."

All were anxious to get under way for Mumed, a comparatively short trip. The ship of 744U-21 carried sixteen machine men and four organic Zoromes, while the other ship under 24J-151 was to carry ten machine men and five of the flesh and blood species of Zor.

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

In the sheltered wall of a dark, looming pinnacle of massive rock, a mountain crag a darker shadow against the darkened sky, Professor Jameson saw two spaceships slowly disappear before his eyes. They were on Ip mats. A far off sun shed a subdued glow of sunset upon the towering crag which, etched in ice and snow, lowered menacingly over the squat buildings at its base.

Before these buildings, the machine men were assembled, ready to set out upon their secret expedition to Mumed. Several of the organic Zoromes were present in spacesuits, while others were in the two ships which were fast disappearing under the layer of gushing substances applied in red hot streams from long nozzles held by machine men. Tubes led off into the heart of the buildings.

A roaring wind howled about the great eminence as fitful gusts of air, so poisonous to the flesh and blood Zoromes, raged and tore over the melancholy landscape, carrying veiling screens of fine, crystalized powder dislodged from pockets in the rough surface and redistributed among the conical heads of the metal Zoromes.

The tempest calmed, and clear vision reasserted itself through the intense cold—intense to the organic Zoromes—unnoticed by their metal brethren.

The two spaceships finally became completely lost to sight. Where two metal hulls had reared their dark, opaque shadows upon the snow-crueted mountain ledge, there now existed a clear view of the rugged escarpment dropping away to the depth of the valley, jutting black rocks forcing their irregular spires through the frozen expanse. Above the machine men, a doorway suddenly opened against the starlit sky, blotting out an oval background of glistening points, now supplanted with a solid

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

layer of dull yellow light. Another doorway opened still further beyond the first, the only evidence that ships of space occupied positions upon the ledge. More preparations were applied to the invisible exteriors of the two ships.

"All ends must be caught up and tied," said 744U-21, figuratively speaking. "What they are now doing is to render this invisible coating contagious to any fine particles which may come in contact with it. Otherwise, particles of dust picked up in the atmosphere of Ipmats and Mumed, or even those accumulative, infinitesimal specks of space which escape our meteoric repellers, would eventually reveal us."

Effectually armed both offensively and defensively, the two invisible spaceships left Ipmats for distant Mumed. They left on a grim errand which was to mean much toward the future; there was no celebration, no heartening throngs to watch their ascent into space on what portended to be a desperate venture. Behind them lay the dark, rugged fingers of rock upthrust from the widespread desolation of frozen, barren surface. Ipmats dwindled into a pale, thin crescent, then faded from sight.

Across space they leaped, across the dizzying depth of the cosmos, bridging the distance between the neighboring systems of Zor and Mumed. Of the eight planets in the latter system, only two were inhabited by intelligent life. Mumed lay third from the sun, while Ablen, peopled with a less advanced species than the Mumes, lay fifth in line. An intervening world, called Tanid, held orbit between the two.

From afar, Professor Jameson and 744U-21 examined the sun they were gradually approaching. Already it was

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

the brightest object in the sky; from a glittering point it had now become a barely distinguishable orb. 6W-438 came up behind them.

"Something has been found which warrants your attention," he told 744U-21.

6W-438's frame of mind suggested no alarm, yet he purposely concentrated his mental faculties to conceal the motive for his interruption. It was evident that he wished 744U-21 to make the discovery for himself. The professor and 744U-21 followed him to the supply room where boxes of foodstuffs and liquids were kept for the organic Zoromes.

One of the organic Zoromes stood in the center of the supply room, but it was none of the four who had left with the expedition. The first hasty glance revealed that. Recognition hit the professor and 744U-21 simultaneously.

"Zora!" said the professor.

"How did you get here?" demanded 744U-21, recovering from his brief shock and surprise.

"I hid myself among these," she replied imperiously and unabashed, waving a tentacle airily in the direction of several tall stacks of containers.

"But . . . why?"

Professor Jameson did not have to be told the answer. He knew Zora well enough, and her reply came as he expected.

"I am going to help Bext. I love him."

"But you are seriously endangering your life—you—a member of the royal house."

"It matters little to me who I am—without Bext," was Zora's emotional answer. "I am going to him."

744U-21 recognized the impossibility of sane argument

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

with the princess while she was in this frame of mind. He turned to practical matters.

"You stowed yourself away. What will they think back on Zor when you turn up missing?"

"They will know by now where I am," said Zora. "I left word."

"I have half a mind to turn back," 744U-21 suggested.

"No!" pleaded Zora. "Let me go, too. I can be a useful member of the crew when we reach Mumed. Besides, there is the other ship to think about. You cannot turn back now."

744U-21 pondered the idea. He bewailed this impractical madness which afflicted organic Zoromes. Its final result, the eventual mating and subsequent propagation of Zoromes, was a worthy and sensible goal, he well realized. But what foolish, senseless deviations from cold, logical reasoning this disease of imagination placed upon its hopelessly implicated subjects.

The professor, catching the exasperated thought impressions of 744U-21, smiled inwardly. The machine man had no sense of humor. Since his transformation from an ancient corpse, Professor Jameson had discovered that such a sense was an idiosyncrasy peculiar to people of Earth. He had run across few species in his cosmic travels who were possessed of humorous qualities. On such rare occasions such qualities generally ran to a tendency toward irony.

The professor and 744U-21 realized mutually that Zora's agony of mind, her fretfulness at delay, and her own unbounded confidence in the belief that she could personally be of great service in freeing her lover had forced her to come. Both realized it, yet the professor was alone openly sympathetic. To 744U-21, it was an un-

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

foreseen circumstance of troublesome consequence. Yet even he accepted her presence as inevitable, and so Zora became a part of the expedition.

Tiny, unblinking points of light became planets as the two ships, cloaked in their invisible mantles, entered the system of Mumed. Ablen was passed as a growing crescent and left behind and far to one side as a gibbous orb. Tanid, the planet between Ablen and Mumed, lay in opposition to its bordering worlds. Past the orbit of the gigantic and uninhabited Tanid the two ships passed on their way in the direction of Mumed. Their goal grew steadily larger, assuming the proportions of a gigantic ball, its topographical features limned clearly under a cloudless atmosphere.

"See those flickering rays of light which sweep intermittently about the planet?" 744U-21 inquired. "We have to penetrate them safely in order to orbit the world."

"They seem to expect us," was 6W-438's ominous observation.

"After what has happened, it is not strange of them to expect a retaliation," said 744U-21. "But they are not yet wise to our invisibility treatments. They will be operating their visual watch, not using their proximity detectors as thoroughly as they should."

"How can we ever get through that destructive radiance?" the professor queried, lifting his gaze from the telescope leveled at the shimmering, spreading fields of light which blanketed Mumed with glowing transparency.

"They open safety lanes where their own ships may enter and leave. We shall have to wait and follow a party of their ships inside."

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

"We cannot accompany just one of their ships," 6W-438 advised. "Their proximity detectors would spot us out instantly, even though they were unable to see us. Our entrance will go unnoticed, however, with two or more of their ships."

"It is not our entrance we have to fear," was 744U-21's grim suggestion. "It is our leavetaking which will prove the more dangerous, especially after the release of Bext is accomplished."

III

A SHORT DISTANCE apart, the two ships from Zor cruised about the planet they had come to investigate. Finally, three of the enemy ships were found far out in space. Keeping behind their course at a distance which would fail to register upon the enemies' detectors, the two invisible ships hung doggedly to the flight path of the three ships as they circumnavigated their own world. Those in command of the two unseen ships felt satisfaction as the three ships broke orbit quite suddenly, heading for a tiny, glowing spot on the planet's surface. Where the thickest radiations were clustered, there suddenly opened a break in the destructive wall.

Into this opening the spaceships dropped. The two prowlers from Zor sped close on the heels of their quarry. 744U-21 called for a maneuver which brought them midway between the first and second enemy ships. The other commander, he well knew, would range his ship between the second and last in line.

Unaware of their unwelcome companions, a slack watch paying no attention to the queer behavior of their

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

detectors, feeling themselves able to relax this close to home, the three ships of Mumed safely negotiated the passage through the death screen and into the upper reaches of the atmosphere. They dropped groundward, while the two invisible ships from Zor hung far up, just below the radiation umbrella.

"What about our thoughts?" queried Zora fearfully, shuddering slightly at the idea of revealing their presence.

"It will require an effort of concentration to reach the Mumes," said 6W-438. "Their mental perception was never as keen as ours. It is their detectors we have most to fear, but we should arouse no suspicion, thanks to so many other objects approximating our substance and bulk."

"It is a strong temptation to wreck that city below us," mused 41C-98. "A just retribution for their attack on Ipmats."

"Too dangerous," observed the professor. "We are safe just as long as we do not show our hand."

"Where is Bext?" Zora asked anxiously.

"We must take our time discovering that," 744U-21 insisted. "His release is to be our final act before leaving Mumed. In the meantime, there is much to be learned of this world. It has been a long time since a machine man of Zor set friendly foot here."

For days the two spaceships lurked over the centers of life on the planet. Everywhere there existed a martial spirit, a grim preparedness. The Zoromes not only saw but listened as well. They became acquainted with the general plan of the Mumes. Roughly, it was to continue raiding the planets of the Zoromes until the latter rose up in wrath and came to Mumed in war. The Mumes

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

preferred fighting near their own base where the invading forces would be at a disadvantage and could be more easily annihilated. Zor, having shot its bolt, would then be open to conquest by the empire dreamers of Mumed.

Professor Jameson had his first view of the Mumes. The machine men he found as exact counterparts of himself, but, as 744U-21 had explained, their mental perceptions were below the average of the Zoromes. The organic Mumes were strange creatures. They appeared to the professor as large spiders with cranial superstructures. Their globular bodies, slightly flattened at top and bottom, were equipped with eight jointed appendages, while from the top center of their bodies projected a head, a smaller globe atop the larger one.

Professor Jameson also saw many of the enslaved Ablenox from the planet Ablen. They were great, hulking brutes, with tremendous physical strength, yet they were no match for the machine men of Mumed. Their lesser intelligence was obvious. The Ablenox seemed peaceful and slow to anger, despite their physical accomplishments. They walked upright on two lower limbs, their barreled bodies possessed of four upper appendages that were heavily muscled and terminating in six digits arranged scoop fashion.

Mumed was ruled over by a machine man, a harsh dictator, 6D4. The Mumes had copied the numerological classification of the Zoromes, their benefactors, and now their chosen enemies. But less than three generations had been born since the first machine man of Mumed had been created, and the numeric distinctions still ran low.

All was not tranquil on Mumed, despite the uniting cause. 6D4 was hastening the manufacture of machine

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

men and cutting short the organic lives of many Mumes in order to equip his creations with reasoning brains. Several of the transpositions were unsuccessful, and as 744U-21 pointed out, more of the successful changes to machine men would come to grief, due to the mental inadaptability. This very reason had caused the severance of relations between Mume and Zorome.

But these dissatisfactions were trivial in comparison with the surging movement of war-designs, and the metal shod feet of 6D4 figuratively stamped out even the most timorous objection to his aims. 6D4 was a machine man, and unlike the esteemed regard the metal Zoromes bore for their organic brethren, on Mumed the flesh and blood Mumes counted for little other than possible material for the machines. The metal Mumes became self-important and 6D4 had become drunk with the passion for conquest and power.

The secret investigation by the two invisible ships from Zor disclosed the fact that the Mumes depended little on space craft for their anticipated warfare with the Zoromes. It was true that many ships were being turned out by the Mumes, but their greatest weapons of war were located on the surface of their world. Huge rays were to stab accurately into space and annihilate the attacking ships of Zor at immense distances. The wall of palpitating light was impervious to the rays and other offensive measures of the Zoromes. The Mumes felt reasonably safe behind this transparent veil of death—death to the operators of any spaceship attempting to penetrate it.

The machine men of Mume also discovered another new weapon. As luck would have it, the Zoromes chanced upon a demonstration of a small gun for close-in fighting.

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

Professor Jameson considered it a gun. To the Zoromes, it was an ejector of metallic destruction. Evidently the Mumes were anticipating tentacle-to-tentacle combat. It was later learned that these weapons were to be used in the counter-attack on Zor, following the destruction of the Zoromes' space fleet.

These small side arms were metal eaters, their action on a machine body was the same as that of a moving stream of water on a bank of soft mud. Aimed at the metal head of a machine man for a few brief seconds, these pistols were truly terrible. Their action was soundless and invisible, no light or other manifestation issuing forth. The gun was aimed, a slight pressure applied, and several square inches of the metal target commenced to disintegrate.

The two ships, lurking unseen about the various centers of activity on Mumed, learned much concerning the armament and plans of the Mumes. A fever of activity rose overshadowing completely all minority peaceful intentions.

As a race, the Mumes were below the mental standards of the Zoromes, but here and there existed an outstanding exception to the general rule. The Zoromes guarded against these rare exceptions. Free thought among them was carefully restricted near the surface level, and thought conversation from one ship to the other avoided. This, however, did not hamper the Zoromes from searching the minds of the Mumes, the latter possessing no knowledge of the mind-listening presence. To the professor, it seemed much like many people silently eavesdropping.

Reference was made occasionally by the Mumes to their captive Zorome. A burst of hope in the heart of Zora

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

optimistically linked this appellation with her beloved Bext. 744U-21 was of the opinion that this celebrated captive might as easily be the captured commander of the Zorome cruiser which had been snatched away so ruthlessly by the marauding Mumes.

Then the work of investigation was done. They learned that the captive was on exhibition at Ndlet, an important base for the return of incoming ships.

It took the two ships but a short time to locate Ndlet in the center of a city. Vast buildings, the principal manufacturing plants for spaceships, loomed up from below to meet the invisible ships of the cosmic void.

"Bext—he must be there!" cried Zora.

She pointed far across the city to an open spot among the buildings where tiny shifting dots designated a crowd of Mumes. In her heart she truly believed that Bext was where she pointed, and where her heart dictated she must go. There was no swerving of Zora's purpose. 744U-21 entertained the possibility of Bext being there, but he was not guided by intuitive instincts.

The ships sped low over the mingled crowd of both organic and metal Mumes, the latter predominating in numbers. The object of their attention was a single Zorome who looked down upon them from a raised platform of massive stone blocks. He stood there taciturn and unmoving, his tentacles securely fettered with metal cables which led to staples set deep into the stone platform. A metal girdle encircled his waist. His face was bruised and scarred, and there were grooved, unfamiliar lines of suffering. Professor Jameson did not instantly recognize him. But not so with Zora.

"Bext!"

A world of anguish, pity and love was crowded into

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

her mental cry. Instinctively she pressed herself against the side of the ship nearest Bext, her eyes close to a transparent port. The haggard face was seen to undergo a transformation, like the surface of a planet suddenly sun-kissed by the unexpected break in an ominous, black cloud.

"Zora! It can't be! You're not herel" The tired face grew somber once more, a wan smile flitting suggestively, derisively, across the worn features, as if sudden realization had dispersed a mirage. "The delirium! I am losing my grip!"

"I am really here, Bext! You are unable to see me!"

Both hope and bewilderment mingled in the expression on Bext's face. He became lost in the chaos of lesser thought impressions hurled at him by the spectators below. They were jibing him, this sentient symbol of what Zor and its retinue of worlds was soon to become. They told him that the beauty of Zor would be overrun by the Mumes. The Mumes would then extend their empire over neighboring systems. Zoromes would be helpless beneath the heel of 6D4 and his empire builders, even as this upstart, Bext himself, who had come to Mumed in retaliation for their raid on Ipmats. He would never return to Zor to boast of his act.

Bext remained oblivious to all this, however, and to the dull pain of his hard, unyielding fetters and the cruel, biting girdle over which his cramped body sagged. Once more his mind swam in symphonious harmony with the consciousness of Zora, that entrancing, nerve-dulling, mental phantasma which Professor Jameson had often felt guilty at disturbing or penetrating with his own matter-of-fact thoughts. Such disturbances seemed to

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

happen whenever he had found himself in company with the two.

The mental communion of Zora and Bext had somehow provoked misinterpreted attention from several of the more mentally acute Mumes. They were not centering their jibes on Bext's disordered state of mind in the mistaken belief that he was weakening, that he was losing his mind, foolishly talking to friends who were not there. They believed that he had broken down completely, his brain suffering from mental delusions.

"Careful, princess!" 744U-21 remonstrated kindly. "Do not give up our secret, or else it may prove even more difficult than it now looks for the rescue of Bext. There are those down there among the Mumes who are nearly on an equal with us in thought-reading. The concentration between you and Bext was unusually heavy."

"Oh, get him! Get him away from that place," she begged.

Zora had been the most anxious of any to come, cloaking her terror beneath the clinging resolve to find Bext at any cost. Now, she was increasingly anxious to snatch Bext and be gone, terrified lest an ill-omened circumstance might suddenly disrupt the attempt to rescue him.

An acknowledgment of presence made them aware that the ship of 24J-151 was close behind, also watching the scene beneath them. It was up to 744U-21 and 24J-151 to take the initiative, and it was the former who made the suggestion.

"Stand by overhead, 24J-151. We'll land just outside the crowd. Their attention is on Bext. I shall let my machine men out one by one and they will mingle with the crowd. Only a few of us, including all the organic Zoromes,

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

will remain in the ship. Twelve of the machine men will enter the crowd and edge close to the platform from different directions. 21MM392 will be first to jump upon the platform. He'll burn away Bext's cables with his heat ray while the others cover and hold back the Mumes. When Bext is released, they will watch closely for the door of the ship to open and fight their way to it."

"And what shall I do?" asked 24J-151.

"Stand ready for emergency. This is left to your judgment; you will probably see the total situation better. We must act quickly after 21MM392 gives the word. We will possess the advantage. Should escape be delayed by reinforcements, it is up to those in the waiting ship to hold them off."

The ship of 24J-151 hung high over the assemblage of Mumes, while the other settled silently and cautiously near the fringe of the crowd. 744U-21 kept his ship moving, letting a machine man out at intervals so that a sudden cluster of them would not attract undue attention. Stealth and secrecy were of vital importance.

As the ship settled low the oval door opened quickly and 47X-09 stepped out, pushing the door shut behind him, all in the space of a second. The act passed unseen, and the machine man of Zor melted into the crowd surrounding the stone platform on which stood the fettered Bext. 47X-09 was accepted by a disinterested populace as just another mechanical Mume. The ship passed on a short distance, rising quickly to be clear of a running group of organic Mumes scuttling towards the crowd on their jointed, spidery legs.

The ship descended again, the doorway magically reappeared, and another Zorome dropped close to the gathering whose attention was concentrated upon the

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

spectacle of the wretched Bext. The doorway was near to the ground, and 20R-654 was careful to bring it close to the backs of organic Mumes, for 744U-21 feared that one of the endless row of eyes in the conical heads of the metal men might sight the fleeting apparition of a spaceship doorway, where there was no spaceship visible.

6W-438 dropped out, melting into the packed assemblage, the door swinging noiselessly shut behind him. Then it was the professor's turn. The furtive act was consummated successfully, and he pushed his way among the Mumes. There was only one in all that throng who saw the door of the invisible ship open from time to time, and he was the center of attraction. A soft mental utterance from 744U-21 had given him to understand what was soon to happen.

Having encircled the crowd nearly twice the ship rose slightly, to be above the heads of those below. The twelve machine men slowly made their way to the four sides of the platform. In appearance they were no different from the metal Mumes. They guardedly controlled their mental radiations to conceal their identity, an act which the Mumes would be unable to detect.

Professor Jameson knew that a word from him would bring twelve machine men leaping upon the platform beside Bext. He waited, unable to see across to the other side of the platform, until he believed that those who had left the ship last of all had gained convenient positions. With the exception of himself, none of the Zoromes who had emerged from the ship were armed in any way. The fore-tentacle of Professor Jameson's metal body possessed a devastating heat ray near its termination. It was this the professor expected to employ

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

in burning away the cables which held Bext to the stone platform.

Few of the Mumes were armed; this small minority carried the metal eaters hooked conveniently at their sides. The machine men of Zor felt that weapons would have drawn too much attention to them. They would have been discovered almost immediately. Their defense lay in the two waiting ships which drifted above.

The professor felt the moment was at hand. A mental command vibrated soundlessly from his brain, as a quick spring brought him hurtling upon the platform. He was at the side of Bext before the amazed Mumes could realize what had happened, and even then they thought it was the act of a purposeful Mume bent on perpetrating some new indignity upon the helpless captive. But a bright glow from the tentacle of this machine man caused a wave of doubt, alarm and consternation to sweep through the crowd. The professor disregarded the excited interrogations which were flung at him as the intense heat of his ray parted a metal cable.

The Zoromes leaped upon the platform beside him. They formed a formidable metal wall about the professor and the organic Zorome whose bonds were already half-removed. Professor Jameson had no time to remove the metal girdle or the metal rings encircling Bext's tentacles without seriously burning him. Ragged stumps of cables dangled from his six tentacles. The professor now devoted his attention to the thicker cables which held the girdle.

