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The Solar Invasion

FROM BEYOND THE FIFTH DIMENSION, A MASTER FIEND THREATENS TO
DESTROY THE UNIVERSE ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ BY MANLY WADE WELLMAN



NIGHTMARE GALAXY

Joan Randall was one of the toughest, most experienced agents in the inter-galactic security service. Although her beauty was cool and unruffled as a Martian breeze, her nerves were customarily strong as steel.

Today, as she burst into headquarters, she was shaking, pale and hardly able to speak.

"What is it, Joan?" the Captain urged.

"Oh, God! Captain, it's gone!"

"What's gone, Joan?"

"The moon, Captain. It's disappeared. The moon no longer exists."

The Solar Invasion

Manly Wade Wellman

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CHAPTER I

Fugitive Futuremen

Asteroid No. 697 is one of the countless worlds explored by Curt Newton—Captain Future to the peoples of the many planets for whom he has waged such brilliant conflict—and, unlike most explorers, about which he has said little to anyone beyond his own circle of strange comrades.

Asteroid No. 697 is not much larger than a flying mountain. Nevertheless it has a freak gravitational power which makes possible the retention of atmosphere and water. Rich green grass and shrubs and trees, myriads of flowers, and delicious fruits, grow there. The grotto in which they now were gathered was an ideal picnic spot. And as a picnic spot it was being used just now by Curt Newton and two companions.

They had come, ostensibly, to collect and examine specimens of edible plants, which early sketchy tests had shown to contain a new quasi-vitamin useful in prolonging life. But there were other reasons for coming to Asteroid No. 697—and for spending some time there. And so they lolled and rested, after the last specimen had been carefully packed and slid into a locker.

Curt, graceful, brawny and a bit more than normal size, knelt before a small fire, grilling a steak. A close-fitting green zipper-suit hugged the powerful muscles of his mighty shoulders and long legs. His red hair, never quite in order, was comfortably rumpled now, and his clear gray eyes were studying his cookery with the attention that he had so often turned upon a cosmic riddle of science, or upon overwhelming enemy odds.

"How can you eat that stuff?" asked Otho, the android, who was sprawling nearby, nibbling a cake of the synthetic chemical which was his favorite nourishment.

Otho, too, was gracefully built and clear-cut of feature.

He had been made artificially, of elastic muscles and organs and tissues. His high skull was bald, his complexion rubbery white, and his sardonic eyes were green and ironical. Near him played Oog, the fat, doughy little meteor-mimic that was Otho's cherished pet.

"How can he eat it?" repeated a raspy voice from overhead. "Why, he just puts it in his mouth, chews it and swallows. It's the least of Captain Future's problems."

That was Simon Wright, the Brain, speaking. Long ago, on his deathbed, Simon had prevailed on Curt Newton's father, the brilliant Roger Newton, to transplant his brain into a crystal box, where it would live and function forever in a bath of life-giving serum. Flexible metal stalks bore lens-eyes. On either side of the crystal box was an artificial ear. In front, beneath the eye-stalks, was fixed the Brain's resonator speech-apparatus. By use of traction-beams, he could move, touch and work as though he had hands and feet.

Curt laughed. He deftly made a steak sandwich, doused it with sauce and relish, and took a grateful mouthful. For all his peerless science and deadly fighting skill, just now, Captain Future was but a healthy, hungry young man.

"Isn't this cozy and peaceful?" he asked.

"Cozy and peaceful," repeated the Brain. "That's just it. Thank the planetary providences that we found out in time."

"Mmm," agreed Captain Future through his sandwich. "We cleared off the Moon just in time to miss the big ceremony and decorations. High-flown jabber over interplanetary radio hookups about how great and wonderful and valuable we are, is certainly a horrible ordeal."

"Why can't the System Government see that a big ceremony and reception for us would be bad?" inquired Otho. "We do our best work because we're not too well known by sight. If the whole System saw us on television it would ruin our effectiveness." He nibbled more chemical-cake. "I'd look silly wearing the System Medal for Distinction."

"What's that you're wearing?" inquired the Brain, dropping down a couple of feet to peer.

Otho glanced down—and gasped. On the chest of his zipper-suit hung a broad, glittering piece of jewelry—a ten-pointed star, inches across, jewelled and enamelled and inscribed in five planetary languages.

"The System Medal!" cried Curt. "Otho, I thought you wanted to steer clear of all decorations!"

"Where did it come from?" Otho clawed at the magnificent creation. It dropped from him like a fruit from a tree, bounced on the floor of the grotto, shook itself and flowingly shifted shape—and changed into Oog who stared solemnly at his master. Oog had just been exercising the meteor-mimic faculty of changing himself into anything.

"The little imp!" cried Otho. "He's beginning to understand our talk. By gosh, he can imitate anything!"

"Amazing," agreed the Brain. "Well, here we are, anyway, quietly picnicking. No fuss, no decorations!" He closed the jaws of his resonator with an emphatic snap.

"The difficulty is," resumed Curt, finishing his sandwich, "the Solar System thinks its major troubles are over, and we can think of retiring. It's my experience that when everything seems smoothest, danger threatens in its most deadly form. I wish President Carthew and his cabinet would realize that."

"Grag's back on the Moon," the Brain reminded him. "Maybe they'll go there and give him all the glory."

"Grag—bah!" snorted Otho. "That big heap of junk! Those tin brains of his don't realize what a bore it would be!"

He broke off, staring at Oog. The meteor-mimic had again melted, stirred his cells, and now stood up in the form of a little metal dwarf, sturdily made, with jointed limbs, bulbous metal head and tiny photo-electric eyes.