The crowd surged for the platform, the metal men of Mume clambering up to investigate this sudden act which had occurred unheralded. Surprised, yet still unsuspecting, they were caught up in metal tentacles and

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

hurled backward into the surging masses. Metal feet from above pushed away clinging tentacles seeking leverage upon the lip of the platform.

A frantic cry from the mind of a more astute Mume instantly ended the disordered investigation.

"Zoromes!"

Several of the metal Mumes dragged at the feet of 34T-11, pulling him down into the throng. The corner of the platform on which he had been standing lay unguarded and open; several Mumes were shoved up by their companions.

The professor frantically played his ray upon the last, thick cable holding the metal girdle of Bext, aware of the conflict that was descending like an avalanche upon his comrades. 6W-438, seizing the metal cable, snapped it short before the heat ray had eaten more than half-way through.

5ZQ35—once known as Jbf among the tripeds—felt a paralyzing sensation grip one of his metal limbs. He looked down just in time to see it dangle useless from his metal body, then fall away from him. Several corroding spots were growing larger on one side of his cubed body. He glanced out over the crowd and saw ejectors of the Mumes leveled at him and his companions.

A blinding flash blotted out this vision, apparently originating from nowhere. A wreckage of machine men and torn Mumes lay scattered beyond one end of the stone platform. The devastating blast had issued from the invisible ship of 24J-151.

Bext was now free and guarded by Professor Jameson and 6W-438. The professor glanced quickly around for the doorway of the spaceship. He could not find it.

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

6N-24 leaped headlong into the jumbled fray below them where 34T-11 was beset by several mechanical Mumes who had pulled him down and were attempting to pull off his all-important, yet independently helpless, head. 176Z-56 joined him.

More Mumes were mounting the platform. A tentacle encircled 6W-438 and pulled him backward.

"21MM392!"

The cry rang frantic above the chaos of thoughts, burning into the professor's consciousness. He turned to find a mechanical Mume squeezing the life from the gasping Bext. It was Zora who had brought his attention to the peril besetting Bext.

Professor Jameson played his heat ray full upon the pointed head of the Mume and saw him release Bext and go plunging madly into the maelstrom of fighting forces below. The Mume's tentacles flailed frantically at both friend and foe in his indiscriminating haste to escape the blazing horror released so suddenly into his metal optics.

6W-438 battled desperately with two of the Mumes. The professor turned the heat ray on the two assailants and they quickly fled, one of them too late. He fell inanimate, a hole burned clear through his metal head. The professor seized Bext and swung him around out of reach of the climbing hordes.

"21MM392—this way! Come!"

Again it was Zora's electrifying directions which bit into the professor's mind. He looked about him bewildered, searching for the oval door of the ship. On every side were hurrying, rushing throngs of Mumes, both mechanical and organic. Three brilliant flashes in as many different spots blinded his vision momentarily. Again one

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

of the unseen ships had struck, leaving three gaping spots of wreckage and dead bodies in its wake.

A ragged cavity upon the professor's body told him that he was the target for a Mume marksman, and now for the first time he saw several jagged pits on his metal legs and tentacles. The jostling mob was responsible for these unfinished cavities; otherwise he might now be helpless.

Another series of crackling, hissing bursts of white-hot incandescence splashed their wake of death into the excited hordes of Mume reinforcements, but the ships dared not loose their weapons near the platform. Machine men of both worlds grappled madly, tentacle to tentacle. Meanwhile, the invisible spaceships kept up their havoc, causing the rushing throngs of Mumes to turn back. The Zoromes were still outnumbered twenty to one, their only advantage lying in the fact that restriction of space failed to allow more than a fraction of the Mumes at them at any one time.

Professor Jameson suddenly spotted the doorway of the spaceship. He pointed to it excitedly, calling the attention of both Bext and 6W-438. Even as they looked, a half-score or more of machine men poured out, each armed with a ray gun similar to the built-in affair in the professor's tentacle. They were from the ship of 24J-151. Immediately after the last Zorome had hurried forth, the doorway disappeared. The ship moved to avoid destruction. A gathering of Mumes were forced flat as the invisible ship leaped forward. Soon, the bombardment from above was once more unloosed.

Space craft and airships of the Mumes were appearing on the scene. Those which came close were blasted out of the sky. An airship broke to pieces, leaped sideways,

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

and fell to the ground amid a scattering of Mumes, some of whom failed to escape. There had been a collision with one of the space ships of Zor.

The odds were becoming overwhelming on the platform where Bext had been fettered. The machine men and organic Zoromes were literally forced off into the assemblage below, a fighting, rioting battle.

"We shall land just beyond where the crowd is thinnest!" the professor heard 744U-21 direct him. "Get to the ship as quickly as you can!"

With Bext, the professor and 6W-438 fought their way in the direction 744U-21 had designated. Exhausted as he was, Bext flailed away savagely with the burnt cable ends as the heat ray of Professor Jameson cleared the way. More than once the professor and 6W-438 felt the insidious, metal eating pistols directed their way. Bext gave a warning cry as he saw tiny streams of granular metal drip from the professor's head. A nearby sniper had his gun snatched from him by 6W-438, who then wielded it himself.

Explosions still crackled and hissed all over the public square of the Mumes as the invisible spaceships maintained a protecting barrage. Inert machine men lay quiet victims of either the heat rays or the metal eaters. Organic Mumes lay dead, broken and crushed. Bits of metal were scattered in all directions, results of the explosions. Equally significant were dark, wet splashes of color.

IV

FULLY A DOZEN mechanical Mumes surged in upon the professor, Bext and 6W-438, seizing them in their tenta-

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

cles. The two machine men fought savagely as Bext resisted demonically, yet futilely. The tentacle possessing the professor's heat ray became cramped between himself and one of the Mumes who had seized him. The weapon of 6W-438 was wrested from him even as he himself had obtained it.

An agonized cry issued from Bext, an audible articulation Professor Jameson rarely heard the organic Zoromes utter. A flutter of mental terror/and maddening anxiety sprang from an outward source into the professor's mind. Bext was being viciously torn to pieces before his very eyes, the victim of the avenging Mumes. He tried to fight his way to the Zorome's side, but the enemy blocked off his passage, separating him from Bext. Before anything could be done, Bext was dead. The professor saw him go down, trampled and inanimate in his own life blood.

Zoromes, with their rays of death, crowded into the fighting group. All was confusion. The professor felt a dull pain and went down to the ground, wondering as he crawled among the threshing feet if a metal eater had found his metal-encased brain. His tentacles roved over his conical head. It was deeply pitted in several spots, dangerously close to the vulnerable brain, yet he was conscious; no mortal damage had been done.

Vengefully, he tore loose with the heat ray, taking his stand with 6W-438 and several Zoromes from 24J-151's spaceship.

"Quick—to the ship—there!"

6W-438 pointed to an oval doorway a short distance away, but one Mume blocked their passage. The professor's heat ray bore down in unison with several others. Eight Zoromes rushed through the oval doorway and into

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

the spaceship of 744U-21. A few stragglers followed a moment later.

"Hurry!" cried 744U-21. "Rise, 20R-654. We must maintain a constant fire, while the ship of 24J-151 descends to pick up the remaining survivors."

"Bext is gone." 6W-438 exclaimed. "He died fighting!"

"I know," was 744U-21's sad rejoinder. "We saw it from the ship but could do nothing."

Professor Jameson sought out Zora, to console her as best he could, yet on seeing her he hesitated. Her mind, immersed in a manifold sorrow, shut out all communication. She stood alone, not far from where 41C-98 in his little artillery room kept up an almost constant fire of destruction about the center of strife below them, while 24J-151 picked up the remaining Zoromes. Looking about him, the professor saw that many of the Zoromes who had recently manned the other ship were present.

"Look!" one of the machine men directed. "Off upon the horizon."

A series of black dots grew steadily larger in the sky, sweeping directly for the center of the recent combat.

"An armada of spaceships!" announced 29G-75 beside a telescope.

Below, a few lingering Zoromes beat a hasty retreat to an oval opening and disappeared from sight.

"We must get away from here fast," said 744U-21. "Have 41C-98 cease firing. It is necessary to conceal our position. Now, if ever, our mantle of invisibility will prove its worth."

On the square below, the oval door snapped shut behind the last Zorome, whose heat ray had splayed a devastating fire of destruction upon a Mume whose

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

wavering metal eater had in turn pock-marked the Zorome's metal body. There came a rush of dust from the spot where the door had been, and those watching from the ship above realized that 24J-151 had also seen the approaching armada.

"Away from here—fast!" repeated 744U-21.

The ship shot upward and sped at right angles to the approach of the ships which dotted the sky. They were spaceships of the Mumes, sent hurriedly from a nearby location.

How many of the enemy ships had penetrated the veil of defensive rays, the Mumes did not know; but they were certain that none would escape. Several of the vanguard swept low about the spot of recent combat, flashing their rays horizontally, feeling, hoping to strike an invisible enemy. Their rays also flared upward into the empty spaces, while aircraft quickly became airborne to assist in the search for the Zoromes.

A blast leaped out of nowhere to crumple and explode one of the spaceships hanging low over the city.

"24J-151 is mad to commit such an act!" 744U-21 exclaimed. "They will trace his ship and destroy it."

"That ray was shot from our ship," said 20R-654 from the controls.

"The Mumes are commencing to close up this way!"

"41C-98—cease firing!" 744U-21 ordered. "They will find us."

"I did not fire," replied 41C-98.

744U-21 turned in surprise to find 41C-98 standing only a short distance from him. All attention became riveted in the direction of the artillery room. Inside stood Zora, grim, tense, and resolute. Her tentacles were upon the dials and levers controlling and directing the

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

destructive forces of the ship. A movement of her tentacles and another of the approaching ships was torn half away, this time an off-center shot. The remaining wreckage plunged to the ground a shattered mass.

"Zora—stop! It means suicidal!"

But Zora disregarded the command. Vengeance lurked in her every act, dominating all sense of reasoning, enveloping her in its spiteful cloak, lending her the fury of reckless abandon, a blinded indifference to the future. The present was all powerful. They had killed her beloved Bext, torn him viciously limb from limb. Her brain was aflame with the tortures of the flesh and the indignities of captivity they had perpetrated upon him. They were now to bear the brunt of her unleashed wrath.

"Zora—stop!"

The only reply was the complete demolition of a large factory over which they sped low in order to escape the spot where flitting, flickering gleams of destruction marked their last position. Machine men hurried rapidly in the direction of the artillery room to prevent Zora's madness from further imperilling them, 41C-98 in the lead.

Blazing eyes turned to greet them, and a heavy metal door crashed downward, severing the fore tentacle of 41C-98 who had reached the threshold. Like angry wasps, the spaceships of the Mumes sped in the wake of the demolished building, their rays playing and crackling through the atmosphere, trying desperately to locate the invisible menace.

Only the keen maneuvering of 20R-654 saved them. Quickly he swerved about into the very midst of their ranks, narrowly missing collisions with several of the

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

enemy ships. A raking devastation unloosed itself on both sides and six of the Mume space craft were blown to bits. The reckless speed of 20R-654 made accurate counting impossible, so quickly did they leave the spot. Ruins fell from the sky. 744U-21 waved his tentacles wildly as Zora unloosed several more shots, ineffective this time, yet plainly marking the course of their retreat.

Machine men pounded and hammered at the thick metal door which only opened from the inside.

"Upward!" directed 744U-21 anxiously. "Go high where there will be no tempting targets for Zora's aim!"

The invisible spaceship of Zora careened into a vertical ascent which made the Zoromes lean crazily planetward, held only by the artificial gravity of the ship's flooring, which a nimble tentacle of 20R-654 had intensified at this vertical maneuver. Zora's uncontrolled rage now vented on the buildings of Ndlet far below. One after another they burst apart, hurling debris and occupants skyward. Missed shots left great cavities and fissures in the avenues.

Blazing destruction swept dangerously close from below. Their existence hung on the skills of 20R-654 at the controls as the ship lurched and swung erratically from one side to the other, trying to escape the numerous fingers of death which crept and wavered all over the sky in search of them.

And still Zora, unmindful of the frantic entreaties to desist, spread her path of revenge, oblivious to danger, secure from interruption behind the locked door of the artillery room.

At the order of 744U-21, they sped above the atmosphere, perilously close to the unbroken ceiling of quivering radiance which hemmed them in, prisoners of the

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

planet. 20R-654 was enabled to reach tremendous speed once they were above the atmosphere. The topography beneath them changed rapidly as they passed into the opposite hemisphere. This frustrated further efforts of Zora to vent her retaliation on the Mumes for the loss of her lover.

The machine men felt easier. Safety, however, was only temporarily assured. The Mumes would come searching for them in a more determined manner, and no place would be safe for them.

The Zoromes did not underestimate the cupidity of the Mumes. The professor, in his previous conversations with the Zoromes, had likened these enemies to veritable Frankenstein creations that had turned upon their makers. Zor had become threatened by the bitter fruits of a kindly intentioned mistake.

The armament of the ship was stilled, yet Zora would not hold conversation with them. She remained strangely silent and unmanifesting, like the dangerous weapons over which she presided. Vaguely, the Zoromes sensed a change in her attitude which had turned from blind wrath to heavy sorrow. Draped veils of melancholy gloom and utter dejection enveloped her. Shades of loneliness dulled her mind, and her next acts remained un conjectured by both machine men and organic Zoromes.

Only by cutting through the metal door might they gain access to the artillery room. 744U-21 refrained from this, feeling somehow that it would not be necessary. A close approach to the surface, passing over a sleeping city in the darkened half of Mumed, testified to the complete passing of Zora's wrath. As she apparently desired, she was left alone with her sorrow.

After what seemed a long time to the organic Zoromes,

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

Zora lifted the door of the artillery room and emerged forth, wan, heart-broken and badly in need of nourishment. Meanwhile, the spaceship cruised stealthily below the mantle of pale, shimmering effulgence, seeking an escape, but the hollow sphere of radiant menace was found impenetrable. Several times they narrowly missed destruction by ships of the Mumes who located them with proximity detectors, and, seeing no visible targets, fired in all directions. The clinging persistence of one craft, whose commander was recklessly desirous of becoming famed for the destruction of the invisible ship from Zor, forced them to shoot it from the sky.

It seemed, especially to the organic Zoromes, that this endless chase would never cease. Detector alarms were being placed everywhere on the planet. Every time they found themselves in what they believed to be an isolated spot, free from pursuit, several black dots would drop from space into the atmosphere and search for them with their deadly rays. Escape was always preceded by a battle. The situation rapidly grew worse as the Mumes became more accustomed to their invisible maneuvers through the aid of the proximity detectors, and the search for the invisible ships grew more grim and systematized.

Nothing was discovered concerning the whereabouts of 24J-151, whether he was cruising beneath the protective covering of rays enshrouding Mumed, or whether he had made his escape. One thing was certain: he had not been brought down by the Mumes. The Zoromes would soon have learned of it in their frantic flight about the planet.

Eventually the food supply for the organic Zoromes became exhausted. A raid on a storehouse in an isolated

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

city was made. The provender of the Mumes sustained the Zoromes, though it proved flat and distasteful to their own peculiar appetites.

It was Professor Jameson who suggested a means of escape shortly after an unsuccessful attempt had been made to run a safety lane into space using several ships of the Mumes for cover. The watchful enemy detected the invisible ship, and almost instantly the ships of Mumed had dropped planetward while the pulsating rays of death rapidly closed once again, nearly catching the ship from Zor. The inevitable chase had followed before the Zoromes could confuse and elude their followers.

"We must capture a ship of the Mumes, abandon our own and escape to free space," said the professor.

"It is a desperate chance—giving up our one protection, invisibility," 744U-21 considered.

"But our only chance," the professor countered. "Sooner or later, a wild random shot of theirs will strike true, and then it will be all over for us."

The idea was agreed upon. They flew as near to a spaceship terminal as they dared, but here again a proximity detector once more revealed them and they were forced to flee. The professor had based his chances on their escape under the fundamental theory that the most obvious features are those which are overlooked, yet it appeared that it would indeed be difficult to put this theory into practice. The invisible ship of Zor circled the globe beneath the blanket of unpassable rays for several more days. Zoromes remained constantly at the short range telescopes, and finally found that for which they searched.

A spaceship, untended and apparently unused for some time, stood near the outskirts of a small city. The

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

machine men felt sure there were no proximity detectors in this backwards area, for they lingered long enough to draw out any attack which might follow their discovery. Evidently the Mumes could not adequately cover every section of the globe.

The craft from Zor descended close to the solitary ship, hovering just above the ground, while 6N-24 was let out to investigate the interior. He reported the ship space-worthy, and two more of the machine men were sent to take control of it. Close beside the invisible ship, it rose high above the atmosphere of Mumed before machine men and organic Zoromes transferred themselves. The invisible ship was stripped of all essentials and towed behind the stolen craft. They headed for one of the principal safety lanes which were so well guarded.

From a distance, they waited until a concourse of spaceships was about to leave Mumed. The invisible spaceship was sent directly towards the opening of the safety lane. As the Zoromes expected, its presence was immediately picked up by the Mumes. Several rays probed nervously here and there.

An exploding mass of metal materialized suddenly out of the air, and the watching Zoromes saw the ship, which had so long protected them and befooled the Mumes, blown to bits.

No longer would a tight watch be kept on the safety lanes to prevent the escape of the marauder from Zor, which had cost Mumed so heavily in ships, property and lives.

The safety lane opened wide to allow the passage of the ships and the Zoromes passed safely from the danger ridden vicinity of Mumed and onto the depths of the cosmic void. Once free of the deadly covering

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

of rays, they lagged behind the others. Then, at a safe distance, they spurted suddenly out of the planetary system and into the seas of space, bound for Zor.

On the trip back, the sorrow of Zora became less acute, though she felt that life held little for her now that she had lost her beloved Bext. Professor Jameson consoled her as best as he could, painting an inspiring future for her, pointing out that it was her duty to Zor to carry on in the face of her heart-crushing loss, especially during this crisis.

As is ever the way with the universe, Zora's wrecked dreams changed to fit the circumstances. The destruction she had caused upon Mumed gave her an idea. She resolved to carry on in the capacity Bext had known. No longer would she stay upon Zor in comfort, idleness, and luxury. She would take an active part in the coming campaign against the Mumes.

On approaching Ipmats, 744U-21 was careful to avoid any cruisers from Zor. Slipping in close to the frigid, storm-tossed surface of Ipmats, radiations sent out by the thought amplifiers brought a protecting escort of ships to meet the returned travelers. On the surface of Ipmats they learned that 24J-151 had returned long before and had stopped only a short time upon Ipmats before continuing to Zor. 24J-151 had seemed anxious to reach the laboratories of Zor.

It was a pock-marked crew of machine men—several lacking metal legs or tentacles, their bodies horribly scarred where the destructive weapons of the Mumes had found their mark—that saw the geometrical surface of Zor loom large. They came surrounded by the escort from Ipmats. At first, the home-world Zoromes believed that their forces had returned with a captive ship, but

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

reports traveled ahead of the actual landing of the ships, with the news that the crew of 744U-21 had finally returned and that Princess Zora was safe.

24J-151 was first among those to greet the returned Zoromes. Following the tentacle-to-tentacle combat on Mumed, he had lost track of them when 20R-654 had found it necessary to put on tremendous speed in escaping the wrath of the Mumes at Zora's vengeful sniping. 24J-151 had escaped through a safety lane while the confusion reigned among the Mumes.

A rapid check-up between the two commanders found that seven machine men had been lost out of the two crews, four of them from the expedition of 744U-21. Those who had met death were 38R-497, 176Z-56, 34T-11 and 32B-64. None of the organic Zoromes had been among the casualties, however, thanks to the fact that they had been confined to the spaceships during the attempt to rescue Bext.

"Bext died like a hero," was the professor's epitaph. "He fought to the last."

"Bext is not dead," was 24J-151's quiet, yet startling, announcement.

Every machine man gave a start of mental alarm, so completely surprised were they by 24J-151's contradictory assertion. Zora stood as if turned to stone, her eyes staring wide, her heart beat temporarily arrested.

"Not dead!"

"We saw him die—literally slashed to pieces by the infuriated Mumes!" exclaimed 744U-21.

"You are right about that," said 24J-151. "Bext did die, but so did 21MM392 once, so I am told. There is Bext."

24J-151 pointed to a machine man of glistening metal parts, new from the factories, who now approached the

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

group. He contrasted strangely with the corroded, chemical-eaten bodies of the Zoromes returned from Mumed, so badly in need of repair and replacement. While the machine men and organic Zoromes stared in surprise and fascination at the new entrant to the metal ranks, 24J-151 rendered a brief explanation.

"When my ship descended to pick up the remaining Zoromes, 74H-385 noticed the dead body of Bext. It was torn and crushed, yet the head, half severed from the neck, was intact. It is to this that Bext owes his present existence. He brought the head to the spaceship and, profiting from the experience of 21MM392, we kept it in a stellar vacuum compartment until we reached the laboratories here on Zor. Bext's brain was removed from his organic head and stimulated to life once more. He is now known among the machine men as 12W-62."