"He's mimicking Grag—except that Grag's seven feet tall!" cried Otho. "I told you that Oog is getting smart!"

Oog melted himself yet again and shaped his substance into a little square box—transparent, with flexible eye-stalks.

"Now he's the Brain," said Curt with a laugh. "He understands a lot, Otho. This last shift means that he agrees with you about his smartness."

He put out the fire and relaxed against a wall of the grotto.

"We're out of sight of the *Comet*, parked out yonder," he mused. "Even if they signal the *Comet*, we don't know it, so our consciences will be free—"

"Look at Oog," said the Brain suddenly. "He senses something."

Perched on Otho's knee, Oog was undergoing another shift of shape. His doughy body slimmed out in one place, curved at another, and altered into a tiny living statuette of a young woman, slender and vigorous, in a silken space-jacket and slacks, with rippling black hair and a face of flawless beauty.

"Holy sun-imps!" cried Captain Future. "It's Joan Randall."

"No, it isn't," came a silvery voice from outside the grotto. "It's only an imitation of the genuine article. Joan Randall is right here."

Otho and Curt got to their feet as Joan Randall entered the grotto. Lovely, intelligent, brave, she was one of Halk Anders' best secret service agents in the Planet Patrol department. Again and again she had done splendid service as a lieutenant of Captain Future, whom she loved very devotedly.

"All right, so we've been tracked to our hiding place," groaned the big red-haired chief of the Futuremen. "How did you find us, Joan?"

"Not at all hard to do," she told him. "They fired one red warning torpedo into these latitudes but you didn't give any response. So they fired another, with a follower-beam on it to chart its course. And I jumped into a speedy racer-rocket and came along." She smiled dazlingly and went on: "So here I am."

"That's womanly intuition," observed Otho, cuddling Oog. "How does it feel to have it used on you, Curt?"

"I can remember also what it means," said the Brain, laughing. "Women are marvelous creatures."

"Welcome, Joan," said Captain Future. "Sit down and I'll broil you a steak. The finest steak you ever dreamed of. Such a delicious bribe certainly ought to keep you from betraying our refuge out of sheer gratitude."

"This isn't a question of gratitude!" Joan retorted. "You're wanted—badly—at Headquarters. Ezra Gurney wants you to report in at once."

"He's only a marshal," said Curt. "We can ignore him." He grinned at the pretty girl. "They've got Grag. Isn't one Futureman enough for President Carthew to pin medals on?"

"That's just the trouble," said Joan in tones that were very deeply worried. "We can't find Grag!"

"What do you mean?" Curt Newton was frankly astonished. "We left Grag at our laboratory to look after things and make a check on some experiments he's conducting. I am sure Grag would never leave while on duty."

"Please!" cried Joan Randall, so desperately that they all fell silent and stared at her. "You haven't given me a chance to tell you what it was that made me follow you here."

"All I was saying," finished Curt rather sadly, "was that Grag wouldn't go away from the Moon."

"That's just it," said Joan. "We can't find the Moon either."

The three surprised stares that were leveled at Joan betokened more than mere stunned astonishment on the part of Simon Wright, Otho and Captain Future.

The Moon was their home. It was the staunch citadel where they stored their records and experiments. Captain Future had been born there. Otho had been synthesized there. Simon Wright had let his physical body perish there when he had taken on the new guise of the Brain. All three loved the Moon.

And now the Moon was no more!

The Brain was the first to break the silence.

"You mean, some catastrophe has destroyed Luna?"

"We don't know," said Joan. "The moon just isn't there."

"I can't believe it," Otho protested. "A solid chunk of mineral, two thousand miles in diameter, doesn't just vanish. I say, I can't believe it."

"If seeing is believing, come to the telaudio," said Joan.

They trooped together to the *Comet*, which lay careened on the lush grass outside. In the control room, Joan spun the dials of the telaudio.

She got the wave-length and the image she wanted, clarified the image, and turned back to the Futuremen.

"Look," she cried.

Against a rectangle of black, star-sprinkled sky hung the round silver-green disk of the Earth, with the continents of Europe and Africa, and also most of Asia, wreathed in clouds.

"Yep, that's Earth," the Brain acknowledged.

"But—where's the Moon?" asked Joan Randall almost fiercely. "Where's the Moon, I say!"

"It's gone!" muttered Captain Future.

CHAPTER II

Truant Satellite

No trace, in the telaudio, could they see of the satellite that had been Earth's consort of eons of time. The Moon simply wasn't there.

Where had it gone? And how? What force, mused Captain Future, red-haired master scientist, could remove a massive world totaling more than fifty billion cubic miles in volume, without leaving behind a fragment or a cloud of dust? There remained not a clue to show where it had gone. The whole thing was mystifying.

"Maybe the Moon's on the other side of the Earth," Otho suggested somewhat feebly.

"Let's look," said Joan.

She spun more dials, and the Earth became translucent. They could see the opposite hemisphere, with North and South America well defined, now.

"And where is the Moon?" Joan asked again.

"Not in sight, certainly," agreed the Brain. "And not blacked out, either, or we'd catch its silhouette against the stars. When did this happen?"

"Let's head back," said Captain Future suddenly. "Hitch that little rocket of yours onto our stern, Joan, and ride with us. You can talk while we travel."

Quickly Joan set the beam-mechanism which would serve as a tow-rope between her own craft and the *Comet*, and within five minutes they had cleared from Asteroid No. 697 on the Earthward trail.

"It happened about four a.m. today, New York time," Joan began. "The Moon had been at the full, bright enough to read sizeable print by, and so on. It went out like a snuffed candle. Right away there was wild excitement in the observatories. They couldn't explain it."