"Bext!" cried Zora, at last collecting some order out of her chaotic thoughts. "Is it really you?"

"Yes, Zora."

In that answering affirmation, Professor Jameson detected a great change in Bext's attitude for Zora. Sympathy, comradeship and interest were manifest, yet that electrifying, nerve-startling passion was strangely absent. There was no quivering eagerness for the ecstatic communion of minds which Bext had once sought in her presence. The change in Bext was sharply contrasted by her own thoughts, which went out searching in the same old way, yet, on finding no hold, wavered uncertainly.

"Zora, it is good to see you back," was Bext's friendly greeting. "We feared for your safety when you did not return."

"That we did not return sooner is my fault," was Zora's dispirited reply as she stared bewilderingly at the

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

metal form of Bext. She realized with a choking sensation that the death of Bext had meant the death of tender passion he had borne for her.

Recalled to life, Bext had lost the natural impulses and instincts an organic body had given him. He was beyond the laws of scheming, plotting nature; now he was under the synthetic conditions of a machine man.

Zora came to realize that she could never love 12W-62. He was not Bext as she had known Bext.

The machine man, his mental abilities reborn in the laboratories of Zor, looked back upon his passionate regard for Zora much as do older folks look back upon memories of their childhood. They are unable to recapture them tangibly, however, because of their physical and mental changes through the passing years. Bext accepted the change with an indifferent fatalism. He had anticipated it before his death; he would have widely deplored losing his love for Zora, but that would have been like Bext, not like 12W-62.

Zora retired to her palace in a bewildered state of mind. She was not seen very often after that single meeting with Bext. She was tortured mentally by the loss of her love, memories which recurred constantly now that Bext was a machine man. Sometimes she selfishly wished that he had remained dead, loving her as he had done to the last of his breath, yet calm consideration made her realize that this was a jealous wish. And thus she remained in torment, chained to a passion she could not forget.

Meanwhile, Professor Jameson and the machine men who had taken the dangerous journey to Mumed had their battle-scarred bodies repaired. Where tentacles were entirely gone or irreparable, new ones were installed.

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

It was the same with the metal legs. Ragged cavities in their bodies were filled and their entire mechanism given a new finish. Once more they found themselves whole.

The trip to Mumed had not been in vain. Much had been learned. Already, it was reported that the Zoromes in the laboratories had manufactured a substance which when applied to the spaceships, caused them to convert the destructive rays of the Mumes into force rays which hurled the ships of Zor to one side but did not damage them.

"How will this give us a passage through the protective screen about Mumed?" 6W-438 argued. "There is much yet to be done before we accept their open invitation to carry the fight to our system."

"It will be a battle of wits," said the professor.

Careful analysis by the Zoromes of several cavities made by the metal-eating pistols on their bodies showed that the menace could be easily counteracted and made harmless by installation of a neutralizer in the carapaces of the Zoromes.

One day, while Professor Jameson sat in conference with 744U-21, 6W-438, 24J-151 and others, a machine man entered upon their presence. Something about the machine man's new glistening body and mental stance instantly put the professor in mind of Bext. Yet it was not Bext.

"Zora! You!"

"119M-5," the machine man corrected. "Will you not offer me congratulations?"

"But, Zora, you were still young. A long life lay before you!"

"I know it, now," was the quiet reply. "I was too

ZORA OF THE ZOROMES

deep in the grips of that passion called love, 21MM392, that irresistible impulse of nature's fashioning, of which you spoke so calmly. I am not sorry that I sought this means of escape. Now, looking back, it all seems utterly foolish, even as it must have so seemed to Bext after his brain transposition."

"Have you seen Bext since your change?" the professor inquired curiously.

"Yes. He is sorry that I have willfully given up my organic life to become a metal Zorome. He thought it deplorable, in his practical manner. I agree with him, yet I am not too far removed from my organic existence to lose track of my former attitude entirely, and I know that life would have held little for me as Princess Zora. Love is bitterly cruel even as it is beautiful."

"And now what do you intend to do, now that you are one of us?" queried 744U-21.

Zora's ready reply stirred still-fresh memories in the minds of the machine men present.

"I am an artilleryman on a ship under the command of 12W-62 in the coming war."

TWO: SPACE WAR

I

PROFESSOR JAMESON gazed at a brilliant, dazzling ball which outshone all other objects in the surrounding skies. It was Grutet, the little chromium-plated sister world to Zor. Farther away loomed Zor itself, while several scattered points of fixed light marked the positions of the other four worlds of the planetary system. The professor turned and contemplated 12W-62, formerly known as Bext.

"You have not been a machine man for long," the professor radiated to 12W-62. "Considering the position you have voluntarily chosen, it appears that your career may be a short one."

"What of yourself?" queried Bext. "You, too, have chosen to be among those for the initial attack on Mumed."

"Several of my most intimate companions have volunteered to man the ships of the vanguard," the professor explained. "There is no better reason for my choice."

"Do you leave as a group?" asked 12W-62, turning the small flier back in the direction of Zor. "Your expedition under 744U-21, I mean."

"No, we are broken up. 744U-21 is leaving with the main fleet which shall follow us at a later date. 20R-

SPACE WAR

654, 41C-98, and the others of the expedition which found my dead body near Earth are also staying on Zor to join the main fleet. Of the original expedition, 6W-438, 473G-90 and 56F-450 will accompany me aboard my ship. The rest under my command are new to me.

"I, too, have been placed in command of a vanguard ship," said Bext. "It is a dangerous business. We are already looked upon as martyrs, a veritable death-battalion."

"Zora told me that you had been given command of a ship because of your efficiency in the same capacity before your brain transposition," said the professor, steering the conversation away from the unpleasant aspects of their mission. "Zora is to be one of your artillerymen?"

"Yes, 119M-5 is now being given final training on Ip-mats. She has a talent for the finer points of space gunnery," was Bext's reply. "But as to my efficiency—why did I ever let the Mumes capture my ship and take it back to Mumed along with me? That could scarcely be called efficiency."

"But you were outnumbered by the Mumes," the professor reminded him. "They waited until they found your ship isolated from the rest."

"Few of their ships have approached our system since then, thanks to the mine fields."

Necessity is the mother of invention, and the space mines were a recent contribution by an experimenter of Zor. Professor Jameson had remarked at the outset of hostilities that the war would narrow down to a battle of wits, a siege of brain power. Millions of the mines had been turned out and were sent spinning on orbits about the six worlds of Zor. Possessed of a substance

SPACE WAR

which nullified their attraction to the ships of Zor, they existed as a menace only to the Mumes.

They were too small to register on the detectors of the Mume ships. Added to this, the mines sped unerringly for any large object which came within a radius of five thousand miles.

"But it is only a matter of time until they discover the secret of the mines," the professor prophesized. "See how easily we have counteracted the destructive rays about Mumed. Our ships shunt off their destructiveness."

"However, we cannot as yet penetrate the barrier rays, with either space ships or power beams."

"We will accomplish that in time," said the professor, "and, besides, they cannot project beams through their own blanket of rays."

"That is true," 12W-62 agreed. "Scout ships have reported that paths have to be opened momentarily for them to unloose destruction from the planet itself. They seem to depend mostly upon the latter mode of offense, for their fleet is small in comparison to ours."

"Have you heard of their locater veils?"

"Locater veils?" echoed 12W-62 in query. "What are they?"

"This is little more than rumor. One of our scout ships reported having lost complete track of several nearby enemy ships. They disappeared from the detectors entirely, then reappeared."

"Their ships throw out such a veil in order to confuse our detectors?"

"Either that, or else the functioning of the scout ship detectors was faulty at that particular time."

"Our ships still possess the advantage of invisibility,"

SPACE WAR

Bext reminded them. "Though they have cut down the advantage considerably."

"No one knows that any better than I," said the professor. "What a time our ship had trying to avoid the hunting ships of Mumed while we were hemmed in from escape by their barrier rays."

"6D4, the tyrant of Mumed, is bent on imperialism which knows no bounds," 12W-62 observed. "That, I learned well during my imprisonment on Mumed."

"If the nucleus of his empire could be destroyed in one stroke, I believe the end of the war might be accomplished in a single encounter," the professor said. "The Mumes are being enthused and goaded by 6D4 and his associates. Take their leaders from them, and a few defeats would bring them to terms. Aside from 6D4 and a few others the Mumes are well beneath our intellectual plane; without a directing intelligence their power would be broken."

"It sounds easy," Bext admitted. "Yet 6D4 is also aware of this fact. During my captivity on Mumed, I learned by prying telepathically into covert conversations of various Mumes, that 6D4 was planning a secret, underground city where he and his principal consorts can direct the affairs of the planet."

"If we could only learn where this secret city is located," the professor mused.

"Even so, none of our rays could penetrate to the planet. Sneaking inside the barrier is out of the question, now that the Mumes have learned our secret of invisibility. They will be on the watch for just such an act."

"We could disintegrate Mumed but there is the neighboring planet of Ablen to consider. It would mean the

SPACE WAR

death of every inhabitant, innocent sacrifices to the fury of war."

"The Ablenox are not exactly neutral," said 12W-62. "Their sentiment leans in our favor, for the Mumes have treated them badly."

The planet Zor grew in size as their flier left the vicinity of Grutet and headed homeward.

The professor and Bext left the little space-flier in charge of several organic Zoromes after coming to rest in the shadow of a large city. Preparations were nearly complete for the first hundred or more ships of Zor to leave for the system of Mumed. This was the vanguard, ready to unloose the first salvo of war. Secure in the belief that their planet was invincible behind its protective screens which could not be penetrated by space craft, meteor or message, the Mumes had invited combat in the shadow of their own world.

The initial expedition to leave was to test the space fortifications of Mumed and also feel out their offense, a possibly deadly errand. This time they spurned invisibility, the advantage meaning little in space where ships were watched by detectors, not eyes. The advantages of invisibility lay in planet-raiding; this, under the circumstances, the Zoromes did not expect to do.

The main fleet, representing thousands of Zorome fighting craft, would follow later. Departing from the outermost planet of Zor's system, Ipmats—cold, dimly lit by a far-off sun, and the home of biting, raging storms—the ships of Zor spread out and raced towards the neighboring system of the Mumes. Ipmats grew small behind them, its horned crescent dwindling to obscurity, the sun of Zor becoming smaller, a tiny, glittering point of light,

SPACE WAR

a star among stars, brighter only because of its proximity.

Among those under Professor Jameson's command were 6W-438, 473G-90, and 56F-450; the last was a stranger to him. Besides the machine men, there were four organic Zoromes, the entire crew numbering fifteen. There was room for more aboard the ship, but not too many were being sent on this initial flight into the enemy's territory, from which few might return.

The sun of Mumed loomed as the ships of Zor headed into the system, past the outer planets. Ablen was in opposition to the sun as they passed its orbit. Beyond, Tanid's rough surface was visible in the thin, ragged crescent of its daylight dawn. Farther beyond and to one side lay Mumed.

The ships of Zor watched their detectors carefully for enemy scout ships ready to attack or issue an alarm of their approach, but apparently they were not yet near enough to Mumed. The Mumes could not protect their entire system as the Zoromes did. The population and production facilities were concentrated wholly on one planet.

The ships of Zor moved onward. The first intimation of impending disaster came in the disappearance of a ship far to the edge of the widespread formation. It went out in a brilliant flash which left its recent position on the detectors a blank spot.

"A long range shot!" was 6W-438's lightning resume.

"If so, they were lucky," the professor said. "There's no ship on our detectors within a half million miles."

"What about a small scout flier?" queried Hodze, an organic Zorome. "They register only at nearer distances."

"Two hundred thousand miles, then, at the most," stated the professor. "An impossible distance for accurate shoot-

SPACE WAR

ing at such erratic moving targets. If the Mumes are ...

Three more of the Zorome ships disappeared in rapid succession. A ship not far from the professor's craft was struck.

"That's no chance!" cried 56F-450. "That's accuracy!"

To the dismay of the bewildered Zoromes, another ship burst into pieces. Immediately afterward, a grazing shot tore a ship half apart, leaving it behind the main body which still rushed onward. Two ships dropped behind to pick up the machine men who still survived among the wreckage. Organic Zoromes, unless spacesuited, were doomed in this instance.

"Do you suppose we are being fired upon from Tanid, 21MM392?" came the query of 142V-06 from another ship close by. He referred to the uninhabited world between Ablen and Mumed.

From the professor's memory leaped a recent conversation with 12W-62. This was the locator veils. He immediately radiated his opinion to the other ship commanders. However, to find the ships of Zor the Mumes must penetrate their own locator veils with detector beams.

"Return their fire back along their detector beams! Place our own detectors in ultra-reverse; then fire back whenever they register!"

Several more ships were shot out of space by the undetectable enemy. In the case of a few graze shots, the survivors were quickly transferred to other ships. The Zoromes were now positive that the nearby ships of the Mumes could find them only by penetrating their own locator veil. The Mumes held but a slight advantage after the surprise of their first attack, for the Zoromes

SPACE WAR

were releasing charges of deadly power whenever a detector-beam found them through the locator veil.

The locator veil was a direct retaliation to the treatment of invisibility the Zoromes had given their space ships, but 6D4's mental genius had reckoned without consideration of the resourcefulness of the Zoromes.

The space encounter was no longer as one-sided as it had seemed. Though his detector screens remained blank of enemy, the professor saw the effects of the counter-attack. Far out in space, tiny flashes occurred intermittently, like the distant travels of meteors through upper atmosphere.

"We have drifted off the main course of the fleet!" cried one of the machine men.

The professor returned to the control room. Their faculties had been too engrossed in wiping out the menace which had threatened them to notice their wide divergence from formation.

"Circle back!"

The screen which revealed to them the location of their own ships went suddenly blank. For a moment, Professor Jameson was apprehensive. Then he realized his ship was cut off from the main body by a locator veil of the enemy.

"Slow down. We may be close to one of their ships. Stand ready to fire back along their beams."

A crashing jolt sent Professor Jameson to the floor of his spaceship. His metal head clanged hard and he momentarily lost his senses. Recovering from the shock, he found himself surrounded by his companions. The organic Zoromes had donned spacesuits. Tight fitting, scarcely noticeable, temperature equalizers were worn by the machine men. The professor, too, found himself

SPACE WAR

equipped with one. He had been unconscious longer than he had thought.

"What happened?" he asked. "Were we fired upon?"

"We collided with a ship of the Mumes. You were knocked senseless. Our craft has been holed and the air is leaking out slowly."

"Is the control room intact?" was the professor's swift question.

"It is partly demolished," came 56F-450's discouraging reply. "We are helpless."

"Where are we now?"

"Drifting in the direction of Tanid."

"At what speed?"

"That is unknown. The gauges were destroyed."

II

PROFESSOR JAMESON glanced hastily out of the nearest port. Tanid loomed large. They were far removed from the scene of recent conflict.

The professor made his way to the wrecked control room. A rough hole yawned in the center of an oblong indentation, permitting the light from brilliant, far off stars to shine through the gap. He wondered if the enemy ship they had rammed had fared the same.

The entire crew stood by his side in the wrecked control room of the helpless craft, ready to follow his suggestion. For a moment he pondered the situation. There seemed little to do for the time being except to trust to fate. The machine men and their organic brethren were not confirmed fatalists, however, even though they recognized the numerous byways of destiny.

SPACE WAR

"We can land on Tanid, if our drift is in that direction," said the professor. "Of course, there is danger of crashing in the event that our gravity brakes prove unmanageable. I wonder if—"

The rest of the professor's contemplation was interrupted by the vibrant thought waves of 596L-29, whose discovery gave a new aspect to the situation.

"An enemy ship is coming close!" was 596L-29's startling announcement as he peered intently through the jagged rent in the control room. "We are lost!"

"We are if they see the ship is alive," the professor exclaimed. "Put a guard on your thought waves!"

The Zoromes shielded themselves, Professor Jameson fearing a destructive ray might flash across the wrecked ship at any moment. The suspense was nerve-wracking even to the machine men, and especially so to the organic Zoromes. The Mumes, seeing the damaged ship, hopefully would believe it to be a derelict of the dead. So the professor reasoned.

6W-438 signaled the professor that machine men of Mumed were preparing to board the wreck. Several of them were heading for the rent in the ship's side. The professor rapidly endorsed the plan which sight of the Mumes had occasioned in the mind of 6W-438. The Zoromes hid themselves.

On board the ship of the Mumes, the organic pilot and several of his companions waited for their mechanical brethren to return from the wreck which had drifted across their detector plates. The initial impulse to annihilate it had yielded to the practical need to search it for secrets of Zorome defense and offense. Although the eight-legged Mume thought it was queer that he had received no communication from his seven metal

SPACE WAR

comrades who had entered the wreck, possibly, he thought, this might be due to a mental nullifier of the Zoromes. That was well. The Mumes would learn its secret and 6D4's empire builders would boast another advantage over the Zoromes.

Finally, a metal figure stood limned in the jagged hole of the wrecked spaceship. Another appeared. The two machine men launched themselves from the wreck with gentle pushes, heading straight for the Mume air-lock. Five more left the wreck and swiftly followed. They were strangely silent, much to the increasing curiosity of the organic Mumes who had been left on board. The pilot rapidly worked the controls of the air-lock.

"Shall I destroy the derelict?" asked the artilleryman, when all seven were aboard.

"No," came the brief reply.

The machine men hurried into the spaceship, clutching their metal-eating pistols. They also carried several of the ray guns belonging to the Zoromes.

"What did you find?" asked the pilot, still watching the wreck.

Instead of an answer, metal tentacles gripped the pilot by his neck and slowly twisted his head off, then pulled him from his seat. Meanwhile, more of the machine men had attacked the stupified artilleryman and his companions.

"Take over the controls of the ship, 56F-450," said 6W-438. "The rest can come out of the wreck now."

More machine men, this time with organic Zoromes, made their way from the derelict to the waiting ship of the Mumes.

"We took over the ship without a single loss, 21MM-

SPACE WAR

392," 6W-438 enthused. "We overcame the Mumes easily, thanks to our immunity to their metal eaters."

"Where shall we go?" 56F-450 queried.

"We shall join our fleet, if we can find it."

56F-450 read their position. They were far off course. In the captured craft of the Mumes, the Zoromes headed for the fleet.

"Our own ships will fire on us!" warned 6W-438. "This is an enemy ship!"

"When we come within range, we must establish communications with them," stated the professor.

56F-450 soon picked their own fleet up on the detector plates. Either a good many of the ships had been destroyed in the battle or else the initial fleet had broken up into smaller contingents.

"Let them know who we are," he said.

An exclamation of mingled surprise and dejection reached the professor from 2B-991 at the communicating signal system.

"The communicators are not attuned to our own space craft—only to the ships of the Mumes."

"Look!"

56F-450 pointed to the detector fields where small dots were closing in upon their position.

"Battle formation!"

The professor grasped frantically at an overhanging lever above the controls. Instantly, the dots on the detector field disappeared, as he spread the locator veil.

"That was close!" cried 6W-438. "They think us enemies. We shall be blasted if we stay here!"

"Is there no way we can tell them who we are?" asked one of the organic Zoromes desperately.

The professor said no. 56F-450 needed no instructions.

SPACE WAR

The situation was clearly diagnosed by all. They were in flight from their own comrades, who were intent on blowing them out of existence. Still in the shadow of their own locator veil, they shot the ship clear of the menacing fleet, well beyond the range of detection.

"There is only one thing for us to do," said the professor. "We must play a lone hand, posing as Mumes. Both fleets will be against us, and we shall be doubly in danger, yet it is the most we can do, unless we wish to head back for Zor."

"Where, then?" asked 56F-450.

"Head for Mumed."

They were well on their way past Tanid when an amplified thought wave forced itself in upon their consciousness.

"What are organic Zoromes doing aboard your ship? Are they prisoners? How did you get them?"

For a moment, the Zoromes stared at each other dumbfounded. Then came another query.

"What are your letters? Identify yourself."

The professor, with waving tentacle, pointed mutely at the detector screen. Four ships were shown upon it.

"Mumes!" cursed 6W-438.

"How did they spot us?"

"The televisor! Snap it off!"

56F-450, unfamiliar with the ships of the Mumes, had overlooked this tell-tale possibility. Quickly, he broke visual connection with the other four ships.

"Turn on your screen!" came the snapped command. "Come alongside us at once!"

"Throw out the locator veil." Professor Jameson expressed his disregard for the Mumes.

56F-450 did so. For a moment, the spots on the de-

SPACE WAR

tector plates faded from view, but they soon returned full strength. 56F-450 looked to see if the lever had slipped back. No. The locator veil was spread to its full intensity. The Mumes evidently knew how to nullify its baffling effects.

Professor Jameson watched the four ships on the screen. They were in close pursuit.

"Around Tanid," he ordered. "Then head for our fleet."

"We shall be caught between two fires," warned 6W-438.

Tanid loomed large. The ships of Mumed crept nearer. Their operators, more familiar with their own ships than the Zoromes, were getting better speed and more facile maneuverability. Desperately, 6W-438 opened fire on them as they came closer, without results. Unharmd, the four pursuing space craft crept nearer.

"Nullifiers," the professor summed up the situation. "They are able to nullify their own attack but not ours. If we only had one of our own ships now."

"If there were only some way of coming to grips with them!" exclaimed 6W-438 vehemently. "We are entirely at their mercy!"

"They could have annihilated us before this," mused the professor. "They want us alive for some reason or other."

"Like they wanted Bext!" was Hodze's reminiscent remark.

The Zoromes had shut off the communicator. The locator veil, ineffectual as it was, was also turned off. Suddenly, 56F-450 felt a strange influence guiding the ship. The controls no longer responded to his touch. Their speed rapidly decreased. Soon after, there came

SPACE WAR

a metallic bump which shook the spaceship from stem to stern. The Mumes had clamped on.

Professor Jameson looked at the detector screen. The foremost of the enemy had grappled onto the spaceship manned by the Zoromes. The three remaining space craft lingered in the rear.

"They will probably tow us back to Mumed as prisoners," ventured 93S-404.

"They are coming aboard!" cried Hodze, pointing to several Mumes entering the air lock.

"Keep them out!"

56F-450 futilely tried to close the controls governing the air lock, yet the Zoromes saw the door roll aside.

"There is no use!" exclaimed 56F-450. "They have the operation of the ship entirely in their power."

They waited for the invading Mumes, weapons ready. The first machine man through the door was engaged by 2G-64. Others came from the enemy ship. The organic Zoromes rushed for the entrance of the air lock, weapons unleashed, ready to fight and hold off the Mumes, while those few who had already entered were engaged with the machine men of Zor. The Mumes were evidently reluctant to destroy their own ship, even though capture meant sacrifice. They possessed less ships than the Zoromes.

There came a sudden, shrill thought warning from one of the other Mume ships. "Zorome ships are coming!"

Professor Jameson and his companions experienced a short-lived thrill of enthusiasm. A thunderous, jarring roar shook the embraced ships. They were torn apart and hurled about. One Mume ship was utterly demolished.

The ships of Zor, creeping up unsuspectingly upon the

SPACE WAR

five enemy ships, had found an easy target in the two clinging together.

The ship containing the Zoromes spun dizzily towards Tanid, its occupants dazed, dead, or dying. A large piece had been torn away from the cruiser. Tanid grew larger, its topography clearly distinct; the spaceship fell rapidly into the planet's attraction, unnoticed by the handful of Zorome space craft which had sneaked upon the Mumes, catching them unaware.

Tanid possessed an atmosphere unbreathable by either of the organic species, Zoromes or Mumes. Entering the thick envelope of air, the ship reduced its mad speed. Several of the gravity brakes were still in working order and the increasing air pressure automatically threw them into action. The functioning of the gravity brakes, however, was erratic. The ship came down, none too lightly, in a mountain pass just west of the daylight terminator of Tanid. The light was gradually creeping in the direction of the fallen ship.

Hodze raised himself amid the silence and wreckage and gazed upon devastation and death. He looked up to see the stars twinkling at him through a ruptured seam above his head. It was a wonder that he had not been crushed and mutilated, as were many around him. A stillness of mind persisted. A grayness suffused the sky. Dawn broke quickly on Tanid. In the gathering light, gloom sped swiftly, and the Zorome looked about him.

Machine men lay broken and smashed, their metal legs and tentacles twisted and dented into grotesque, unnatural attitudes. Mixed with these were the slumped, inanimate forms of organic Zoromes who had met their end.

SPACE WAR

Hodze found that two of his tentacles were broken. They pained him with dull and throbbing persistency and stabbed at his consciousness whenever he moved.

Not far from him lay 21MM392, his head half ripped from his metal body, a section of the cube's upper mechanism torn away. A leg was missing, and two of the remaining three lower limbs were bent in under the cubed body with its jumble of twisted tentacles, one of which was plainly torn free of the metal body. With a confusing and jolting realization, Hodze saw that not all the machine men were present. Several had evidently been lost in space at the impact of the shot which had torn away a large part of the ship. They must have drifted away from the wreck while it fell towards Tanid.

Exerting his mental perceptions, Hodze sent a call to the machine men. Perhaps some of them still lived.

There was no reply. Many of them lay with their heads crushed or dented. There existed no doubt but that they were dead. Others among the machine men might be alive yet temporarily stunned. Again he marvelled at the fact that he, a flesh and blood Zorome, had so miraculously escaped death in this terror of destruction which had swept over them.

His first thoughts were of 21MM392, whose wrecked metal body lay a short distance away. Slowly he hobbled over beside him, conscious that two of his own lower limbs were bruised and sprained. He sought vainly for communication with the fallen machine man, searching the other's mind.

Of one thing Hodze was certain: the machine man lived. Yet his brain was in a dazed unconscious condition. 21MM392's thought impressions were fantastic, bordering on delirium. Scanning the professor's mind,

SPACE WAR

Hodze received mental perceptions of weird, four-limbed people on whose heads there grew, in place of membranous fringe, a thick, hirsute growth. They wore strange accoutrements, too, of varying shapes and colors. They were evidently characters from some queer world which 21MM392 had visited in the past.

The sun topped the horizon, reflecting brilliantly against several tiny specks far up in the atmosphere. Whether the approaching spaceships were friends or enemies, Hodze knew not, but he suspected strongly that they were Mumes. It was not likely any of the Zoromes would land on Tanid. The Mumes probably possessed lookout bases on this planet used only by machine men.

If they were Mumes, he knew what to expect. It would mean a quick end for him and those of Zor who still lived.

The thought suddenly struck Hodze that a few of the Mume machine men might also still be alive. Like 21MM-392, they were perhaps only unconscious. As if to substantiate Hodze's opinion, one of the Mume combatants who had entered the ship before the disaster staggered ungainly upon his bent legs, then fell backward again when he attempted to lift himself with twisted tentacles.

An idea suddenly occurred to Hodze; he snatched up one of the metal-eating pistols of the Mumes. Would the Mumes in the approaching ships perceive the vague thought imprints on the minds of 21MM392 and the others who lived, and distinguish them as Zoromes? He doubted it. The mental perceptions of the Mumes were below that of the Zoromes. And after all, this was a ship of Mumed.

Again the metal Mume tried to rise, slowly collecting his confused thoughts. Hodze, his mind set, leveled the

SPACE WAR

metal eater and fired. No sound issued from the pistol. There was no flash, no ray of any kind, yet upon the metal head of the floundering Mume there appeared a dark, round cavity which spread and grew deeper. With several spasmodic movements the Mume fell backward, dead. The metal eater had penetrated his brain pan.

The spaceships dropped closer, flitting across the vision of the spacesuited Hodze. Glancing upward through the ruptured hull of the spaceship, the Zorome saw that his suspicions were confirmed. They were Mume ships coming to investigate their fallen cruiser. He knew he must hurry if he were to destroy the remaining Mumes.

He looked confusedly among the recumbent machine men. They were so much alike that he could find no distinguishing characteristics to differentiate between Mumes and Zoromes. He had recognized the unconscious 21MM392 only by familiar scratches on his metal body. Ordinarily, machine men identified each other mentally.

Hodze, for a moment, was at a loss as to what he might do. He dared not fire at those metal heads he suspected as belonging to Mumes because of the omnipresent doubt that they were possibly Zoromes. Then he suddenly remembered. The Zoromes had immunized themselves to the metal eaters of the Mumes. He had been too engrossed to have thought of it before.

Without further hesitation, he leveled the pistol in turn at all the metal heads in the wrecked ship, regardless of friend or foe, whether the heads were smashed, or were only dented or intact. The metal heads of the Mumes were immediately susceptible to the metal eater, while the heads of the machine men of Zor remained unaffected.

SPACE WAR

The ships of the Mumes landed. Hodze, finished with his grim work, waited for their arrival. Throwing down the metal eater of the Mumes, he seized one of the ray guns used by the Zoromes.

The Mumes, entering the wreck, stumbled over two of their number in the air lock whom Hodze had overlooked. Without stopping to distinguish whether the two machine men were alive or dead, the Mumes hurried into the main compartment of the wrecked spaceship. They were just in time to see a spacesuited Zorome level a ray gun upon the body of a machine man whose head was partly torn away. The ray flickered over the cubed body, leaving a torn and fused path. Before it reached the helpless machine man's head, one of the Mumes released a charge of destruction which withered the Zorome into charred, smoking residue.

Of all the martyrs to the cause of Zor during the war with the Mumes, there was none greater than Hodze, who had chosen for himself a brilliant end.

III

WHEN PROFESSOR Jameson came to his senses, he was no longer in the wrecked spaceship. His metal head was fastened to a shining, new cubed body without tentacles or legs. Looking about him, he surmised that he was in the assembling room of an outfitting department on Mumed. He immediately placed a guard on his thoughts.

How had he come there? Did the Mumes know him for a Zorome? This was not the metal body he had known. The last thing he recalled was the jarring crash aboard

SPACE WAR

the ship of the Mumes, following the report that Zoromes were coming.

A metal Mume approached him, carrying six metal tentacles, his body girdled with various tools and implements. Behind him came another, carrying four metal tags. The professor's brain was alive with questions, yet resolutely he repressed his curiosity.

"How do you feel?" queried the Mume.

"I seem to be all right," the professor replied.

"You must have received quite a heavy rap, but you are lucky. Most of you on that ship either died in the crash on Tanid or else were killed by one of your captives who survived the crash."

"We were attacked by a ship of Zor," was the professor's honest statement. "It was then that I became bereft of my senses, for I recollect nothing which happened after that. What of this captive you mentioned?"

The Mume told him how help had arrived just in time to save him from the ray gun of an organic Zorome. This puzzled the professor; it failed to make sense. But the Mumes really believed him to be one of them. Very well, he would let them remain thinking so.

But the Zorome who had tried to kill him? Had he, too, believed the professor to be a Mume? He dared not ask too many questions.

"Am I the only survivor?" the professor ventured.

"No. Three of you survived—4N7, 2H6 and yourself. Their mechanical injuries were similar to yours."

"Where are they?" the professor asked, masking his sudden apprehension.

"2H6 has been placed with one of the ships which came to investigate the wreck. All he needed was two tentacles and a leg. He recovered his senses quickly.

SPACE WAR

4N7 is in the subterranean city of 6D4, where you are soon to be taken."

Professor Jameson did some rapid thinking. 2H6 was aboard a spaceship. He had little to fear from him. He might never come back to identify the professor as a machine man of Zor. But 4N7 existed as a menace to his safety. 4N7 would brand him as an imposter, stating that he had never been aboard the ship of Mumed at all. And the professor knew that he was to be taken where 4N7 was now located, the secret city of 6D4.

And the rumor of the subterranean city was an actual fact. The professor was not surprised at the matter-of-fact disclosure. It was evidently a development since Zoromes had last visited the enemy world.

"Who are you?"

This question took Professor Jameson by surprise, but he answered quite readily, "9Y1."

With new limbs and a new body, the professor became known to the Mumes as 9Y1, apparently one of their number. An airship whisked him rapidly towards the secret city, in company with several more machine men. It had been the initial intention of the professor to escape at the first opportunity, but now that the Zoromes would not be long in starting their great drive, he readily saw that his secret presence on Mumed might serve for a greater purpose than if he were in command of a ship in the space fleet.

The airship dropped swiftly towards a section of open country, a bit too swiftly for safety, it seemed to the professor. He looked sharply for signs of a tunnel opening but saw none. Evidently, it was cleverly concealed. The ground rushed closer and still the airship clung to its swift momentum without abatement of speed.

SPACE WAR

For a moment, fear clutched at the professor. He felt sure they must strike unless their terrific pace was slowed. Even then, the sudden deceleration would throw them off their feet.

And then they struck. But there was no impact; they kept going. In stupefied surprise, the professor stared out into translucent grayness. A nearby machine man sensed his amazement.

"It's evident you've never been in the underground city," he said. "Where you believed you saw ground there was only a cavity, the entrance to the city. The grayness you notice outside is camouflage gas. Seen from above, there is an optical illusion of a complete landscape."

Professor Jameson felt that he would have to guard his thoughts more carefully against these unexpectedly intelligent Mumes.

The tunnel was approximately a mile in depth.

"Destructive rays line the tunnel," said the Mume, "ready to be unloosed instantly. Every ship which drops into the tunnel is checked by a series of detectors."

Quite unexpectedly, the ship floated down into the city. The metropolis of 6D4 was built on the floor of an immense cavern. Professor Jameson estimated the cavern to be nearly ten miles in length, half as wide, and nearly a mile high. It was brilliantly lit with sun lamps, like those on the inner side of Grutet's chromium shell. The airship headed for a high building, coming to a stop on its roof.

"This is the barracks."

Professor Jameson had been in constant fear of revealing his ignorance of their ways, but the Mumes seemed to take it for granted that a newcomer to the subterranean city would act a bit queer, the routine

SPACE WAR

there being as different as the location and appearance of the city.

In the many nightless days which followed, the professor learned much. He found, however, that the movements of the Zorome forces were kept secret within the city. Only now and then did information leak through some high officer and into the barracks. Professor Jameson had not been there very long before his general aptitude was noticed, and he was promoted in rank. His only fear was the possibility of one of the other two survivors of the wreck on Tanid meeting him and denouncing him as an impostor. The Mumes seemed to possess no comprehensive records of their machine men, and for this the professor was thankful.

One important discovery he made was that the Mumes no longer feared the space mines which floated about the planets of Zor. The Mume ships were equipped with anti-mine detectors that exploded any space mine that started for one of their ships.

One foolhardy Mume had braved the possibility of instant annihilation and had snared several of the mines. Brought to Mumed, they were placed under careful analysis, the ultimate result being the effective defense.

Time passed. Scanty reports which filtered into the city of 6D4 disclosed the fact that the Zorome fleet was hammering away at the strongholds of the Mumes and battling with the latter's ships wherever they were found. So far, it had been a stalemate, neither side gaining much. The Zoromes, however, were on the offensive. Professor Jameson knew that his fleet was growing larger all the time as the various contingents joined it from Zor. The entire force of Zor would soon be marshalled.

He was certain that none of the Zoromes had learned

SPACE WAR

the secret of the underground city. Knowledge of the city's location would eventually bring about a concentrated engagement fit to test the supremacy of the two factions. The skirmishes and minor battles which were taking place amounted to little, as far as the ultimate outcome was concerned. The Zoromes desired to end for once and all the menace of 6D4 and his empire builders. On the other hand, 6D4 was content to stand off the Zoromes at the very gateway of his world, until he felt that they were maneuvered into a position where he could strike swiftly and deadly. In the meantime, he planned to hold them as powerless and ineffective as possible.

Professor Jameson looked for an opportunity to communicate with his fellow machine men, but no chance offered itself. He waited patiently for the time when he would be sent out with a space patrol. 6D4 was keeping much of his fighting strength in reserve, however, and the professor was among these reserve forces.

One day, a superior officer dashed into the barracks of the subterranean city. Professor Jameson and the other officers were galvanized into excitement and action by his electrifying announcement.

"The time has come!" he cried. "All is ready for the great blow!"

The great fleet of Zor was to be destroyed in one full swoop with the latest brainchild of 6D4, the enveloping ray.

"Are we to be sent into space to engage the enemy?" the professor inquired hopefully, looking for an opportunity to quit the subterranean city and notify his fellow Zoromes of their impending danger.

"Some of us," the officer replied. "But you're not. I

SPACE WAR

have a safer and much more important position here in the city for you."

The professor's hopes fell. He felt desperate. He must get out of the city and warn the fleet.

The commanding officer was giving orders. Men scurried everywhere preparing to take off into space for the big battle, ready to fulfill the initial portion of 6D4's plan. Only Professor Jameson and a few other officers were left.

The commanding officer took the professor to a balcony overlooking the subterranean retreat of the Mumes and pointed across the city to a high domed building, the top of which was shaped into a gigantic cylinder. On four sides stood tall minarets, rising to three-quarters the height of the cylinder superstructure of the central dome. The minarets were joined by four narrow bridges.

"There is the weapon to destroy the fleet of Zor!" he exclaimed with a dramatic wave of his metal tentacles. "And you are to have a place at its controls."

"Me?" Professor Jameson felt overwhelmed at the revelation. "Am I to unloose the destruction?"

"Not you alone," the commander informed him. "There are many over there like you. 9G2 has called for an assistant. I recommended you. We'll go over there now."

Entering an air car, they were taken to a small landing platform near the minaret where the professor was to assist 9G2. On the landing platform of the next minaret, the watchful eyes of the professor perceived a small space flier. The professor, entering the minaret with the commanding officer, was confronted by 9G2, whom he learned was an old scientist of Mumed before his brain transposition to a metal body. The commander left, and

SPACE WAR

the oldster commenced explaining the weapon to the professor.

"This produces the enveloping ray," he explained, waving his metal tentacles in a gesture which took in the four minarets and the huge, central structure. "Most of the operators are in that dome. The rest of us are stationed in these minarets, operating the subsidiary power supply as we are directed from the main control chamber over there."

Professor Jameson looked down into the dizzy depths below him. 9G2 continued.

"For the purpose of better concentration of our mental faculties, these minarets have been made thought-proof. In this way, we shall suffer no interruptions to our work when the supreme moment arrives. 7X5 is stationed over in the minaret to our left along with his assistant, and on the other side of us 4N7 is posted alone. Diagonal to our—"

"4N7?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"Why, I have heard of him. That is all."

"Come, I'll take you over to see him."

"Not now," the professor said. "I wish to learn my duties."

"Sure enough," 9G2 approved.

The professor found himself in a dangerous predicament. He had easily avoided 4N7 up until now. But 4N7 was in the next minaret. If they met, a short conversation might soon convince the Mume of the professor's real identity. Then the professor forgot his troubles momentarily to pick up the thread of the scientist's discourse.

". . . and the fleet of Zor will find itself hemmed in

SPACE WAR

by this great, globular ray thrown completely around it. Then we shall start compressing the inner confines. There will be no escape for them. Diving into the walls of the enveloping ray will only mean quicker annihilation. Remaining passive will mean the same final result when the ray closes up into a small sphere. There is no nullifier yet invented for this ray which 6D4 has reserved for this final battle. With the exception of a few impressive tests, it has never before been used."

"But how are we to maneuver the entire fleet of Zor to this locality?"

"Our ships are going out to meet the fleet, which is approaching in full force. A battle will be started; then will follow the gradual retreat of our forces. The Zoromes will naturally follow up the advantage, being much stronger than our fleet. When they are lured to this locality, we shall send out our enveloping ray."

Professor Jameson stood aghast at the fate which lay in store for the Zoromes.

"Already," said the Mume scientist, "our fleet is going out to meet the ships of Zor."

9G2 took the professor through the interior of the minaret to explain the various features of its mechanism. The professor gazed upon a labyrinth of machinery, dials, television squares and intricate apparatus.

"Underneath these four columns is stored the power necessary for the operation of the enveloping ray."

"What is this large communicator for?" the professor asked, waving a tentacle towards a screen.

"It is to keep our ships posted concerning operations. We want to be certain they are outside the field of destruction when we cut loose with the ray. Then, too,

SPACE WAR

they must know when and where to maneuver the enemy fleet to the best advantage."

"Are we attuned to a single wavelength?"

"No. The communicator is adjustable. Our ships are all on the same wavelength, however, so there will be no trouble or unnecessary repetitions."

Under the tutelage of 9G2, Professor Jameson acquired within a few days the complete knowledge necessary for him to take orders from the central control room beneath the cylinder and execute them satisfactory. 9G2 warmly commended his ability.

During the time in which the fleet of Mumed was engaged in drawing the full force of Zorome ships into the field of the enveloping ray's influence, Professor Jameson waited, with the patience of a fatalist, for the appearance of 4N7 across the narrow bridge joining their minarets. He would be revealed as an imposter, a spying Zorome. But 4N7 did not come. 9G2 went over there several times while the professor concentrated his attentions upon some duty in the minaret. And from the minaret to their left, 7X5 came over occasionally to talk over the impending operation of the enveloping ray. Those chosen for the guidance and operation of the enveloping ray were kept posted concerning the swift succession of events occurring in space in and around the planetary system of the Mumes.

The Mumes had gathered their fighting ships and were heading to meet the cautiously approaching fleet of Zor, strung out across several million miles of space. The concentration of Mume power had sent all ships of Zor lurking in the vicinity scurrying discreetly from Mumed to less exposed positions, some of them hurrying to meet the gigantic fleet from Zor and spread the news. Behind

SPACE WAR

them came the full power of the Mume spaceships, advancing slowly yet purposeful.

What 6D4 had anticipated and counted upon actually occurred. The Mumes taunted the fleet of Zor from a tantalizing distance. Immediately the Zoromes slowed their pace as the ships from behind came up to gather in closer formation and start a flanking movement upon the Mumes. Zor was concentrating its full strength to meet and destroy the space guard of Mumed. After a bit of skirmishing with the advance battle formation, in which few ships on either side were lost, the Mumes backed off in a slow, firing retreat.