"Did they try a gravity-finder?" asked Simon Wright.

"Yes, and it didn't register any Moon."

"Did they try a frequency-beam? A spectroscope?"

"They tried everything," Joan replied. "And found no evidence, anywhere, of the Moon."

"Poor Grag!" cried Otho in grief-stricken tones.

Turning, they saw that the android's elastic face was twisted into an expression of deep sorrow.

"I'm sorry," he moaned again. "He was my best friend." He emitted something like a sob. "We pretended to quarrel but we really didn't mean it. Gosh, this is tough!"

"Don't feel bad, Otho," Curt assured him grimly. "I've got a hunch he's still alive and, if he is, cheer up! We'll get him back, and the Moon with him."

"But if the Moon's destroyed—" began the Brain.

"We don't know yet what happened to it," said Curt Newton. "But I'm beginning to have a theory. We're close to where the Moon should be, right now."

The *Comet* had been hurtling through space at a speed

approaching that of light, heading straight for the great gray-green sphere that was Earth. Curt Newton slackened speed, and turned to the Brain.

"Chart where the Moon should be, will you, Simon?" he requested.

"Of course, lad." The Brain's crystal case floated over to a great folder of papers on a work-table. A flick of a traction beam brought one out. "It would be almost at perigee—that is, if it still existed."

"Maybe it still does exist," Captain Future murmured. "Go on. Where's the position?"

"Due ahead. We should be cracking right down on it."

"Right!" Captain Future's big, wise hands slowed the *Comet* still more. "Observe, everybody. Observe everything."

For minutes the *Comet* continued its flight. No one spoke. Finally Captain Future addressed his companions:

"I judge we've passed through the space the Moon would have occupied. What do you get, any of you?"

"No spectroscopic reaction," reported the Brain at once.

Otho closed a valve and peered through a system of lenses at a glass flask.

"No dust or other matter," he said. "Vacuum—that's all."

"And no micro-gravitational impulses to a stray atom of solid matter," finished Joan. "Convinced, Curt? The Moon has been taken away."

Curt shifted controls.

"Stand by to land at New York. Simon, wouldn't it stand to reason that any explosion or change of condition would leave a trace?"

"Yes, but there aren't any traces," replied the Brain.

"Could we be hypnotized?" offered Otho.

"Not all of us," said Curt. "Remember, we first saw that the Moon was missing away out yonder on Asteroid Six-Ninety-Seven—surely too far from any fantastic machine to befuddle our minds. Also we have sailed right through the position in space the Moon ought to occupy."

"Do you suppose that there's been a displacement of molecules," suggested Joan.

Curt looked at her sharply. "No. Remember we've found no spectroscopic reaction."

"All you're doing is eliminating the possibilities, one by one," complained Otho.

"Let the lad alone," the Brain scolded the android. "By eliminating possibilities, we get closer to the truth."

Curt seemed musing in a realm whole light-years away. His hands moved as if in a dream, cutting the *Comet's* speed and knifing them into the atmosphere of Mother Earth. The ship made a wide spiral and braked, to drop on the square deck atop the great gleaming spire of Government Tower.

As Captain Future threw open the airlock and stepped to the roof, two armed guards brought their proton rifles to the ready.

"Identify yourself," said one.

"We've been waiting for them, sentry!" interposed a seam-faced, white-thatched man in the uniform of a marshal of the Planet Police. He was Ezra. "Come on, Captain Future and the rest of you—straight to the President!"

Curt Newton seemed suddenly to awaken.

"That's it, Simon, he said. "All possibilities eliminated except the one true fact. The Moon wasn't destroyed. She couldn't have been snatched away or changed into something else."

"She must still be there then," growled Otho.

Captain Future snapped his fingers in triumph.

"Right, Otho! She's still there!"

His companions clustered around him.

"Tell us!" they pleaded.

"Just a moment," begged Curt Newton.

"You can think while you walk," said Ezra Gurney.

He led the group across the landing stage and down a flight of stairs. On the floor below, where waited another familiar figure—burly, grim-eyed Halk Anders, commander of the System's police organization.

"Quite a gathering of notables," muttered Otho. "But I don't see any medals being shoved at us."

"Medals will wait, Otho," said Anders. "You may get double decorations—or just epitaphs."

"If there's any of us left to make funerals worth while," added Ezra Gurney. "The Moon, two thousand miles in diameter, has been blotted out of existence!"

"Joan told us," said Captain Future. "You said President Carthew wants us? Lead on."

Down more stairs, and into the office of the President of the Solar System.

James Carthew was gray-haired, distinguished-looking, a big-framed man, a brilliant scholar, who, in his younger days, had been an athlete. In two of the interplanetary wars he'd also been a daring officer of fighting men. Now, at the height of his career and powers, he was the beloved president of all habitable worlds within the space-latitudes dominated by Old Sol.

He looked up from his desk as the group entered.

"Captain Future!" he cried. "Welcome to you and your friends. Once more the united worlds depend on your wisdom and courage."

"What shall we do first, Mr. President?" answered Newton.

"The Moon has vanished," replied Carthew. "Undoubtedly you know the facts by now, and realize the implications are tremendous. It may indicate that some cosmic danger threatens to snatch other worlds—perhaps our own—into oblivion, too."

Slowly Captain Future nodded. "I agree so far, sir," he said. "What specific theories have been advanced?"

"Thousands," said the President. "The Science Committees are fighting, arguing, debating, as usual. What's your own opinion?"

"A speculative one," said Curt. "I believe the Moon is still where it has always been. Our instruments show there's no dust or vapor—no visible remains—not even a spectroscopic trace. An explosion or chemical change would have left behind debris. We find nothing our normal instruments can identify. Therefore the Moon is still

there—in a dimension beyond our own, slipped there, in its entirety, by agencies not now apparent.”

The President stared at him blankly. Then he nodded his gray head.

“You’ve traveled from one dimension to another before, you know about these things,” Carthew said. “But I know little about such matters. Explain further.”

“Take a two-dimensional universe, sir. It’s a plane, bounded by length and breadth, like the top of this desk.” He laid his big hand upon it. “My hand’s there on the desk-top. But I take it away, through height, the third dimension—” He lifted his hand. “Not a trace left. Right?”

“Right,” agreed President Carthew. “Then the Moon, which has three-dimensions, has vanished by the Fourth dimension?”

“Not necessarily, sir. The fourth dimension has been judged to be time.” He thought a moment. “I’ll illustrate this way. I’m three-dimensional, and I’m here in the office. But suppose I took ten seconds to leave and close the door. I’d have traveled ten seconds in time—the fourth dimension—and would be present here no more, but somewhere else.”

“I follow you again,” said the President. “The Moon has gone—where?”

“Into another dimension between the four we normally know. Suppose we call it Dimension X. The Moon’s there, away from our sight and sense.”

“And Grag’s there, too,” said Otho. “Poor Grag—my best friend, my old partner! What is Dimension X doing to him?”

CHAPTER III

Grag in Dimension X

When Grag had been directed by Captain Future to remain on the Moon, in charge of the routine laboratory work while the other Futuremen eluded the unwelcome effort to lionize them, he was pleased at his luck.

His great robot voice boomed to little Eek, the moon-pup that looked like a toy bear come to life.

"At least we're spared the sneers of Otho, and the antics of that little monstrosity, Oog. And if the Authorities come here and find only me—well, I won't fight off any medals. One would look good, soldered on here."

His mighty metal fist struck the huge curve of his torso, and clanged like a super alarm bell. Grag was like a seven-foot suit of medieval armor come to life. His great bulbous head was set with two photo-electric eyes and housed a brain of colloid metal—a brain not quite as stupid as Otho liked to pretend, but nevertheless the least acute of all the Futuremen. What he did have was strength. He was a living derrick, a walking tractor, for power.

Just now he was in the upper wing of the great laboratory-headquarters which the Futuremen maintained on the Moon, sealed from the outer airlessness, the cold of lunar day, by thick walls and airtight locks and panels. He was watching the progress of a dozen minor experiments, marking the result of each on a pad alongside. Eek hopped along near him, nuzzling the huge corrugated-soled feet.

"I know, I know," crooned Grag in a voice like an affectionate klaxon. "You're hungry, Eek. Well, come on, we'll have lunch."

He led the way to a cubical room, made more than ordinary size to accommodate his gigantic proportions. From a work-bench he caught a fistful of broken metal, wornout small parts from repaired motors and experimental engines. These he laid on the floor under Eek's nose.

"Some of this had chromium in it," he told Eek. "You like chromium, Eek. I'll have copper, as usual."

He took a big lump of red-glowing metal and fed it into the special digestion chopper inside his torso.

"And now," he said, "Uncle Grag will tell you a story."

Eek hopped up on Grag's knee. He sat up, nibbling on a flawed cog, like a squirrel on a nut.

"It all began with Roger Newton and Simon Wright,

who built this laboratory," said Grag. "With them was Elaine, Roger Newton's wife. They made many things—time-travellers, copper-temperers, atom-busters, inter-planetary fuels. They made Otho, too, on a day when they weren't up to par. But the most wonderful, useful thing they ever made was your Uncle Grag."

The robot's massive jointed shoulders shook with mirth.

"After a triumph like that, it was nothing for Roger Newton to make Simon Wright's brain immortal by transferring it to a crystal case," he continued. "And, after Victor Corvo killed Roger and Elaine Newton, it was your Uncle Grag who raised their boy Curt to be Captain Future, with Otho and Simon Wright helping a little. When the Futuremen went cruising through space, Victor Corvo had the bad judgment to fight us and, instead of Victor Corvo, he became Vanquished Corvo—ha! ha! ha!"

Grag's laughter was like a metal sea raging against metal rocks.

"That's what men call a joke, Eek. Victor, vanquished—understand? Well, when Ul Quorn tried to avenge his father, Victor Corvo, we chased him right up against the sun. And he whiffed away in flame, ship and all—"

The robot broke off suddenly.

"Eek," he said slowly. "Don't you feel as if the floor was somehow slanting?"

Eek hopped down, as if to investigate. Grag rose from where he sat. His big frame tottered.

"Things are out of plumb—but how could they be?" There was a quiver in the booming voice. "The walls look funny, too. Somehow angles aren't right angles. I wonder—"

He tramped to the door and opened it.

Things were black out there.

The upper wing of the laboratory was dimly lighted and several figures were grouped there, studying the experiments. Grag's photo-electric eyes, keener in the dark than normal human optics, counted five intruders.

One of the five strangers was dressed in brilliant turban and Martian cloak, and was human, but the others were beings that even Grag, who had been everywhere on the *Comet's* star-spanning flights, could not identify.

They were two legged and upright but grotesque of action and proportion.

Grag could see their pallid bodies, scantily dressed in metallic-gleaming jerkins and kilts, belted around with strange weapons. Their legs were short and bandy, like those of a frog, and their huge, flat, flapping feet were clad in shiny sandals. By contrast, their arms were long and brawny. Their hands had only three fingers.