The ships of Zor fell into pursuit, determined to overtake and destroy the enemy.

"They're nearly here!" cried 9G2 in high glee. "See!" He rushed to the detector fields and pointed to a myriad of dots on the screen, all merging and partly obscuring each other. "Our ships! The enemy is not yet visible."

Apprehension struck the professor. Soon, the Zorome space fleet would be no more. A powerful, grinding noise vibrated throughout the minaret. Through a small, transparent facing of the tower, Professor Jameson saw quivers of blue light sent shimmering above the massive cylinder. The Mumes were getting ready to enclose their enemies in the projected sphere of death.

The professor ran out upon the bridge. Down in the city, excited crowds of both machine men and organic Mumes surged and milled, the latter's squat, many-legged bodies contrasting strangely with the glistening metal physiques of the machine men who predominated in numbers. All were eagerly awaiting the tragic drama to be enacted—the wholesale destruction of Zor's entire space fleet. The stragglers outside the nucleus of the

SPACE WAR

invading fleet would be dealt with afterward, when the enveloping ray had finished its grim, efficient work.

9G2 called to his assistant. "You seem nervous, 9Y1. Calm yourself. We have much to do. Nothing will go wrong; we have only to follow orders."

The professor took a fresh grip on himself. He was relaxing his mental vigilance, and that would never do. He felt thankful that 9G2 was not of a suspicious nature. For a moment the seriousness of the situation out in space had made him forget the peril of his own position, with its accompanying necessity of inner thought repression.

He took his stance by the giant communicator. Over the small instrument above his head came general orders for the fleet. He relayed them, while those in the secret city listened. All were able to hear the messages sent out to the ships of Mumed.

9G2 watched the chart anxiously. "It won't be long before the enemy will be in position for the ray. It can only be projected a half million miles into space."

A deadening sensation seized the professor. Ruin was about to fall upon his adopted world. Zor was about to be blighted by a terrific blow at its bastion of defense, the immense space fleet. Mechanically he sent out the messages, slowly, inwardly reluctant to spur the deadly events which were about to spell doom to several hundred thousand of his brethren.

"9Y1, are you feeling fit?" asked 9G2 suddenly. "Are you fully recovered from the shock of that space wreck on Tanid?"

"I am well, I believe," said the professor.

"You seem a trifle slow, uncertain. It is unlike you."

SPACE WAR

"I am sorry," he replied. "I shall try and speed up."

"Do so. The central operators seem a bit impatient."

The rumbling in the massive cylinder grew to a high pitched drone.

"There goes the ray!" the old scientist exclaimed.

Professor Jameson watched the enveloping ray from his instrument board. It commenced leaving the planet in a flat oval, followed by a long stem, the ray defense of the planet opening for its egress and then closing again about the stem. The oval grew cup-shaped, and the sides of the cup became elongated. The cup rushed out into space with startling momentum, its gigantic maw measuring many times the planet's diameter. Straight for the space fleet of Zor it rushed, appearing like a subdued star of dwindling brilliance, its latitude becoming still greater as it left the planet farther behind, connected with the secret city only by a comparatively thin wisp of bright material along which the Mumes governed its actions.

When the cup's lips reached the outermost location of the fleet, it closed up. The fleet lay imprisoned in a destructive sphere. Several ships coming in contact with its inner wall were instantly destroyed. The Mumes now held the enemy fleet at their mercy. And 6D4 knew no mercy which did not lead directly to greater conquest.

Professor Jameson desperately contemplated the mechanism about him. Would its destruction break the power of the enveloping ray? He doubted it, for 9G2 had informed him that this minaret held but one-quarter of the power necessary to supply the cylinder. All he could hope for, if he could wreck the machinery, was a possible, temporary respite from contraction of the

SPACE WAR

enveloping ray. The space fleet of Zor would still be helplessly bottled up, waiting destructive measures of the Mumes.

IV

WHILE THESE thoughts ran through his mind, the professor was interrupted by a call from general headquarters. The enveloping ray had commenced its insidious contraction, much like a leaking balloon. Eventually the ships of Zor would be huddled together and destroyed as the ray closed in upon them from all sides.

But the call came under the authority of 6D4 and ordered operations to be suspended momentarily. The globular ray suspended its shrinking process.

There came a brief pause until the reason for 6D4's sudden change of plan became apparent in the form of a message from central control.

"We have opened communication with the Zorome space fleet. Send the following message: 'You are surrounded by a wall of death. There is no escape. Even now, the walls are closing in upon your ships. I am giving you but one chance. Take it, and it means life instead of death. Turn your spaceships over to me and enter my service. You are given only a short time in which to reach a decision. 6D4.'"

"Send out the message!" cried 9G3, waving his tentacles excitedly.

The entire city listened for the message to be repeated to the condemned Zoromes. Professor Jameson hesitated a moment. The fate of worlds hung in the balance, yet he was apparently powerless. Dangerous thoughts whirl-

SPACE WAR

ed about in his mind. He was appalled by the significance of the grim situation. Conflicting emotions strove for expression.

"6D4 wants those ships and the metal bodies," 9G2 enthused. "He'll let them out a few at a time. Our ships will stand by to take them over. Enter our service! Not the Zoromes!"

The professor scarcely heard what the old scientist had said. 9G2 received a brief glimpse of the professor's tremendous mental unrest which momentarily burst the machine man's strained vigilance.

"Here—let me send it!" the old scientist snapped. "This is no job for you. You're too unstrung!"

"No! I am quite all right."

The rapid manner in which Professor Jameson gathered his composure impressed his superior. He found the wavelength of the Zoromes and received a verification from them. Then he notified them of the sender's identity.

"That's quite unnecessary," 9G2 said, fidgeting. "Give them the message and have done!"

"They seem to be a bit ragged," the professor lied. "Do you suppose we shall be able to receive a clear reply?"

"Certainly! 4N7 is maintaining a small clearance through the stem of the enveloping ray for the return message. But hurry! He will close it when the stipulated time is up."

Professor Jameson sent the message out slowly.

"You are surrounded by a wall of death. There is no escape. Even now, the walls are closing in upon your ships— This is 21MM392—captive in the subterranean city. Flash back annihilator rays along your ultra-reverse detector beams before the gap closes! This is 21MM392."

SPACE WAR

This electrifying announcement left its listeners paralyzed with astonishment. For several seconds everyone listening was dumbfounded. In this brief pause, Professor Jameson acted. Lifting a massive bar of metal, he smashed the controls which supplied the minaret's power to the central supply beneath the cylindrical superstructure.

9G2, recovering from his surprise, rushed at the professor. Professor Jameson struck up the other's tentacle as his assailant flourished a metal eater, lunging against him, grappling for supremacy. He longed for the heat ray he generally carried in his fore tentacle, but it had been lost to him during the crash on Tanid. The professor received several shocks from the pistol of 9G2 as he sent the Mumed scientist rolling out the door upon the bridge.

A third machine man came running across the bridge from the next minaret. It was 4N7. Now the professor knew that he had two enemies to fight, metal enemies equally as formidable as himself. But what difference did it make? Soon the whole city would come down upon their heads in the ruin he had invoked from the fleet of Zor. He was already doomed and knew it, fighting to live just long enough to hear a terrific roar and watch the buildings of the enveloping ray crumble into ruin.

9G2 arose to his feet. Seizing his cubed body, Professor Jameson pitched the Mume into the dizzy depth of the far off street. He turned to engage 4N7. The surprise of his life awaited him.

"21MM392!"

"6W-438!" the professor exclaimed. "Where did you come from? I thought you died in the crash on Tanid!"

SPACE WAR

"I am 4N7—to the Mumes! I suppose you are 9Y1. Run this way! Our only chance."

Professor Jameson was too dazed by the discovery of his metal comrade to think clearly by himself. He followed the running feet of 6W-438 straight through the next minaret. Beyond was a small platform, and the small space flier the professor had noticed the day of his arrival.

"Get in!" motioned 6W-438. "We have no time to lose. I heard your—"

A deafening roar split the air. The minaret behind them trembled. Professor Jameson leaped into the space flier, 6W-438 behind him. The central building with its towering cylinder had burst to pieces. Behind them, the minaret they had just quitted crumbled and fell like a shattered smokestack upon the city below. The bridge on which the flier stood gave way, and they hurtled downward into a veil of obscuring dust. The automatic gravity brakes reduced their drop.

"We must head for the tunnel!" cried 6W-438, guiding the flier back into the cavern dome. "Our fleet will destroy the city!"

As they rose, a roaring column of loose building structure hurtled about them. Another minaret had gone down. The flier shuddered under the raining debris. The city was a chaos. The enemy had suddenly turned the tables. No one thought to stop the little space flier heading for the tunnel.

Unhampered, the professor and 6W-438 raced up the tunnel and out upon the surface of Mumed. Through the breach left in the ray barrier by the destruction of the enveloping ray poured spaceships of Zor. Knowing what was soon to come, the two Zoromes sped low over the

SPACE WAR

ground to put a safe distance between themselves and the secret city which the Zoromes were already bombarding. With the explosion of the great cylinder in the subterranean city had gone the enveloping ray. The fleet of Zor was once more free and all powerful.

"Look!" 6W-438 drew the professor's attention to an object pursuing them. "Another space flier."

"From the subterranean city, too, judging from the direction of its flight."

"It is a Mume ship, like ours. We must put on greater speed to elude it."

6W-438 made the little flier turn into a right angle. He watched the ship behind them. To the perplexity of the machine men, it kept on its original course and made no effort to follow them.

"That flier is not after us," the professor said. "Someone else is escaping."

"Who can it be?"

"I have my suspicions. We must follow."

The two machine men took it for granted that the other flier, like the one they piloted, was devoid of armaments, and they boldly clung within striking distance. The two space fliers kept on through the atmosphere, 6W-438 hanging doggedly to the trail of the other craft. They passed aircraft of Mumed, the air currents roaring and sobbing past the streamlined pellets. No spaceships were seen. Most of the Mume spaceships were outside and at grips with the ships of Zor.

Behind them, the two Zoromes knew that there would soon be individual combats all over the planet, Mume craft against Zorome spaceships. The termination of the war was close at hand.

They were approaching one of the ray locks above

SPACE WAR

a Mume city when a startling announcement from the flier ahead to the city officials confirmed Professor Jame-son's growing suspicions.

"Open the ray-lock at once! This is 6D4! I go to join my fleet."

"Take after him," the professor directed 6W-438. "Don't let him get away."

"Zorome spaceships are coming up in our rear," observed 6W-438. "They will fire on both of us when they come closer."

"We should be through the ray-lock by then. They will have it closed behind us by the time our spaceships reach here."

6W-438 shot the flier ahead so swiftly that it wavered sickeningly from side to side. The little ship ahead of them dashed up the cylindrical passage between palpitating rays.

"If we ever hit the rays with this ship, it will mean farewell," warned 6W-438 as he slowed their mad speed to approach the opening above the atmosphere. "These Mume ships do not shunt off the barrier rays like our ships."

The little flier of 6D4 put on a burst of tremendous speed as it hurtled from the tunnel into unrestricted space. The distance gain was so sudden that 6W-438 almost lost trace of the other craft on his detector board.

"Where do you think he is going?" asked 6W-438.

"Not to join the fleet. He is going the wrong way."

"His plans of empire are dying," was 6W-438's suggestive statement.

Through space the two fliers raced. Several times they passed the vicinity of Zorome ships, both undergoing bombardment. Charges of destruction and flaring rays

SPACE WAR

slashed dangerously close, but the swift little ships were elusive targets and their diminutive bulk soon passed beyond range of the fleet detectors. Once they passed a group of speeding Mume ships, but 6D4 failed to slacken his speed, nor did he reply to the queries hurled at the two as they rushed past and off the detectors.

"6W-438, there is still another who survived the crash on Tanid," the professor stated. "Do you think that he, too, may be a Zorome?"

"I wonder. When I learned about you, I believed you to be a Mume and avoided you, fearing detection."

"Just as I avoided you for the same reason," added the professor.

"The Mumes believed me one of them without question."

"An organic Zorome survived that crash, too, and was killed by the Mumes," Professor Jameson said. "And perhaps a few of the Mumes survived the crash itself. But if they did they never lived to know about it."

"What do you mean?" queried 6W-438.

"From what I was told the organic Zorome who survived saw the ships of the Mumes coming and knew our chances of survival were better than his. He made sure that all the Mumes were dead before the investigators came."

"It sounds reasonable."

"What makes it more plausible is the strange fact that when the Mumes entered the wreck they saw this Zorome about to finish me with a ray gun."

"It was a ruse," offered 6W-438.

"Exactly."

"Then we owe our lives to this organic Zorome. Who was he?"

SPACE WAR

"We shall probably never know. It was one of the four we had on board our ship."

The little space flier hung close to the path of the fleeing Mume. The two Zoromes knew that 6D4 must be aware of their presence, yet he made no effort at communication. Did he wish to keep his identity a secret, or did he know them as enemies? It puzzled the professor that 6D4 did not try and throw them off the track by tricky maneuvers. The leader of the Mumes kept onward in a straight, unswerving line.

"He's heading for Ablen," ventured 6W-438.

6W-438 had his assertion borne out as 6D4 headed directly for Ablen, two worlds farther from the sun than Mumed. Ablen shone like a quarter moon against a velvet shroud of darkness; beyond it was a shroud punctuated profusely by brilliant star clusters.

6D4 made a half turn to the planet and landed on the morning quarter of the world. The two Zoromes swiftly followed, not losing him for one moment. As 6D4's flier sank into Ablen's atmosphere, the two machine men of Zor made up part of the distance between themselves and their enemy.

The space flier of 6D4 gradually decelerated, coming to rest under the shelter of overhanging vegetation which climbed the steep sides of a deep valley. Eyes other than those of the two machine men swiftly descending in their pursuing craft also saw the flier of 6D4 bump and skid to a stop on the valley floor. Those above lost sight of the little space flier under the screen of the verdant foliage. 6W-438 dropped their flier a short distance from the spot where 6D4 had landed.

The two machine men left their craft and hurried to where the ship of 6D4 had dropped through the trees.

SPACE WAR

They found the little ship at the termination of a long furrow it had ploughed in the ground. It lay on one side, the door partly open.

6W-438 approached the overturned craft cautiously, the professor covering the entrance with his metal eater held poised for 6D4's appearance. 6W-438 looked inside.

"It's empty!"

Professor Jameson stepped forth in sudden alarm. Rough, pitted spots were appearing and growing rapidly on 6W-438's cubed body just below his head. The professor radiated a mental alarm and discharged a sustained fire in the direction of an agitated clump of bushes fully two hundred feet distant from the flier.

"This way!" the professor exclaimed, heading for the spot where a faint movement had recently stirred the bushes. "If our metal heads were not those of Zorome composition, you would have been dead by now!"

"Our Mume bodies are vulnerable, though. We must use caution."

A flitting, metal figure disappeared behind a pile of large rocks just as Professor Jameson peered through the bushes. Risking all to be the first to fire, knowing that his own head would resist the powers of 6D4's weapon, the professor ran for the boulder where he had last seen 6D4. A hurried examination disclosed that the fleeing Mume had taken no stand here but had hurried onward. 6W-438 joined the professor, and together they continued at a fast pace along the valley floor.

The valley was narrow, and they knew that 6D4 could not slide past them and regain either ship. Their stop had given him a good start, and they saw nothing of him; only occasionally were there tracks on softer portions of the ground. The valley grew still narrower and steeper

SPACE WAR

after several miles of running, the vegetation disappearing, to be replaced by rough, rocky walls.

"There he is!" exclaimed 6W-438.

The professor looked to where his comrade pointed with waving tentacle. Fully two hundred feet above them, 6D4 was climbing rapidly, pushing with his four metal legs against the rough crags, while with his tentacles he pulled, seized and hauled himself upward.

The two Zoromes leveled their pistols at the self-styled emperor who had fled from the ruin which had fallen upon his colossal plan. 6D4 had evidently seen them; he scurried along a ledge halfway up the side of the valley wall and disappeared behind a rocky escarpment.

He soon reappeared and unloosed a flood of metallic disintegration upon them. Professor Jameson felt one of his tentacles drop from him and fall clattering among the small stones as he and 6W-438 ran for shelter around the jutting formation of rock. Knowledge that their heads were invulnerable to the metal eaters caused the two Zoromes to keep their eyes on the position of 6D4, ready to fire the moment he left the protection of the ledge. 6D4 held the best position, but already his metal head was badly scarred from the sniping powers of the two Zoromes.

Concealed, with the exception of his metal head and one tentacle, the professor suddenly experienced the surprise of having the tentacle melted away beneath his weapon; the latter fell clattering and rolling to the center of the valley floor. In dismay, Professor Jameson saw it slowly eaten away by the opportune aim of 6D4. But 6W-438 was not idle, and far above them 6D4 hastily grabbed at his metal eater with another tentacle. The

SPACE WAR

one with which he had been holding the weapon had melted in two.

Far above 6D4, on the rim of the valley, indistinct figures flitted in and out of view.

"What are they?" the professor queried, ducking back from a renewed effort on the part of 6D4 to annihilate them.

"Ablenox, I believe," was 6W-438's venture. "I saw them none too plainly, but they were not machine men; of that, I am positive."

"There they are," the professor announced. "They're doing something up there."

Far above them, several hulking brutes were pushing and tugging on a large object which was not yet in sight. Their low, sloping foreheads denoted a minimum of intelligence. Four mighty muscled arms on each of the creatures bulged and strained as a large rock was rolled into view.

"They're going to roll that down on 6D4!" said 6W-438 in rapid understanding. "The Mumes oppress and enslave them. The Ablenox see a chance for retribution."

In the minds of the dull-witted creatures above, the two Zoromes read an inherited hatred against the machine men who were the bane of their existence. Now they saw a chance for revenge.

The combined strength of the Ablenox brought the massive boulder to the edge of the valley's rim where they poised it on end to be sent hurtling down upon 6D4, who lay on the ledge below them. The two Zoromes peered from their positions and made no effort to acquaint the doomed tyrant with his impending danger. Unaware of the menace above him, 6D4 fired viciously

SPACE WAR

at the two metal heads peering out from a rocky jutt near the valley floor.

"The Ablenox deserve vengeance more than we," was the professor's consensus.

The two Zoromes waited. With a united effort, the Ablenox sent the great boulder juggernauting into the valley. It struck an outcropping of rock which pulverized to powder, bouncing angrily towards the ledge where 6D4 lay secreted. The Mume looked up just in time to see the oncoming boulder rush down through the air. It was the final, split-second realization in the artificially prolonged life of the cruel, empire dreamer. Both ledge and 6D4 were crushed and broken, to be sent sliding into the valley, small bits of metal mingled with a roaring conglomeration of onrushing avalanche.

"Run!" cried the professor.

The two machine men raced down the valley, away from the sliding, rolling tons of rock debris which thundered upon their recent position. Their metal bodies were hit with flying stones and ground particles of rock, but their retreat was a safe one.

"That was close!" stated 6W-438 as they ceased running to look back at the mass of rock which choked the valley. "We cannot go back the way we came!"

"We'll have to climb out."

The two machine men started a careful ascent of the rugged wall. 6W-438 looked up.

"The Ablenox! They're getting another stone ready!"

Quickly, the machine men dropped their holds and tumbled to the valley floor.

"They believe us to be Mumes!" was the professor's dismayed discovery. "We must let them know that we mean no harm!"

SPACE WAR

In vain the machine men concentrated their mental faculties upon the Ablenox who followed them along the valley's rim, watching them from above, waiting for the two Zoromes to start climbing. The Ablenox knew nothing of Zoromes or Mumes. They only knew that all machine men were cruel oppressors of their race. They never lost an opportunity to kill one although such opportunities were rare.

At the professor's suggestion they ran along the valley floor, the Ablenox keeping pace with them on each side. But the strain eventually told on flesh and blood, just as the professor had expected. The machine men rapidly outdistanced the Ablenox, and when they believed they had put a safe distance between themselves and the menacing creatures, they hurriedly scaled one of the valley walls.

They were none too soon, for the grim, determined Ablenox came up and commenced hurling rocks at them just as they reached the rim of the valley. The rocks they threw were small ones, the Ablenox having no time to roll up a boulder; these were either dodged or clattered harmlessly from the bodies of the machine men.

The situation became reversed, however, as the machine men climbed out of the valley. The Ablenox turned tail and beat a hasty retreat, the two Zoromes making no attempts to follow.

Coming back to the tree-verdured vicinity where they had left the space fliers, they found to their disappointment that both ships had been completely wrecked and stripped of everything movable. The Ablenox had seen to that. What they were unable to steal, they had destroyed in an orgy of vandalism.

"We're marooned on Ablen," said 6W-438.

SPACE WAR

“We have been in worse spots than this,” the professor reminded his companion. “We have only to wait until a ship comes to Ablen and finds us.”