At first glance they seemed to have no necks at all to support round hairless heads, which had mere holes for ears and noses, dark wide eyes and mouths like gaping slashes clear across the face. Though stocky, they were less than average human height. Even the man in the turban was shorter than customary.

"Space-burglars!" growled Grag. "I'll scoop them up—I can do it with one arm—and keep them for Captain Future!"

He clanked out into the open. Five faces turned to stare at him.

"Here comes one of the Futuremen!" cried the man with the Martian clothes, and his voice struck a responsive chord in Grag's memory.

"I know who you are!" roared Grag in return challenge. "Aren't you—"

"It's Grag, the robot!" interrupted the speaker. "He's strong but stupid. Trap him!"

A ray from somewhere played. There was a clang and a vibration. Darkness enveloped Grag as if dark water had closed over his body. The ray caused five plane surfaces of metal to close around him—four as walls and a fifth as a roof above. He was like a very large and grim rabbit caught in a box trap.

He stood still, great metal legs braced, huge spading-forks of hands doubling into fists at his sides. After a moment, his photo-electric eyes gauged the small chamber

which had clamped around him. He moved—and opposite him something else moved.

Grag peered at it. This thing in the trap with him was as big as himself, a burly, oversized human shape, as tensely cautious as himself. Plainly it was an enemy, a guard, sent to subdue him.

"Huh!" grunted Grag. "The champion, are you? Bully of the gang? I'll fix you quick!"

He shifted his feet, lifted his left hand and cocked his right, assuming the boxing stance.

At once the stranger fell into a like posture of defense.

"So you're left-handed!" said Grag. "A professional, eh? All right, come out punching and I'm going to knock your head off into your own lap."

He sprang and the stranger sprang to meet him.

Grag drove his left at the stranger's head. It landed with a solid ringing bang as he shifted and threw his right. Both punches scored, and he jumped backward, expecting to see his opponent, down and helpless in a crushed heap.

But the burly figure opposite him was bobbing and weaving without the slightest sign of injury. Grag's fiercest blows had not won!

"That was only the overture before the main performance," Grag taunted. "What's the idea, dodging around like that? Come on and fight."

He rushed, and his enemy met him halfway. Grag threw a dozen battering-ram blows. It was an attack that should have battered down a brick wall but he felt no wilting under his smashing knuckles. Winding up with all his metal-muscled strength, he planted a final super-robot blow. He landed, and the impact of his own blow sent him reeling back out with a resounding clangor of metal joints. Then he raised up, glared, and whooped for joy.

This time his giant adversary was down!

"That does it!" boomed Grag.

He scrambled to his feet.

But as he did so, the other figure also was getting up, a little unsteadily.

"Hey!" Grag thundered. "Don't you know when you've had enough?"

He moved forward cautiously. So did the stranger. Grag peered—and flinched. The stranger flinched, too.

"It's my own reflection!"

And so it was. For the first time since the fight had begun, Grag paused to study what he saw. The burly metal figure was an exact duplicate of himself.

"It's a mirror!" he cried. "No, not a mirror—a surface of gleaming metal! I've been fighting my own image!"

"The farce is over," said a twittery voice above him.

He glanced up. A small port was open in the ceiling-plate of the trap. Several pallid faces, with large glowing eyes, were peering down at him.

"The gas," said another twittering voice.

"Grag is a metal robot," said the man in Martian clothes. "Use the magnetic beam. It will lock his iron arms and legs."

A pale light stabbed down from above. Before Grag could dodge the beam struck him and the robot became helpless as though frozen in ice—a silent gleaming statue.

From above two of the pale men swung down. Grag, whose brain was not affected by the ray, heard them call to their companions overhead. Coils of wire were flung down.

Deftly the two strangers wound this stuff around Grag, and he was soon swaddled like an insect in the web of a mighty spider.

"Turn off the ray," called one of his captors.

It blinked off. Grag felt his powers return.

He strove against his bonds, but they were strong and snug, and beneath them he was helpless.

"Take away the trap," was the next order, and the walls fell away. Grag saw the dim upper wing of the corridor, and several more pale people ringing around him. But the man whom he had recognized was not present.

"Forward march," a captor bade him. "Your legs aren't tied."

Grag decided to act as Captain Future would have acted—pretend submission, watching meanwhile for a

chance to escape. He obediently clumped up the stairs, through an airlock door to the outside—the outside which he knew so well.

But Grag did not recognize it now. He had expected to step out into the familiar great expanse of rocky floor, its great central pinnacle of sky-aspiring stone, its horizon-ringing crater wall.

And this was all changed. He had emerged upon soil, crumbly and a little damp. The lock-door of the laboratory was familiar, but it opened into a little clearing among weird, fleshy plants that must make a jungle of immense extent—he could not tell, for things were dim here, too.

The sky was of a greenish gloom, and around him hung what the Moon had not known for eons—air, heavy air, with a slight warm breeze swaying the plants. He heard a distant trilling that might be insects or birds.

Far off a mighty movement crashed among the jungle growths.

"Why," he stammered. "This isn't the Moon—not our Moon!"

"Right, and wrong," said one of the twittering pale captors. "It's the Moon, yes, but it is not your Moon. We've taken it for ours. And you're looking at a very few of the alterations we have achieved."

CHAPTER IV

The Pursuit of the Moon

By the time the Futuremen and Joan Randall were back in the *Comet*, which still remained parked on the landing-stage atop Government Tower, Curt Newton had mapped out a plan of procedure. With their Moon laboratory gone, their best remaining equipment and files of experimental data were in the workshop of the trim-lined little space-craft. They were grouped around a table, littered with papers from a huge folder marked "Extra Dimensions."