“It may be a Mume ship.”

“I have an idea that there will soon be a scarcity of Mume ships.”

“Then you believe that we have won the war?”

Professor Jameson countered with a query of his own.

“What do you think?”

THREE: LABYRINTH

I

INTO THE DAZZLING, sun-lit system of seven worlds sped the machine men's spaceship. A consultation between the professor and 744U-21, joint leaders of the new expedition, had decided upon investigation of the sixth planet. Their telescopes had found that the three inner planets did not rotate, and closer examination of the fourth and fifth planets revealed that they lacked an atmosphere. The parent star was of unusual brilliance and incandescence, and the machine men knew well how hot and how cold the opposite hemispheres of these airless worlds must be, unprotected by an insular blanket.

The new expedition had left Zor not long after the termination of the war with Mume. Professor Jameson—rescued from Ablen by a passing cruiser—and 744U-21 had gathered what was left of their old expedition, augmenting this force with many new personalities. Among the adventure-scarred veterans still pregnable to the lure of the mysterious cosmos, and who had come through the war with the Mumes with undamaged heads were 6W-438, 20R-654, 41C-98, 29G-75, 6N-24, 47X-09 and 2Y-4. Then there were three of the converts from the ranks of the Tripeds, Glrq, Ravlt and Jbf, known among the Zoromes as 454ZQ2, 92ZQ153 and 5ZQ35.

Thirty-one new recruits made up the remainder of the

LABYRINTH

metal crew. Of these, less than half had seen experience with former expeditions. New to the life of the cosmos was 119M-5, formerly known as Zora. Bext, now known as 12W-62, was also a new member of the expedition.

"Parts of the planet we are approaching seem well covered with vegetation," observed 41C-98 from his position at one of the telescopes. "It is a good sign."

"Yes, but what of those rough, bare spots?" queried 744U-21. "There are plenty of them."

"Desert, I should say," was 41C-98's reply. "They are still quite difficult to make out."

Professor Jameson, at one of the telescopes, peered intently at the gibbous surface of the sun-lit portion which swelled in his vision as the spaceship raced into the planet's gravitational attraction. It was indeed a huge world, twice the size of Earth, although less dense.

This world boasted four moons, three of them insignificant, well under a hundred miles in diameter. The largest of the four possessed a diameter of over one hundred and fifty miles. Still, as moons went, it was a very small one.

As the spaceship plunged nearer the surface, the professor saw what appeared to be rough splotches of yellow scattered among the fertile portions of the hemisphere they were approaching. They appeared to be barren. Vertical vision failed to give the professor a satisfying perspective, so he leveled his telescope towards the horizon to obtain more of a lateral view at the price of clarity, atmospheric aberration and density blurring and distorting the yellow formations.

But closer investigation proved that they were buildings of a sort, proclaiming centers of intelligence.

LABYRINTH

"Head for one of the lighter areas," he told 20R-654. "They appear to be cities."

744U-21 took a long, searching look as the ship headed for a stately pile of buildings near the edge of a vast purple and green forest. In the distance lay a gigantic area of smooth azure, evidently a huge lake or sea. From it radiated tiny, irregular ribbons of silver, one of them forming a semicircle about the cluster of buildings they were approaching.

The spaceship of Zor came to rest in the shadow of purple foliage a short distance from the city. Twenty Zoromes were selected to stay with the ship which was to take off while the remainder of the machine men entered the city on foot. The Zoromes had learned to use caution on landing on a new planet.

Professor Jameson and 744U-21 were among those to first set foot on the surface of the world. The twenty-three machine men walked slowly towards the walled city.

For a short distance, they progressed beneath the shadow of green and purple foliage, rising from the ground on rusty brown trunks, not quite tree and almost spreading vine, a strange hybrid of botanic structure. Through the fringe of canopy in the woodland copse they caught occasional glimpses of yellow surfaced domes and walls. Suddenly they burst into the open before the high wall surrounding the mysterious piles.

"It is old," said the professor. "See the break in the wall where a portion has fallen inward? We can enter that way."

Other evidences of antiquity were also discernible as the machine men approached the gaping fissure in the wall. Lichens of various descriptions, some short and

LABYRINTH

close-cropped, others a hanging fringe, decorated various portions of the tall domes seen from without the walls.

"Do you suppose the city is abandoned?" queried 744U-21. "Its appearance suggests a lack of life inside its walls."

"Its builders may have died long ago," offered 47X-09.

"How old do you think—"

The mental remark of 12W-62 was never finished. The thought died there, as both his own and his listeners' attention became focused on a flitting figure which stood limned in the fissure of the wall for a second, half crouching, then leaping out of sight beyond. So brief and indistinct was the sight of this apparition that none of the machine men could describe what they had actually seen. There came to them the sounds of a faint scurrying on the other side of the wall, and then once more there reigned the perpetual silence which had greeted them, a silence now broken only by dull thuds and the scraping and clattering of metal feet as the Zoromes climbed through the break in the wall.

Filing through over the rough, broken chunks of fallen rock, now powdered and worn in spots, the machine men paused and looked about them. To all appearances it was a dead city, un conjecturable antiquity. Most of the towering stone structures seemed fairly intact, though here and there lay scatterings of archaic ruins. A general air of lifelessness and quiet lay over the silent buildings. The parasitic growth, unhampered and prolific at the very doors of the edifices, savored of desertion, a wholesale exodus of animation. Yet the metal travelers felt probing, invisible eyes upon them in spite of the apparent desolation and disuse. The flitting figure, seen

LABYRINTH

momentarily in the rupture of the great wall, was instrumental in arousing this suspicion. Then, too, the machine men's telepathic faculties felt vaguely the workings of mental perceptions other than their own.

With eyes staring from all sides of their heads, the machine men of Zor peered intently into all windows and breaks in the masonry from their vantage point just inside the wall. But if they were watched, their watchers remained well out of sight within the darkened areas beyond window squares, seeing yet unseen.

The professor scanned the immediate vicinity for some signs of life, noting that the building materials consisted of rough rock cemented together with a mortar the same color as that of the rocks themselves. The only difference lay in the sparkling surface of the rocks, contrasting sharply with the dull cement work. The rocks were unhewn, the roughness and crudeness of which was made up for by the lasting qualities of the cement, presenting a not unpleasing design. The cement itself was of extreme durability and strength. In most of the ruins, it was the rock which had broken and crumbled.

"Do you seek the creature who ran from the wall?" came the mental query from the circling spaceship above.

"Where did he go?" 744U-21 asked.

"Into that opening low to the ground near the wall itself," came the reply. "There are others like the same creature in the city."

"Into that cellar," said the professor, pointing to the triangular opening at the very base of a building which reared its bulk not far from the wall. "That is where it went."

Ray destroyer held ready, 12W-62 crouched low and pushed his way into the triangular hole, the professor

LABYRINTH

and 6W-438 behind him. Inside the opening there was a drop of several feet. They found themselves on a smooth rock floor. Stygian gloom lay beyond the aura cast by the bright triangle through which they had entered. 12W-62 and 6W-438 put their body lights into use.

In the bright glare, the machine men saw several figures cower close to the opposite wall. There were seven of them, the strangest looking animals the professor had ever looked upon in all his travels through the cosmos.

Like the machine men, they walked on four legs; jointed in different places, however. They seemed to have no ankles, their lower leg bones terminating in soft, padded discs. Their upper appendages consisted of long arms like the thin, jointed legs of spiders. There must have been a dozen of these upper appendages.

The body represented about the same dimensions as the body of a man, although the torso trended towards an ovoid form. The head was strangest of all, being exceedingly diminutive. Its largest feature consisted of a loose, flabby mouth with hanging lips which gave the creature a crestfallen, woebegone expression. Nostrils were visible, though the faculty of hearing was not apparent in exterior detail.

The eyes were weird, yet practical. There were four of them, each optic situated at the termination of an angular pedicel rising some seven or eight inches out of the small head. These snaky antennae twisted and turned in all directions. At present, they were all bent towards the source of artificial light, curious and blinking.

It was unmistakeable that unnameable fear ruled them; they were afraid of the machine men. There seemed to be no escape, no visible doors or remaining windows, yet, when 12W-62 approached them, one leaped upon the

LABYRINTH

shoulder of another and jumped upward out of sight. Another did the same thing with surprising agility.

"We must seize one of them," Professor Jameson said. "They seem intelligent enough for questioning."

6W-438 sprang forward with 12W-62 just as two more of the creatures leaped on the backs of their companions and hopped upward out of sight.

"There's an opening in the floor above!" called 6W-438 as he and 12W-62 each seized one of the wailing, terrified things who struggled to be free.

The wild scrambling to escape offered little resistance to the machine men, proving futile, bruising and scraping the bodies of the strange things. The professor found himself too late to capture the remaining one, but two were sufficient. The last of the seven leaped up and grasped something which dangled from above, then disappeared. The professor suspected that it was a leg of his companion. This reflected well on their courage even though they had fled; it proved their fidelity to one another.

The two captives were brought out into the daylight. They were questioned, but as the professor had suspected, their intelligence proved low, barely above the mentality of beasts.

With difficulty, the machine men impressed the fact upon the two captives that none of their kind was to be harmed. How universal was the immediate supposition that a stranger was to be feared. Ignorance and low intelligence invoked fear. It is the law.

The machine men learned from the muddled replies and strange mental conceptions of the creatures—Queegs, they called themselves—that they had not built the city—that no one had built it. The city had always

LABYRINTH

been there, like the trees and rocks. They lived there, yes. Their people had always lived there. It was their home.

Darkness fell not long after. The machine men of Zor let the two Queegs go and returned to the spaceship.

The machine men were only mildly interested in the old city and its current inhabitants. If these were descendants of the original builders, the race had certainly degenerated. But the professor did not believe the present inhabitants to be related to the builders.

The following morning the machine men once more returned to the old city. This time they did not find it necessary to seek out the Queegs. They came from their hiding places timidly yet trustingly, urged by an uncontrollable curiosity.

With the Queegs, the machine men set out to explore the city. The Queegs inhabited the ground floors of the buildings, few of them ever venturing into the upper chambers. They were not pressed for room. Numbering less than five hundred in population, the Queegs found the city much too large for their needs.

Although the Queegs knew cooking, they wore no clothes or other accoutrements of civilization. Nudism was not always a mark of barbarism or savagery. Clothes were more or less of a peculiarity, usually worn for protection against temperature, or as ornamentation or harness for weapons and implements.

The Queegs were metal workers, many of their utensils and implements made of metal, yet the weapons with which they killed their meat supply were made of wood, even to the tips. It seemed inexplicable.

The machine men finally gathered that the Queegs believed that metal wore out sooner. One old Queeg was insistent that a metal weapon was good for but one

LABYRINTH

hunt while a wooden prototype lasted for many. The Zoromes dismissed this as one of the mental vagaries of this strange race.

It seemed to the professor that their stay on this planet was to be a short one, another mildly interesting exploration, of which there had been several since they had left Zor. The events of the expedition were scarcely worthy of mention beside other more outstanding adventures of the machine men. 744U-21 discussed with the professor the advisability of leaving and examining the outer planets of the system.

The Queegs spoke of a country several miles away where they went to obtain their meat supply. From the mental impressions of the many-armed creatures, the machine men conceived a barren, desolate country devoid of vegetation, supporting only the animals which the Queegs killed for food. The Queegs called them ohbs. Their environment, however, the machine men doubted.

"Preposterous!" 744U-21 exclaimed. "It is another of their crazy tales—like that of the wooden weapons. We know that animals do not live without vegetation. They must have sustenance."

"Perhaps a very scanty moss grows there, or short, sparse grass," offered the professor. "These people seem prone to exaggeration."

"Or the animals they kill may possess the ability to go without food for long periods of time," 6W-438 supplemented, "taking refuge in the protection of the barren territories from a hereditary enemy—the Queegs, perhaps—coming to the fertile areas only when they must eat, at rare intervals."

"There is such a barren country not far distant," said 20R-654. "We saw it from the spaceship, you remember."

LABYRINTH

"We shall go with them on one of their hunts," was 744U-21's decision. "We shall learn if these strange conditions are true, and after that we can visit the outer planets before leaving the system. There seems to be nothing extraordinary here."

II

SIXTEEN MACHINE men set out for the hunting territory the next day, not long after sunrise. The Queegs promised they would pack back meat to last them for a long time. Fully thirty Queegs comprised the hunting party, armed with their long, wooden lances, points hardened in the fire and sharpened.

The tireless machine men adapted their pace to suit the Queegs. Soon the lush verdure of purple and green grew thinner, the trees and bushes' becoming farther apart, until they eventually died out at the edge of the badlands.

They were truly bad, not only from the standpoint of fertility, but bad for traveling as well. Professor Jameson could not see enough sustenance to keep an insect alive. The walking was extremely harsh and treacherous, the ground rough, pitted and calcareous. Depressions, ranging from tiny pits to great yawning caves, dotted the lifeless expanse. The machine men saw outcroppings of raw metal from time to time.

"Iron, mostly," 8L-404 observed.

"And some nickel, too," added 12W-62. "It would seem to be a miner's paradise, if he were not looking for rare earths."

"It's a walker's nightmare," 6W-438 reflected as he

LABYRINTH

scrambled out of the rough hole into which he had slipped.

The Queegs made easier progress than the machine men. Besides being more accustomed to this jagged terrain, they were adapted to more secure footing. Their four pads, soft and shaggy, found a grip while the flat, smooth metal soles of the machine men slipped and scraped, stopping only when they met a projection between their feet and the planet's gravity.

They had come about four miles into the desert. Professor Jameson knew from the declination of the sun that the day was well into the afternoon. A day on this world ran approximately thirty-seven Earthly hours.

"Where are the ohbs you came to kill?" he asked of the Queegs.

"We should have seen some of them before this," was the reply. "It cannot be long now."

"Look!" shouted a Queeg. He was a short distance to one side of their advance. "There is one!"

He pointed with his lance. The machine men looked, but saw only the same rough, barren landscape, the same pitted scars and occasional outcrop of ore. The Queegs became excited and ran towards the indicated spot. One of them lifted his weapon over his head and let it fly. Not until the lance had struck quivering into the side of an indistinguishable gray mass did the machine men discern the quarry.

With triumphant yells and much excited jabbering, the Queegs hauled their catch out from a small indentation. It was unlike anything the machine men had expected. In fact, they had scarcely known what to expect, so vague were the descriptions by the weak-minded Queegs. The animal, if it could be called such, appeared

LABYRINTH

like a gigantic slug, fully half as large as one of the metal cubes comprising the body of a Zorome. As the Queegs hauled it out of the depression, the machine men saw that the underside of the ohb was possessed of the same concentric rings that governed the movements of snakes and worms. From all appearances, the ohb was an invertebrate, presenting a pulpy, unprotected mass of sluggish motion.

"Our theory of migration is gone," said 6W-438. "Those things can't move in and out of here as fast as they would necessarily have to."

He looked ruefully at his scratched, roughened metal feet and then back at the soft, unprotected body of the ohb.

The Queegs ran on ahead, excited with the search. Lances were lifted back and cast powerfully. The Queegs were fair marksmen; beside, their prey basked unheeding in the sunlight, the two supple antennae on their heads waving lazily.

The term "head" was a misnomer. The ohbs were actually all body, possessing no appendages, their only features consisting of several small, warty knobs near the base of the two antennae. There was no visible mouth.

The machine men hastened onward to catch up with the Queegs who were killing more of the strange animals, now abounding in more plentiful numbers.

"This is no hunt," said 744U-21. "It is a slaughter. Those things have no protection, no way of escape. They are so dull, they do not even realize their danger."

"How do they exist?" asked 119M-5.

"That is difficult to tell," said the professor. "It is possible that they are like plants in the respect that they gain sustenance largely from sunlight."

LABYRINTH

"They would die on a cloudy day."

"Unless they were able to store up such energy to be held in reserve."

One of the ohbs doubled its body and gave a high jump into the air after a lance had, from a careless mis-cast, pierced it slightly, surprising the machine men with its unexpected motion. The ohb wriggled quickly into a hole and out of sight, taking the Queeg's lance with it. the Queegs sought to catch it, but the ohb escaped down a tortuous passage leading into the ground.

The machine men noticed that from time to time the smooth skins of the ohbs became overspread with a network of capillary brilliance, like wet punkwood in the dark. At such times, their antennae shivered perceptibly, and others of the creatures came close and gathered around, all intent upon a particular section of the ground.

"They seem to possess a silent means of communication," was 6W-438's opinion, "but of a low order of intelligence."

"It is beyond our perception," 744U-21 said.

The Queegs were leaving their victims where they lay, intending to pick them up on the way back. They plunged further and further into the barren country, and the dull-witted ohbs became more numerous. In the meantime, the machine men pondered the question as to how the things lived. It was 41C-98 who offered the most plausible solution.

"They feed upon some substance which the ground yields."

"But it is not fertile. The ground here is sterile."

"Sterile of organic life," 41C-98 argued. "These things probably derive their sustenance from chemicals in the soil."

LABYRINTH

The ground grew rougher, the small pits becoming larger and deeper, the angular caves losing their mysterious extremities into the darkness. The corrugated lips of great cavern mouths yawned open here and there, often joined by ragged fissures of varying depth, the sides mottled and perforated, an insane design of uncertainty, of chaos.

The machine men found their progress growing more perilous. Small projections broke off and sent them rolling into crevices. 744U-21 bade the Queegs go no farther, stressing the uselessness of it. Already, the ohbs were so numerous that it was with difficulty the members of the party, both Zoromes and Queegs, avoided stumbling over them. The Queegs had already killed more of the ohbs than they and their metal guests together could possibly carry back to the ancient city.

To the Queegs, this slaughter and the roaming among the pitted caves of the barren country represented their only recreation, and they were not inclined to return; but urged by the machine men, they turned back. Slowly, keeping to the better areas of travel, they picked their way back in the direction of the distant forest, now but a heavy, purple line on the horizon.

One of the ohbs sat on a thin ridge in the line of their advance, its antennae waving wildly. 6W-438 gave it a shove down a declivity. Instantly, it shone all over with fine radiance, a sudden palpitation of intricate lace-work done in fire. In the bottom of the cavity where it came to rest, its antennae waved excitedly while the palpitations of light became soft, dying glows wandering here and there over the soft-skinned body. A general unrest became manifest among the surrounding ohbs, their antennae waving in aroused agitation, but as the

LABYRINTH

one 6W-438 had shoved down the spine of rock became quiet once more, the others subsided, too.

Further along, one of the Queegs pushed an ohb unceremoniously off their chosen path, shoving it with his many arms and prodding it with his lance. There was no repetition of the phenomenon following 6W-438's act. The grazing herds on every side remained quiet. Exhausted by their travel the Queegs made no attempts to kill more of the still numerous ohbs.

47B-97 took a false step and lost his balance, rolling and clattering amid a shower of loosened rock materials into an oblong cavity where, with tentacles tangled and seeking to break his fall, he landed upon two of the ohbs.

Instantly the bright glow previously seen upon the creatures spread threadlike over the two soft bodies, and their antennae wildly vibrated. The two ohbs became virtually white with the cold light overspreading their bodies as 47B-97 scrambled to his feet and started climbing the rough side of the hole into which he had fallen. It was then that both Queegs and Zoromes saw the two ohbs execute strange maneuvers with a quickness their appearance belied. They leaped upward and clung to the machine man, their bodies burning with the cold radiance. The ohbs possessed no appendages, yet somehow or other they clung on. 47B-97 shook them off and climbed higher. Once more the ohbs leaped up and gripped him, one upon his peaked head, the other hanging to a metal leg. He shook the latter off, but in so doing lost his grip, tumbling back to the bottom. With two tentacles he unwrapped the excited ohb which clung to his head, while the one he had shaken from his leg now took a new hold upon his cubed body.

LABYRINTH

Aroused from surprise Professor Jameson blazed away with his heat ray at the radiant ohb which clung to 47B-97's cubed body. The ohb writhed in agitation, the light of its body appearing to struggle with the burning intensity cast from above. Stubbornly, the ohb refused to loose its hold; not until the professor had burned clear to its center did the thing actually die. Even then it still clung until a frantically flailing tentacle of 47B-97 smashed away the charred remains.

Meanwhile 2Y-4 had leaped into the cavity with his ray gun held ready. 47B-97 had now torn the second ohb from his head but both tentacles were enfolded by the ohb, apparently fused to them in some manner.

"It is eating me!" cried 47B-97. "It is eating my metal body!"

"Metal eaters!" Professor Jameson exclaimed.

The machine men and Queegs were too busy watching 2Y-4 dispatch the second ohb with the ray gun to look about them. Coming from every direction was a vast legion of hurrying ohbs, their antennae quivering, slight radiations of anticipation suffusing their leaping, crawling bodies. They were being called to the feast, a feast of virgin metal which the gluttonous appetites of their two companions had revealed.

47B-97's body was roughened and corroded where the two ohbs had clung. The metal had changed color slightly.

Several of the ohbs suddenly appeared over the opposite side of the cavity leaping down upon 2Y-4 and 47B-97. A cry of alarm escaped one of the Queegs on the outskirts of the gathering as a rush of ohbs knocked him down and wriggled over his fallen body to gain the pure metal they sought.

LABYRINTH

His cry aroused the machine men. The Zoromes spread a net of death about them with their ray guns, while the Queegs, alarmed yet stupidly unafraid of something which they never before had cause to fear, soon exhausted their supply of wooden lances. The professor now understood why the Queegs used wooden weapons because metal points soon wore out.

Wave upon wave of the creatures flopped themselves towards the Zoromes and their organic allies. Resolutely, the machine men burned them down, but the reinforcements more than replaced their dead. As far as the eye could see, from every hollow, every ridge, every cave, the aroused ohbs crowded steadily in the direction of one focal point, their antennae waving excitedly while enlivened currents of unnatural light permeated their bodies. Upon coming in contact with the Zoromes, this light increased to a dazzling intensity while remaining more or less internal, spreading no rays.

With no regard for self-preservation, the ohbs seemed possessed of but one desire: to glut themselves on pure, refined metal. Nothing but death could stop their mad charge.

"They're coming faster than we can kill them!" cried 744U-21.

Professor Jameson looked out over the barren country. On all sides, the ground had magically become alive, forming a rising mound of living animosity. Machine men were no longer finding it possible to hold the irresistible horde at a distance. The dazzling bodies curled about their metal feet and leaped among their threshing tentacles. Thousands of the ohbs poured forth like devils of the deep.

A rushing wave of the insidious creatures, unimpeded

LABYRINTH

by the Zoromes, suddenly piled down into the cavity on 2Y-4 and 47B-97. A sudden feeling of hopelessness overcame the professor. The two were in a death trap, doomed. They all were, unless this rushing tide of destroying life, these apparently indomitable myriads of impending death, were not stopped.

The professor stood face to face with the inevitable. Even with sufficient time, the machine men could never kill all the ohbs. The huge slugs knew only a satiated appetite or death. There was no driving them off.

Probably they were unaware of death. Appetite and the means to satisfy it furnished their one purpose of living. To them, eating was living; the two were synonymous. Even had the machine men been able to kill the ohbs as fast as they came within range, the power of their weapons was not inexhaustible.

If the spaceship were only hovering above them—but it was not. Nothing like this had been anticipated, and the spaceship was far away.

Professor Jameson shared his fears with 744U-21.

"If we might only gain a brief respite," the latter said.

The ohbs were leaping close and squirming along the ground, seizing the machine men's legs, glowing brilliantly from contact with the metal. Queegs were bowled over and crushed by the weight of the ohbs as they attempted to run and escape. They were frightened by the vast, inconceivable numbers of their recent prey. To the Queegs, it seemed that they were assailed by an overwhelming mountain of flesh which threatened to crush their bones and squeeze from them their very life; a suffocating wave of organisms threatening their life breath, barring them from escape. The worst terror of

LABYRINTH

all was the complete reversal of the attitude of the ohbs.

Yet the ohbs paid the Queegs no more attention than they did the rough, metal-veined crags over which they clambered to seize upon the virgin metal of the Zoromes. The Queegs were but another obstacle, yet they were too demoralized to think of this.

The machine men of Zor had met with the unusual, the unexpected. Invincible to most of the dangers which menaced flesh and blood, they were now assailed by death in a different form. Harmless to the Queegs, the ohbs represented the doom peril to the Zoromes.

While the machine men fought off the grim, disgusting creatures, a cry reached them from under the heaving, glowing maelstrom of bodies which more than half filled the cavity into which 47B-97 had fallen, and into which 2Y-4 had confidently jumped to aid his fellow machine man.

"21MM392! 744U-21! Help! We are helpless! They are all about us! They are turning our metal parts to a fluid which they can absorb! If our heads are eaten through, we are doomed!"

Professor Jameson and 744U-21 blazed their weapons into the horrid, twisting mass of struggling ohbs. Charred bodies vibrated, glowing dark and rigid with death, the intense brilliance expiring with fleeing life, yet there were too many of the things to offer hope of rescue.

"We are weighed down!" cried 47B-97. "We cannot move!"

"Two of my legs are gone!" was 2Y-4's desperate entreaty for aid. "They have eaten into my metal cubel My brain pan is becoming thin! Do—"

2Y-4's thoughts were suddenly stilled. 744U-21 lifted his ray gun as the frightful horde in the cavity became

LABYRINTH

augmented with new arrivals. The hole was now filled to its rim. Other ohbs flopped, squirmed and jumped over their predecessors to be at the machine men. 47B-97 still cast excited thought waves which abruptly stilled. The professor glimpsed insanity in those final moments.

III

"WE MUST TRY and fight our way to that large tunnel opening over there!" said Professor Jameson. "At least, they will be able to approach us from but one direction, while here we are entirely surrounded."

"To the tunnel mouth!" cried 744U-21. "Run for it!"

Even as they broke into a run, smashing over the hills and clumps of moving ohbs, the machine men saw that from the tunnel there still issued a stream of the creatures, although the turmoil of the advancing thousands seemed to be slackening. Each step they made brought forth a glowing suffusion of light. Taking advantage of the duller senses of the ohbs, they progressed swiftly, the remains of their two companions still acting as a magnet for the hurrying ohbs.

Into the darkness of the ragged maw they dashed, the gigantic hole yawning with crooked-toothed mouth to receive them. Leaping over the hurrying ohbs they ran into the deeper, darker recesses of the dismal retreat. The ohbs were animated with but one desire, to get to the heralded feast as quickly as possible, a feast of virgin metal announced by the oscillations of many quivering antennae.

Those upon which the machine men stepped grew suddenly brilliant, faltering in their hurried march, cross-

LABYRINTH

swept and confused by this new attraction, yet pushed on inexorably by their following companions. Strangely, the machine men, the object of the ohbs' desire, escaped right through their ranks in the opposite direction, like the ship which miraculously rides the crest of the tidal wave.

The ohbs were devoid of reason, actuated by instincts; all their instincts were guided by the swarming activity where the two machine men were being rapidly absorbed by some favored dozen or more of the ohbs fortunate enough to have arrived earliest at the banquet.

So long as the Zoromes did not pause in their flight over and through the ranks of these organic, metal absorbers, just so long their possible survival existed.

The last machine man to enter the tunnel caught a final glimpse of a rising mound of twisting, repulsive bodies over the remains of 2Y-4 and 47B-97, a living shroud, a multi-active gravestone. Surviving Queegs shrieked and ran. They had seen the docile become stampede-mad; those things which had always submitted meekly to death in the form of the Queegs' wooden lances had been metamorphosed into dangerous animals.

What few of the Queegs had been killed were those unfortunate enough to fall and be crushed beneath the combined weight of the surging hordes. They ran, yet none followed the machine men, avoiding the tunnel for some reason.

Professor Jameson hurried along with 6W-438, both machine men running and stumbling. Behind came 744U-21 and the remaining Zoromes. The darkness of the tunnel was weakly lit with the intermittent flashes of light from the straggling ohbs on which the machine men trod. The light cast upon the rough walls was but a weak dissemi-

LABYRINTH

nation of the brilliance possessed by the strange creatures, yet it served to light the way. Not until the flashes from the trampled ohbs grew fewer and farther between did the machine men think to turn on their body lights. Then, one and all sped onward less hesitatingly.

How far they kept on in this manner, the machine men found it difficult to estimate. They soon found the last of the hurrying ohbs and passed it. Those of the things they found from then on were composedly eating away at various portions of the tunnel. The Zoromes assiduously avoided them, the latter taking scarcely any notice of the machine men, ignorant of their appetizing composition, painstakingly extracting and absorbing the metal from the tunnel walls and floor.

After passing the last of the cavalcade headed for the tunnel's mouth, the machine men slackened their mad pace and viewed some of the characteristics of the winding thoroughfare they had entered. It was anything except straight, and the floor was everything except smooth. The tunnel's course meandered in every direction. Farther along, it occasionally dropped downward. As the machine men guessed, the passage had been made by the ohbs following a favorable vein of metal.

The tunnel inclined; it turned in all directions; it declined, sometimes falling away before assuming a level once more. It grew narrow, so narrow that the machine men could scarcely crawl through it, and then again it broadened out so that its walls became lost in the gloom on either side. The ceiling was even high above the conical heads of the Zoromes. Here and there, pillars had been left standing, the ohbs having eaten around less favorable parts. The machine men saw that openings branched away in all directions.

LABYRINTH

"The ground beneath the sterile sections of this world must be honeycombed with tunnels such as these," Professor Jameson observed.

"What shall we do?" queried 6W-438, thinking more of their immediate future than he did of the probable conditions of the planet. "How are we to escape?"

"When the Queegs return to the city without us, the spaceship will come in search of us," the professor stated.

Heads were counted. There were fourteen machine men present. But two were lost, and all knew what had become of them. Sixteen machine men had accompanied the Queegs on their hunt, the remaining Zoromes staying behind to explore the mysteries of the ancient city.

Many long hours passed. The fourteen Zoromes waited patiently in a hollowed cave which they had rid of ohbs. Guesses were ventured as to how long it would take the Queegs to escape the badlands and return to the city.

- The machine men found corrosive spots on various parts of their metal anatomy to which the ohbs had briefly clung. In the run through the tunnel, one Zorome had bent a leg in tumbling down a vertical declivity. All were scratched up considerably.

"We shall find our return to the surface more difficult," prophesied 12W-62.

"We will have to help one another," said the professor. "There are some difficult stretches we passed."

"These things are the most malignant menaces we have come across since our adventures on the planet of the double sun," spoke 41C-98.

"Yes, but in this case we can come to grips with our foe. On the planet of the double sun, the Emkls spread their menace from another dimension."

In this manner, the machine men of Zor passed a

LABYRINTH

sufficient time to feel assured that the danger above was over. They decided to return the way they had come. Continuing on would lead gradually downward.

They retraced their steps, realizing they had a long journey before them. Care was taken to avoid contact with the ohbs they occasionally came across. The machine men noticed that the ohbs were found in small colonies. To find one was to expect many.

The things were boneless, a weak cartilage the nearest to skeletal framework they possessed. There were no remains to be found.

Ahead of them, 6W-438 made a startling discovery. "The tunnel is full of ohbs!"

Carefully, they came forward and shone their body lights ahead of them.

"Do you suppose they detect us in some way?" 744U-21 suggested.

"They do not act aware of our presence," said the professor. "See how intent they are on feeding."

"There may be a clear space beyond them," was 12W-62's opinion. "Shall we try a dash through them, weapons ready?"

"Two of us can try it," said the professor. "You and 9V-474 can go."

The remainder of the group waited while the two machine men, gripping their ray guns, ran through the scattered assemblage of ohbs. A few were touched, giving forth their exudations of light and becoming immediately excited. Their antennae vibrated, and their nearer companions came close about them, expecting they had found an unusually attractive vein of superior ore. 12W-62 killed one of them. A maximum brilliance enveloped the

LABYRINTH

strange creature, and its excitement was seized by the others, spreading like a contagion.

The two Zoromes passed out of sight around a bend of the tunnel. From them soon came a thought message that they were once more in the clear. The waiting Zoromes followed.

"It seems strange that so many of the things could congregate in that one place since we passed it on the way down," 744U-21 reflected. "I cannot remember having passed so many of them at one time."

A suspicion was growing in the professor's mind, yet he concealed it as best possible from the rest. He did not care to jump at conclusions. It was better to wait a while.

"This is not the way we came," 6W-438 finally announced. "I have felt it for some time."

"There are several inclines we should have passed before this," said 12W-62.

"We have come back the wrong way."

The machine men stopped and pondered the situation.

"Let us retrace."

They started back the way they had come. Once again, they dashed through the colony of malevolent ohbs. They came to a dividing of the ways, one tunnel splitting into two at a very acute angle.

"I do not recollect which tunnel we came through," 744U-21 confessed. "In fact, I do not remember there being two tunnel mouths so adjacent."

"Which shall we take?"

"Divide up."

"To divide up means to become lost from one another," was 744U-21's thought.

"We are lost now."

LABYRINTH

"But we are all lost together."

"One way seems as good as another," said the professor. "Let us try the right tunnel, and then if it does not lead us back to familiar spots, let us return and try the other one. Tax your memories for familiar characteristics. Let nothing escape your attention."

The machine men did as advised. They went onward along the convoluting tunnel, hollowed out by the insatiable appetites of the metal absorbers. Side tunnels spread to left and right. Finally the passage they were following dwindled, then grew larger once more, finally ending in a pitted wall.

"The wrong way," said 6W-438. "Luck is against us."

"The chances are against us, you mean," said the professor. "We must go back and try the other division."

Wheeling about, the fourteen machine men started back to find and explore the divergence they had discovered in the wrong tunnel they were following. At right angles to their course lay a yawning intersection. Several of the Zoromes claimed they had come this way, while others claimed not; that there had been no turns as sharp as this one. Still others among the machine men allowed that even sharper angles than this had been encountered, yet the right way led straight ahead. A few were uncertain and awaited the outcome of the discussion.

"Stop!" the professor cried. "We argue in vain, to no end. It is a veritable sponge of passageways, this ground. A maze of tunnels. We are lost in a labyrinth."

The shocking truth was received in mental silence. The machine men realized quite suddenly their confusion. They were lost, and every move they made was taking them into more hopeless situations. All the passages they had been in bore the same characteristics. They rose on

LABYRINTH

an incline; then fell sharply, curved and even spiraled. Sometimes the machine men scrambled upward; then again they slid and stumbled downward, often in narrowness that scraped their metal bodies in passing.

The floors, even as the ceilings and walls, were a chaos of roughness interspersed with stalagmites and stalactites, formed by the wandering caprices of the ohbs. Like a worm-eaten tree, there existed no symmetry or beauty to the columns. Here and there lay accumulations of dust and hard bits of material the ohbs had not been able to digest. Often on the sides and ceilings, fragile, untouched lacework crumbled and became debris as the Zoromes pushed their way through the seemingly endless maze.

They found where cave-ins had occurred, where unsupported weight from above had yielded to gravity, filling parts of the intervening area eaten away by the ohbs.

It was the professor's consensus that the ohbs turned much of their provender into a gas, slowly escaping from the pores of their skin. He examined several of the things quite carefully, approaching close yet not touching them. 744U-21 believed that much of the metal absorption was consumed when the ohbs became suffused with their strange brilliance. By turning off their body lights, the machine men found in the Stygian blackness permeating this underworld of chaotic thoroughfares that the ohbs were always visible as soft glowing hulks against the darkness. Their intensity of brilliance often varied.

"We must get out!" 119M-5 exclaimed.

"How?" queried 377X-80. "Other than roaming until we come out upon the surface?"

LABYRINTH

"That is so," said the professor. "Yet we can apply some logic to our meandering."

"What do you mean?" asked 744U-21.

"We can stay with the courses which lead upward. This should continually bring us closer to the surface. There must be many tunnels leading to the surface."

"If we could only find one of them."

"We must follow the inclines."

The machine men employed this expedient, yet it availed them naught. Practicable in theory, it proved, as is often the case, the antithesis of expectation. The inconsistency of the labyrinth mocked their painstaking theoretical conclusions with illusory promises. Inclines often led into deeper points, like a rising hill on whose other side drops the ravine. To choose a sloping hole yawning from the depths of the planet often proved an eventually sharp rise again. The machine men did not take these latter chances through choice. These saturnine futilities of the labyrinth forced themselves involuntarily upon the Zoromes, giving them the passages which led into end caverns against blank, pitted walls or into deeper areas.

There was always the constant menace of the ohbs. Dark, perpendicular holes of indeterminable depths lurked ready for the unwary. 6A-491 fell into one of these and bent a metal leg so that it became more or less unmanageable.

Halting for another conference soon after this distressing episode, the machine men manifested hopelessness and gloom. They were no better off than when they had started to follow only the inclines.

The professor confessed the failure of his plan. He believed they were even farther beneath the surface than

LABYRINTH

previously. A slight increase of temperature permeated the linked, inescapable dungeons.

After this, they roamed aimlessly, always keeping together. How much time had passed they did not know.

IV

FATALITY LOOMED over catastrophe. A rock fall, having waited long for just such a slight, shuddering vibration of the machine men's passage as now occurred, buried four of the Zoromes in a broad cavern, completely blocking the forward advance of the column. It was a long, arduous task to dig out their buried companions.

Legs and tentacles, even metal bodies, had been damaged in the fall. 970Q-17 had been in advance of the main body of the Zoromes. Now he lay in the far side of the fallen debris, partly free yet unable to extricate himself.

19K-59 and 284D-167 were dug out, and 8L-404 was not far from rescue when an alarmed cry issued from 970Q-17.

"Ohbs are approaching!"

"Lie quiet!" Professor Jameson advised. "Can you use your ray gun?"

"It is buried!" came the disconsolate reply. "Part of my head and two tentacles are free." The machine men increased their efforts. "There are three of them," came 970Q-17's thoughts. "Now, four. They are examining the edges of the rock fall for metal."

"Remain quiet!"

"If they approach too close, use your tentacles which are loose. Kill by contraction."

LABYRINTH

"They are edging this way," said 970Q-17. "One of them will soon discover me!"

The machine men worked faster, fearing they could not reach their companion in time to avert the disaster which would result if an ohb came in contact with 970Q-17. His only chance rested in the possibility of the ohbs overlooking him.

But the long chance failed: the anticipated occurred.

"An ohb is coming closer! It is only inches away!" There followed a momentary pause, tense and drawn out. Then, "It touched me!"

The machine men saw through the mind of 970Q-17 the menace grow suddenly brilliant, its antennae vibrating greedily as it seized with astonishing swiftness upon the metal protruding from the mass of fallen roof. The machine men visualized a rapid, flicking tentacle which wound itself around the inner fires of the pulsating monster, squeezing madly until the thing separated into two parts, the flaming brilliance dying immediately. But three more of the hungry things wrapped their hideous, shapeless masses of flesh about the imprisoned machine man and slavered their corrosive juices upon his metal head.

The tentacles wrenched one free and threw it forcibly against the farther wall where it lay momentarily stunned before creeping back to continue its deadly, purposeful design. Another of the ohbs the machine man tore desperately to shreds, using both tentacles in a spasm of repulsion and terror. The remaining monstrosity of glowing body clung relentlessly. More of the hideous species tramped rapidly into the cavern and set upon 970Q-17 in hopeless numbers.

It was soon over. The wildly threshing tentacles became dissolved and weakened in spots so that they broke

LABYRINTH

and were hurled across the cavern where incoming ohbs fell upon the bits of metal. Every available inch of 970Q-17's head became covered, while more of the sinister dwellers of the badlands pushed and nudged at their companions to be at the inaccessible delicacy of pure metal.

970Q-17's brain emanations were soon stilled. He died uncomplaining.

The machine men slowed their operations. They finally reached 8L-404. There were three survivors of the four who had been buried. 284D-167 was so badly damaged his head was removed from his wrecked body and carried by a metal companion.

8L-404 had two legs and three tentacles irreparably damaged, while 19K-59 had lost one leg and a tentacle. From the abandoned body and limbs of 284D-167, a metal leg and two tentacles were found serviceable. These parts were given the two deficient Zoromes and were fastened upon them in place of the damaged counterparts. Each of the two now hobbled forward on three lower limbs.

The advisabilities of digging onward to where 970Q-17 lay in order to salvage his remaining appendages was suggested. Both the professor and 744U-21 turned against this.

"By the time we get to the metal body, the ohbs shall have consumed it," Professor Jameson stated.

744U-21 feared, too, that digging to the other side of the cavern would be too much like inviting disaster.

"The cave-in exists as a wall of defense," he said. "We have failed to save 970Q-17. Let us not tempt fate but go back the way we came."

LABYRINTH

Once more they set out to find a way out of the baffling labyrinth which held them captive. They wondered about their companions in the spaceship above ground. Were they looking for them? It would be foolhardy for the others to penetrate into the labyrinth and become themselves lost, too.

It was the professor's opinion that those above ground were doing all in their power for the lost machine men. But there was no way of getting to the lost Zoromes other than risking the peril of becoming lost themselves; two parties of Zoromes in the myriad intersecting tunnels possessed the same chances of finding each other as they did of finding their way out again. Once more they took up the monotonous march, the perpetual quest for the seemingly unattainable.

Added to the hopelessness of escape was the vicious menace of the ohbs. Like the sword of Damocles, their unceasing threat hung as another weapon over the Zoromes. Often the machine men stumbled over one of the partially hidden creatures buried in a pocket of ore. There ensued the whitening glow and the excited quivering of the antennae. The machine men killed the menace and ran before the arrival of the nearest ohbs.

Once, when several of the machine men had slid down a rough, sharply sloping hole, they found themselves in the midst of several of the deadly creatures. Before they could warn their companions flashing lights revealed more of the things beyond. There was one avenue of escape, a low passage to one side of the larger cavern. Into this they dashed, leaving behind them a congregating horde of the metal absorbers.