"You talk as if Grag was still alive," said Otho hopefully.

"I think they'll keep him captive, whoever they are," said the Brain. "He's a masterpiece of scientific construction, and only scientists would be able to steal a whole satellite. As scientists, they'll want to use him for their own purposes."

Otho got up from where he sat. "Simon Wright, are you suggesting that Grag would turn traitor?" he asked fiercely.

"I said nothing like that, Otho," said the Brain soothingly. "I know Grag better, even, than you do. I helped make him and train him."

"Why should they grab the Moon?" inquired Joan.

"I think I know," said Captain Future. "We Futuremen would understand and resist. So they moved to take away the Moon, and all of us with it. As it turned out, they got only Grag."

"But we'll get him back," said Otho sternly.

"We have some data to help us," resumed Curt, assembling papers. "Here are the researches of Harris Haines, who penetrated the fifth dimension and who lost his life there. Remember how we followed him? Here's our report, too, of going into the dimension and returning. It's something with which to work."

"If we only had the benefit of Ul Quorn's research and experience," mused the Brain, dropping down to rest his crystal case on the table while his eyes on their flexible stalks studied the paper.

"Ul Quorn is dead, and better so," said Joan, very grimly for so pretty a girl. "We all saw him blow into fiery nothingness as his ship fell into the sun."

"But he was a master scientist," the Brain said. "He had only one rival in mind, imagination and daring—Curt Newton. Even Ul Quorn admitted it."

Curt Newton ignored the compliments. His gray eyes stared into space, as he remembered the conflict with his mightiest enemy.

"I recognized his powers, too," he said. "Ul Quorn was brilliant and brave. Pity he wasn't a good man, too."

Well, as Joan says, he's dead and disintegrated. We'll take up this dimensional study again."

"You think we're attacked from the fifth dimension?" asked Otho. Curt shook his rumpled red head.

"No, what we explored of the Fifth Dimension didn't show any science capable of stealing a world the size of our Moon."

"Which, then?"

"We'll find out. We still have that fifth-dimensional machinery—remember? And Simon's been working on it for months."

"Right, lad." The Brain floated to where, against a wall, were set strange controls and gauges, with attached fabrics of machinery, the whole bolted to a small section of flooring.

It was more compact and intricate than when it had served to plummet them into a new universe and a decisive conflict with Ul Quorn, the mixed-blood son of Captain Future's ancient enemy.

"Dimension travel," amplified Simon's flat-sounding resonator voice, "is only a matter of extension of the dimension-spanning power and observation of the space-time-dimension quotient at all times. This modification may not switch whole worlds, not even a ship the size of the *Comet*. But it can carry a smaller load—our life-rocket."

"Which will hold one observer," said Curt.

"I'll be the observer," put in Otho quickly. "I want to rescue Grag."

"No, me!" begged Joan. "You're all needed here to plan—"

"Sorry," went on Captain Future, in the voice of authority he used to settle such arguments. "I'm commander. I go. Think I'd let one of you head into such a danger while I hung back?" He turned to the panel that led to the life-rocket chamber.

The Brain had a suggestion to make.

"There's about a cubic foot of extra space, lad," Simon Wright reminded him. "I speak for that. Something says

this dimension-jumping will need both of us to observe."

"Come, then," granted Curt. "Otho and Joan, stay and observe here." He paused at a stand, pulling into view a volume of notes. "Follow these. Perhaps you can develop even better gadgets, and we'll be back and incorporate them into a real trans-dimensional counter invasion."

He looked at Joan silently, tenderly. She was pale, but she smiled bravely. He started to say something, and did not trust himself. He strode into the life-rocket hold, with the Brain hovering close at his heels.

Joan looked at the notes, her eyes strangely bright.

"These say that the *Comet* must fly near the selected point—which means the point where the moon would be swinging in her orbit if there were a Moon—about three thousand miles off, and follow the path."

"Thirty-seven and a half miles a minute," amplified Otho. "That's Moon's speed in her journey around Earth. Ready?"

They went together to the controls, and within minutes were seeking the indicated position in space. The *Comet* fell into the designated course and speed.

"Now," said Joan, "what about Curt and Simon? Will—we will we ever see them again?"

The android shook his high-craniumed bald head.

"It's been swifter than light, this realization of what happened, and what must be done to fight it. That's Captain Future for you. Only he could have puzzled it out. We've all gone with him into other dimensions, traveling in time—all the experiences that should have pointed the way. But he knew. Listen! The space-rocket's cleared!"

Inside the tiny craft Curt and Simon had set up the dimension-shifting machinery. Curt steered, Simon observed and operated with his traction-beams.

"As before, no hint of gravity-pull to where the Moon should be," he reported.

"Try fifth dimension—we're fairly familiar with it," said Captain Future, and he threw a lever.

There was a moment of blackness and physical convul-

sion; then their brains cleared. Simon's flexible eye-stalks sought the gauges.

"No gravity reaction to indicate a satellite, or even a little lump of rock close to us," clipped out the Brain's resonator. "This point in the fifth dimension shows nothing but space."

Curt threw over the lever further, further, further. . . .

"No indications," the Brain was saying. "Work back, lad, and not so fast. Remember how small a difference there is between dimensions. Again. Again . . . just a little click of the lever—hold it!"

Curt paused, hand on the lever.

"Yes?"

"Gravity indications strong," the Brain reported. "I get evidence of a large body in this space. Distance, about two thousand miles. Pull shows a mass comparable to—"

"That's enough—we've found the Moon!" cried Captain Future. Still gripping the controls, he bent to glance out of the forward port. "Look, Simon! there she is!"