Down this tunnel the machine men rushed, while behind them an excited gathering's quivering antennae bore

LABYRINTH

a false promise of virgin metal; but their excited wanderings in the immediate vicinity disclosed only the partly-eaten walls of ore.

As before, the Zoromes escaped momentarily the scourge. But they soon ran into another colony. Without slackening their speed, the machine men ran over and through the bright, glowing denizens of the depths. Then, before they had cleared the last ohbs, they ran into a pitted pocket, the blind end of the tunnel. Rivaling the glow of the machine men's lights, the ohbs waxed brilliant as they came in contact with the metal legs and feet.

Fearfully, the Zoromes searched for escape which did not exist. Quickly they seized upon the one chance left them. Shaking off the avid creatures, striking recklessly with their tentacles, the machine men sped back the way they came. In dismay, they halted on rounding a turn, perceiving a fiery glow ahead not more than fifty feet distant, traveling ominously towards them. The other colony of ohbs was answering the inevitable call of their excited companions in the passageway's end.

"Trapped!"

That single thought from 6W-438 told the entire situation. The ranks before them swelled to such an extent that escape through the ohbs seemed nigh impossible. On came the metal eaters, tumbling over one another in a flapping, squirming, hopping wave of glowing anticipation. Glands all over their soft bodies were salivating in prospect of the expected feast.

The machine men spread a halo of death into the hurrying vanguard, backing off, knowing full well that these abominable dwellers from the desert wastes died more slowly than the advance of reinforcements.

LABYRINTH

"Watch behind!" warned Professor Jameson.

Maintaining an effective barrage, the machine men retreated, holding off the insidious ohbs, yet constantly losing ground and placing themselves nearer the menace from the tunnel's end.

"Turn!" cried 41C-98 who perceived the slower ambling ohbs from the rear.

41C-98 whirled his ray gun and blazed away at these latest arrivals. Into their searching ranks flickered the weapon of 41C-98, temporarily halting their advance.

Professor Jameson visualized the end. The free end of the tunnel swarmed with an impassable mass of metal absorbing flesh. They could never run through it. There were too many of the things to cling and drag them down, turning their metal parts to liquid. The horde from the tunnel's blocked end was not unsurmountable, yet futility mocked from that direction.

They were once more in the same predicament as upon the surface, when they had fled into the labyrinth; this time, there were no places which they might run to; walls enclosed them. The ohbs, they well realized, would increase five to one for those killed, their silent communication clamoring like a shrieking siren.

The ray guns gained time, yet what did time mean to them? The professor searched desperately for some advantage to further their chances, prolong their life. He searched also with his mind, yet it was his eyes which first discovered that which his frantic brain almost simultaneously seized.

The rough, pitted walls of the tunnel offering irregular projections, were fairly high, especially here. On the other side wall and ceiling merged close to the floor.

"Climb the side of the tunnel!" he cried.

LABYRINTH

Instantly twelve Zoromes scrambled up the side of the tunnel, two of them sorely missing the tentacles they had lost. One of the uninjured machine men carried the head of 284D-167. Tentacles curled over rough knobs of rocky ore. Some of these broke, the tentacles scraping and curling madly for new holds. Metal feet dug into pockets of the mottled wall, often slipping and sending the machine man clattering to the tunnel floor among the leaping advance of the ohbs. Already, now that the Zoromes had abandoned their fire, the ohbs were meeting from two sides in as many waves of gluttonous hope.

6W-438 was unfortunate in his ill-fated start; a veil of rocky material crumbled and threw him back where tentacles found nothing to clutch, feet finding nothing to stand upon, each hold giving way as if with damnable intent of allying with the ohbs which now poured over the fallen Zorome. The ray guns of seven machine men bit like darts of death into the creatures which sought 6W-438 as sustenance. As the rays became concentrated and burnt steadily deeper, the bright glowing bodies grew suddenly dark. 6W-438 hurled them off with mighty efforts and leaped quickly up the wall, the ray guns of his companions covering his retreat.

Down below, the leaping, flopping ohbs became so numerous that the tunnel shone with a dull, fitful glow of unworldly luminosity. The professor saw that very soon the tunnel would become a crushed, packed mass of flesh. The machine men of Zor would soon be lost, disintegrated pieces of metal. Like water in a dammed-up pond, the numbers of the ohbs rose. There was but one thing to be done. The machine men climbed higher.

The ceiling grew nearer, and the ravaging menace below crept closer to their feet. No longer did the machine

LABYRINTH

men fire at the ohbs. Many had climbed as high as possible, clinging with tentacles to the ceiling, their legs braced in niches or projections of the wall. They could exist but a few minutes longer.

The tide rose. The Zoromes awaited philosophically the overlapping wall of total inundation. The waves reached hungrily higher, lapping viciously at the feet of the castaways.

Once more the machine men of Zor used their guns. Death claimed those which fastened themselves about the feet and legs of the clinging Zoromes. Soon it would be the end, each Zorome overwhelmed by superior odds; yet it was their way to die fighting.

894R-15, lowest in position on the wall, clambered upward as an ohb fastened itself to his leg. He curled a tentacle away from the wall in order to use his weapon; his feet did not find the projections they sought. A chunk of rock gave way.

Into the swirling mass of ohbs he fell. A dozen ray guns blazed futilely. 12W-62 dropped lower, hazarding his own slim chances, clinging to frail, untested portions of the wall while he dangled two tentacles which grazed the horde of hungry ohbs. The doomed machine man disappeared by his own weight into the rapid moving chaos of the ghoulish ohbs. A brilliant blaze of oval light shone from the sea below.

"Look! See what I have found!"

It was 119M-5, once Zora. The projected thought was unexplanatory, yet the machine men detected a ring of hope. 119M-5 was farthest down the wall, in the direction of the tunnel's end.

"What is it?"

"A cavity high up near the ceiling of the tunnel"

LABYRINTH

It was the signal for an immediate exodus in that direction. The machine men climbed perilously along the treacherous wall with its inviting, yet sinister, holds. One of the Zoromes slipped and nearly met the fate of 894R-15. To lose hold of the wall was to abandon a grip on hope.

"Keep close together!" Professor Jameson warned them. "One tentacle to the person before you!"

In this manner two were saved from possible death by the sudden freezing of the entire group to the wall when a misstep or broken hold occurred. 119M-5 waited by the entrance to the newly discovered cavity, firing at the ohbs which leaped and clung tenaciously to the feet of the cavalcade.

One by one the machine men passed into the cavity, while below the ominous flow of life rose higher, menacing the safe passage of the remaining Zoromes. Professor Jameson, 744U-21 and 119M-5 still remained, three of the clinging ohbs feeding on the feet of the latter. Below, more of the churning mass reached upward, standing momentarily on end in their eagerness, then falling backward only to be replaced by others. Using his ray gun, the professor cleared the appendages of his fellow Zoromes and motioned them into the cavity.

He was the last to enter, lifting his corroded legs out of the rising legions of metal absorbers. His last glimpse revealed the ohbs flopping against the ceiling of the tunnel.

A mighty wave bore down but the castaways had been saved. From Scylla to Charybdis, from the Caskets to the Ortach Stone—a Hobson's choice, yet an existence of hope.

The machine men found themselves in a low, irregular

LABYRINTH

shaped tunnel which grew larger farther along. It was only another of the many freaks of the meaningless, chaotic labyrinth. Here was a passage which cut transversely just above the ceiling of the tunnel in which they had nearly met their doom.

"Let us hurry!" Professor Jameson exclaimed. "There will shortly be an overflow into this tunnel!"

V

THEY RAN, choosing cross passages at random, there existing little difference. Somewhere a variation of choice might lead them to the surface.

Proceeding more leisurely, the machine men found themselves weakened structurally. In the escape from the ohbs, many of them had suffered. There were also parts wearing out from travel, not to mention the parts missing from the damaged three.

They were fast becoming a group of cripples, prisoners of the labyrinth, captive in a vast, never-ceasing network of cells. Yet, in the face of this, they kept onward. The Zoromes noticed a change in the character of the tunnels through which they traveled. They were narrower and lower, possessing more pillars and columns. There were fewer deviations and cross tunnels. Choice became limited.

"There is a noticeable diminution of metal in these last tunnels," the professor observed. "The ohbs did not find so much to eat here. It explains why we have not seen any of the ohbs since entering here."

"It looked as if all the ohbs on the planet were in that tunnel back there," said 12W-62.

LABYRINTH

They were far from the place of their recent escape when 6W-438 stopped suddenly, calling for silence.

"I heard something!"

Instantly, the clattering and scuffling of metal feet became still, the rustling of tentacles silenced by rigid immobility. They all listened. For somewhere came a sighing ripple of noise, a tinkling sound as of many small voices merged in conversation.

"What is it?"

"It seems to be ahead of us," said 744U-21.

With one thought the machine men moved forward. They stopped again after a considerable distance had been covered. The sound now persisted clearly above the noise of their progression. A subdued bubbling smote their hearing, mixed with a slight hissing and spattering.

"Water!"

"Can we be nearing the surface?" 119M-5 queried hopefully.

"Not necessarily." 6W-438 checked the rising tide of hope. "It is probably leakage of some kind."

"Or a subterranean river," 744U-21 suggested.

"We must find it," said Professor Jameson.

They kept onward in the direction of the sound. There was little fear of deviating, for there were scarcely any side tunnels. The tunnel grew damp, and the machine men knew they were nearing the waters. The sound increased to a rushing sound of many echoes. The Zoromes turned unexpectedly into a low-ceiled cavern, their lights reflecting from troubled waters.

They looked upon what appeared to be a small lake. Tiny whirlpools, upgushing currents and lapping ripples which splashed the walls bore evidence of undercurrents. It was obvious that the water entered the cavern from

LABYRINTH

a source beneath the water level and left it by means of another submerged channel. Turning their body lights all about them, the machine men perceived that no other tunnel opened upon the underground lake. The distance across the water was not far.

"It is the best chance we have been offered yet," the professor said.

"Of escape, you mean?"

"To the surface."

"By following this underground river back to its beginning on the surface!" 6W-438 exclaimed, probing the thoughts of the professor.

"We can try," said 744U-21 hopefully. "It is our only chance."

"What of the currents?" warned 41C-98. "Will they sweep us downstream into a trap or unscalable abyss?"

Deep in the mind of 41C-98 was engraved an episode on the planet of the double sun. Machine men of Zor had remained imprisoned in the depths of an oceanic abyss for several hundred years. Other survivors of the old expedition shared this memory.

"We can only chance that. There are eleven of us—twelve, including 284D-167. We must hold close to one another and enter the water single file. In a swift current, we shall mass ourselves three abreast and twist tentacles."

The machine men lost no more time in speculation. In single file they entered the water. The slope was gradual, and their coned heads disappeared slowly beneath the ruffled surface. 377X-80 held the staring head of 284D-167. Limping along on their insufficient quota of legs were 8L-404 and 19K-59.

The machine men sank deeper and deeper into the

LABYRINTH

watery depth as they followed the decline towards the cavern's center. Professor Jameson, his tentacles curled with those of 6W-438, led the way.

"Be fearful of going to some place from which we may find it difficult to return," admonished 744U-21. "We can always go back to the dry tunnels if we become blocked down here."

"This, too, may prove to be a puzzle," the professor warned. "It is but a flooded section of the labyrinth."

"But a path to follow."

"True. The current is our pathway. We must keep to it."

The machine men now found themselves in the current. It was not too strong, however, exerting but a gentle resistance to their weight. The professor walked towards the force of the current. To follow the path of least resistance would be to become further lost in the intricate mazes of the flooded passageways.

The current became gradually stronger and restricted to a smaller area. The professor soon discovered a hole yawning in the wall just above their heads. Leading up to it lay an incline of hard-packed rock debris. Up this the professor walked, 6W-438 behind him. Before the opening Professor Jameson was met with a force which bowled him over and sent him rolling above the heads of his companions.

A grasping tentacle circled the head of 9V-474, and 119M-5 pulled him down out of the current, to the cavern floor. Despite his metal composition, the force of the current could easily have swept him a good distance before he could regain a standing posture. He returned to the machine men grouped beneath the inlet.

"Now is the time to mass our advance," said 744U-21.

LABYRINTH

There was room for but two machine men to crawl at once through the cavern's inlet.

"We must move several machine men through the opening so they may gain hand holds and afford us a chain along which to move," said the professor.

The machine men advanced in a compact square of nine, two of them held in front. Bracing themselves, the entire group stood before the force of the gushing water pouring from the hole in the submerged wall. One of the two, 6A-491, was picked up and hurled headfirst into the channel, against the force of the current. He disappeared and did not return.

"I have caught hold!" he cried. "Send 41C-98."

The second machine man went through the same procedure. He seized the feet of 6A-491 and held to projections. By reaching as far up the tunnel inlet as his tentacles could reach Professor Jameson grabbed the feet of 41C-98. He felt the remaining Zoromes climb over his body as they took up positions ahead of 6A-491.

The last Zorome passed and then the professor clambered over his metal companions against the teeth of the current. Eleven man-lengths from the flooded cavern, the channel broadened and the current became less forceful.

"Where are we?" queried 19K-59. "Is this another of the caverns?"

"Perhaps," said the professor. "It makes little difference. We are still probably far from our goal."

"Where do you think this water comes from?"

"A surface lake or river. When we see light other than our own permeating the water, it will be possible to hope."

Once more the machine men found it practical to walk in a single file. Always they followed the current. To

LABYRINTH

divert from it was to imperil their chances. It was only too easy to walk down a flooded tunnel of still waters and into a submarine labyrinth.

They had been fortunate in coming upon the main current. Even so, Professor Jameson knew it seemed an even chance the current might sift further along through debris gathered by the current and past weaknesses of the channel walls. Then again, they might emerge into vast caverns where water poured and seeped through the ceilings.

The machine men followed the current upstream. In stretches of easier progress, they often came out of the water to find they were in a cavern or broad, winding tunnel. Sometimes their attempted emergence from the watery depths brought them up against a flooded ceiling.

Many of the caves and tunnels bore ancient trace of the ohbs. This part of the labyrinth was evidently older than that section in which they had become lost.

The holes into which they feared they might fall existed only in fancy. The few pits they discovered were shallow and not dangerous to their progress. The underground river had filled them with silt and other inorganic materials to a level with the rest of the tunnel floor.

With the exception of the current they continually breasted—sometimes strong, sometimes barely perceptible—they found the walking easier than it had been in the dry tunnels. The water offered resistance, but there was no stumbling or treacherous rock slides and pits with which to contend. Above all, there was a complete absence of the ohbs.

There were denizens of the subterranean waters, but

LABYRINTH

they were not large enough to hamper the machine men, and the ray guns counteracted any nuisances.

The machine men were pushing along, ignorant of whether night or day reigned above them, when Professor Jameson suddenly heard himself called.

"21MM392!"

He looked about, expecting one of his metal brethren to have made a discovery of some sort. The others looked at him. None of them had spoken. That was a certainty.

"744U-21! 6W-438! Come out of the water!"

All were surprised, but before they could form a query, the answer came to them on the rapid wings of telepathic thought.

"It is I, 6N-24! 5ZQ35 and 27E-24 are here with me."

"Where are you?" Professor Jameson called in rising excitement.

"In a cavern above you, to your right. Come out of the water."

The eleven machine men scrambled up the incline towards the water's edge. The first head to break the surface stared into the glare of several lights. In the brilliance stood three machine men from the spaceship.

"How did you get here?" queried 744U-21.

"We came to meet you."

"Are you lost?"

"No."

"How did you find us?"

"We have been following your course through the labyrinth with the thought detectors."

"Did the Queegs return and tell you where we went?"

"They told us you ran into a hole in the ground when the ohbs went suddenly mad. Their behavior was a puzzle to us until we discovered that the ohbs are

LABYRINTH

metal eaters, much like the pistols of the Mumes, but on a different principle."

"How did you get to this cavern?"

"We entered through a hole in the bottom of what the Queegs call the Disappearing River. You are not far from the surface now. We came to meet you. There was little else we could do. When you found the underground river and decided to follow it, we followed your course above the surface in the spaceship. We searched the vicinity for a lake with a whirlpool or a river entering the ground and discovered the latter."

The twelve Zoromes, one of them but a metal head, were overjoyed to find they had won out against the labyrinth, and that they would soon be free of the hated depths. With the three Zoromes who had come to meet them, they walked the remaining distance to where the river issued from its surface course into the ground. A diffusion of light spread an ethereal glow—welcomed by the Zoromes—into a submarine cavern. Here, the machine men found more of their comrades. Reunited, they walked out upon the river bed and to the shore.

Once again they found themselves in the sunlight. They discovered they were not far from the ancient city. They had done a great deal of wandering before finding the underground river. From then on, their course had been straight. Even so, the old city lay many miles off.

Professor Jameson and his metal companions once more found themselves in the spaceship of Zor, which headed skyward. The machine men had no further desire to remain upon the planet. In fact, their recent experiences had prejudiced them against further exploration of this system. They headed off towards the stars.

"At one time when you were in peril we contemplated

LABYRINTH

shooting a depth explosion deep into the ground," said 20R-654.

"You mean when we were in the tunnel full of ohbs?" queried the professor understandingly.

"Yes. 119M-5 found an escape just in time."

"Our own chances of survival would have been slim," 6W-438 pondered.

"A much better way to go," said 744U-21, recollecting quite vividly the fates of 970Q-17 and three others of the Zoromes.

"Where now?" queried 20R-654. "We were to have discussed that before leaving this system."

"Let us head in the direction of distant Sirius," Professor Jameson offered.

"What interests you in the system of Sirius?" asked 744U-21.

"You will remember that mankind deserted the Earth for a world of Sirius thirty-five million years ago. It is highly improbable any semblance of mankind still remains, yet it may be there are records of some kind left behind."

"Another encounter such as we have just escaped," said 6W-438 staring back at the gibbous orb of a dwindling planet, "and we may never reach Sirius."

To this pessimism, Professor Jameson uttered a bit of sound philosophy taken from a long dead civilization of the remote and distant past.

"If it were not for the clouds, we would not enjoy the sun."

ANOTHER GREAT SCIENCE FICTION
ADVENTURE SERIES!

PROFESSOR JAMESON SPACE ADVENTURES!

F-420 — 40¢

PROFESSOR JAMESON #1:

The Planet of the Double Sun
by Neil R. Jones

Eons after the death of the Earth, one last Earthman lives on, his brilliant mind encased in the indestructible metal body of a Zorome. With his cosmos-exploring comrades, Professor Jameson faces the strange enigma of the triped-creatures of THE PLANET OF THE DOUBLE SUN.

G-631 — 50¢

PROFESSOR JAMESON #2:

The Sunless World
by Neil R. Jones

Exploring deep inside the cavernous interior of a planet which was hurled forth between the stars in some long-past catastrophe, Professor Jameson and the Zoromes suddenly discover that this world is going to crash into another planet—and there is no time for escape!

Ask your newsdealer. Also available directly from Ace Books, Inc. (Dept. MM), 1120 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10036. Please enclose the indicated price per copy, plus 5¢ handling fee for each book.

DON'T MISS THESE GREAT ADVENTURES IN TIME-TRAVEL INTRIGUE!

G-605 AGENT OF T.E.R.R.A. #1:

The Flying Saucer Gambit by Larry Maddock

Hannibal Fortune and his symbiotic partner Webley come to Earth to investigate the murder of T.E.R.R.A.'s Resident Agent in the 20th Century.

G-620 AGENT OF T.E.R.R.A. #2:

The Golden Goddess Gambit by Larry Maddock

Fortune and Webley fight a desperate battle against time-tampering by EMPIRE agents in the dawn of Earth's history.

G-644 AGENT OF T.E.R.R.A. #3:

The Emerald Elephant Gambit by Larry Maddock

Fortune and Webley must battle to insure the destruction of a great civilization, while vicious looters from the far future upset the balance of history.

ACE BOOKS, INC. (Dept. MM)
1120 Avenue of the Americas
New York, N.Y. 10036

Please send me:

.....copies of G-605, AGENT OF T.E.R.R.A. #1
.....copies of G-620, AGENT OF T.E.R.R.A. #2
.....copies of G-644, AGENT OF T.E.R.R.A. #3

I enclose 50¢ per copy plus 5¢ handling fee for each book.

NAME

ADDRESS

CITY STATE ZIP CODE.....

space war

The Zoromes had found a way to immortality and thereby were able to set out on centuries-long explorations of the entire galaxy. One among the Zoromes was a human, Professor Jameson, last man of Earth, and his adventures make a saga second to none.

The Zoromes had made one mistake in their scientific history—they had helped another race of beings to change over into machine bodies—the Mumes of the world Mumed. But unlike Jameson, the Mumes did not join in fellowship with Zor. Rather instead they turned on their benefactors, schemed for greater power, and finally the two super-races of machine-men became the bitterest of enemies.

In SPACE WAR, Professor Jameson finds himself in the thick of a war of the worlds....