They had found their lost home in space. But how different was the appearance of the Moon!

Gauge marks and gradations on the glassite pane of the port enabled Captain Future to compute quickly that here was a world spherical in shape, and approximately 2,000 miles in diameter—the size and shape of Luna, where his home was located. All else seemed different, however.

At a scant two thousand miles distance, the globe filled a large part of the sky, and it was fuzzed and wreathed with clouds, indicating a damp, thick atmosphere. There were great masses of dark and pale vegetation. A gleam here and there indicated lakes and rivers.

"Don't touch that lever, lad," the Brain cautioned him. "As I take it from our instruments, we're really between dimensions just now. And that's why the Moon looks different. Because she's really two moons—our own, wrenched from our dimension, and another that's mixed in."

"That's possible," nodded Curt, still studying the strange world ahead. "That's probable, too, for a dimension-shifting device big enough to involve a whole world such as this must have a base almost as large as the world itself, just as our dimension-shifter is the size of this little space-skiff."

"You think, then, that a whole planet or moon of this invasion dimension—Dimension X, you call it—is fitted up as a shifter?"

"That's only a guess, but it seems to me to be a good one. Let's drop down and see."

Simon Wright, too, was gazing out of the port.

"Drop where?" he asked.

"Where our laboratory should be. I don't see mountains or craters or anything like Tycho to guide us, but our charts can help. Call out directions as I head in. I'm landing near the lunar Antarctic circle, where Tycho ought to be."

The Brain watched the charts and called out warnings or other data as Curt settled the *Comet*. Finally they came opposite the jungle-swaddled area where Tycho should have been. Curt saw no clear space large enough for an improvised port, and so he hovered for a moment, directing his bow-proton gun blasts against the lush thickets. The jungle seemed to slough and cook away, like strange frost-figures under a burning glass.

"Your blast-fires looked greenish and strange," observed the Brain. "This atmosphere plays strange tricks."

"But the fact that combustion takes place shows there's plenty of oxygen," reminded Captain Future. "That space I cleared looks reasonably flat and solid. I'm setting us down."

The little life-rocket dropped down with a slight thump, and Curt studied the atmosphere test-gauge a minute.

"Oxygen, nitrogen, carbon dioxide, water vapor, traces of other gases—all in breathable combination. I'm on my way out."

He flung back a panel and emerged. The Brain floated after him, hovering at shoulder height.

All around them, at the edge of the clearing they had made, grew great thick clumps and mats of what appeared to be giant fungus or lichen. Captain Future slipped his proton gun from his holster and walked toward it.

"Vegetable—or is it? It might be a form allied to the plantlike sea animals of Earth's oceans. I'd swear there was a little ripple of motion there that was from the growths themselves."

"It might be animal," agreed the Brain, still hovering beside him. "Or it might be a form of life neither animal nor vegetable, but peculiar to this universe. Which way are we heading?"

From his belt Captain Future took a compass and studied it.

"The needle shakes a little in this dimension, but it seems to work to some extent," he said. "As I judge, we ought to head straight through here, and not many minutes' walk will take us to where our laboratory should be, if any of it is left."

"I'll see," volunteered the Brain, and wafted his crystal case aloft against the dim green sky on one of his traction beams. He disappeared above the top of the jungle, but was back in a few moments.

"There's a clearing just ahead, and I thought I saw a metal lock, like ours," he reported. "Head toward it."

Together they entered the jungle. The growths, though thickly set, were not too hard to push aside or bend down. Captain Future's mighty arms and the Brain's deftly used traction beams forced a way through the thickets.

At last they came to the last belt of jungle, could see the dim green light of the clearing beyond. Bending his head as if to buck a line of football players, Captain Future wormed his way through.

"Here they are," commanded a voice he half-remembered. "Quick!"

He spun around, lifting his proton gun. But upon and

around him fell something like a thousand wiry snakes all working together—a net of flexible metal strands, that covered him in one second and in another second was drawn tight around him a dozen ways. He fired once, but already he was being tripped and flung from his feet. The gun was knocked from his fingers.

"Out of here, Simon!" he cried. "Back to the life-rocket!"

"I won't leave you!" came Simon Wright's grim rejoinder. His traction-beams tore and worried at the net.

But little palefaced men were rushing, throwing another net. The crystal case that housed the Brain was caught and wound in intricate folds.

Outside the net, bonds were being tightened on Captain Future. Even so, he was difficult to subdue. Six men, then eight, fought and tugged and battled before he was rendered helpless.

"Let him get up," commanded the first voice that had spoken.

Captain Future struggled erect. He faced the figure that was darker of complexion than the pallid sneakers who had ambushed them, and wore Martian turban and cloak.

"We observed your approach, and knew it must be you," continued the commander. "That last blast to clear a little landing field showed where you came down. And we prepared this reception."

Captain Future strove against his bonds.

"If I didn't know that the sun's heat had cooked him to nothingness," he said, "I'd swear that you were—"

"I know what you're thinking, Captain Future. And you'd be right! That sun-fire didn't kill me; it only threw me into another dimension. I'm Ul Quorn, the Magician of Mars, and this third meeting is going to be the finish of you!"

CHAPTER V

The World-Eaters

Of the many master qualities that made Captain Future the great defender of the commonwealth of worlds, perhaps the greatest, commentators have agreed, was the force and speed of his thought.

Born of the brilliant Roger and Ethel Newton to a heritage of science and intellectual might, reared and schooled by Simon Wright's peerless brain-supervision, seasoned by travel and adventure and study on the strangest and most surprising of planets throughout the galaxies, Curt Newton was more than the foremost scientist of all civilizations; he was the foremost thinker, concrete, abstract, philosophical and strategical.

The rapid classification of facts that had led to his decision about the dimensional theft of the Moon, that had amazed even his companions, was not as effortless as it had seemed—it was only that Curt Newton could and did think and decide, as Otho had said, with the rapidity of light.

Now, faced by mortal peril and complete surprise, his mind did not go blank and helpless, as might so many others. It functioned all the swifter.

Ul Quorn, Magician of Mars, had fought him twice and failed twice. At their first conflict, the evil genius who was Roger Corvo's son and self-appointed avenger had wound up on Cerberus, the drab prison moon that circles around Pluto. Escaping by a miracle of scientific scheming, he gathered new allies and powers for a second defiance of the Futuremen that led in and out of the fifth dimension, and concluded as Ul Quorn's ship drove, or seemed to drive, to destruction in the heat of the sun. And now here he was, on the Moon that was somehow not the Moon, with Captain Future bound and helpless before him.

Brilliant, ruthless, brave, Ul Quorn had a few faults. One of them was vanity. Captain Future, estimating and facing the situation in headlong seconds of thought, knew that he must use that weakness against his captor.

"Only you, Ul Quorn, could have escaped as you did," he said, in tones of sullen admiration. "And I still don't see how."

"Thanks!" Ul Quorn laughed spitefully, but his eyes shone with vain gratification. "Coming from Captain Future, that's the greatest compliment I could hope for. But you've figured out so many mysteries, why isn't this one understandable? I was diving into the sun. An ordinary ship—with an ordinary steersman—would have perished. But Ul Quorn was steering, and the ship was fitted—remember—with dimension-traveling machinery. The moment of explosion seemed to throw that machinery into activity that outdid itself. I went on, past even the fifth dimension—"

"Into Dimension X?" supplied the voice of Simon Wright, from the cocoon-like swaddling of bonds where he hung between two of the grotesque pallid followers of Ul Quorn.

"Call it that, if you like. X, the unknown quantity—the spot where dark deeds happen—yes, Dimension X!" Ul Quorn was enjoying himself hugely. "And I found what I could find anywhere! New powers, new allies, a new plan to make myself what I should always have been, master of worlds!"

"Too bad," commented Curt gently, "that N'Rala didn't live to share your triumph. She was a beautiful girl, and she wasn't quite all evil. Your influence was bad for her."

"Who said N'Rala was dead?" said Ul Quorn. "She's very much alive and—"

He broke off suddenly, and when he spoke again, his voice sounded gruff. "Forget N'Rala. You'll forget everything soon. I plan to destroy you both."

Ul Quorn could do that, Curt reflected. He and the Brain were helpless for the moment, among armed enemies. It was time to use another of Ul Quorn's own weak-

nesses against him—the trait of spiteful curiosity that stemmed from a twisted but brilliant pursuit of scientific knowledge.

“I’m ready to die,” said Curt. “So is Simon. When we’re gone, you can’t find out what preparations are being made against you.”

“Preparations?” repeated Ul Quorn. “You mean, defense against invasion? Impossible! We sent spies—the best spies—”

“Your best aren’t good enough,” taunted Simon Wright, taking his cue from Captain Future. “We’re here, aren’t we? Do you think we’d come smashing in without arranging—in secret—a big surprise for you back in our own dimension?”

“Don’t tell any more, Simon,” said Captain Future. “He’s going to kill us, anyway.”

One of the pallid monstrosities began to twitter.

“Perhaps, we should wring their secrets from them,” he suggested.

“Not so easily done,” Captain Future snubbed the creature. “Ask Ul Quorn if I ever told anybody anything I didn’t want to tell. Especially if I’m to die, anyway.”

“There are many ways of dying,” said the pallid thing. “Easy ways, and hard ways.”

“Stop that,” ordered Ul Quorn. “I know Captain Future, and he’s my most deadly enemy. But he’s the wisest, bravest, most dangerous creature I’ve ever encountered. Threats won’t work, and not many tricks. March them away and put them in the safest place possible.”

The misshapen assistants of Ul Quorn moved forward obediently. With a pallid captor at each bound elbow, Captain Future marched across the clearing to an open panelway that he recognized as an entrance to his own laboratory.

Here, at least, the nature of things on the Moon did not appear changed. They descended to a corridor below, marched along it, and one of the pale men flung open an inner door. Captain Future was pushed into a dark, cubical chamber, and a quick spurt of flame from a gunlike

instrument roughly welded the loose end of his tether to the metal bulkhead. Another fusing hung the Brain in his bonds as in a hammock, just out of possible reach of Captain Future.

The door clanged shut, a lock snicked into place. Captain Future strained his eyes in the dimness. In a far corner stood a massive, towering figure. Could it be—

"Grag?"

"Chief!" came the booming voice of the robot. "Did they get you, too?"

"Simon and me both," replied Curt. "Are you tied? What happened?"

"I don't quite know," admitted Grag ruefully. "There was a big rough fellow I whipped—no, that was me, in a mirror. Then funny little pallid apes, and someone I remember from somewhere directed them."

"It's Ul Quorn," Captain Future told him, and quickly went on to describe all that happened. He explained to the puzzled Grag the significance of the dimension-shift that had somehow swallowed and altered the Moon.

"And now, what happens to us?" asked the Brain when Curt had finished.

"Curtains, as they said in the Twentieth Century," suggested Grag.

"Nothing of the sort," replied Captain Future quickly. "I know Ul Quorn's merciless, but he practically admitted that he needed to keep us alive. He wants to know what, if anything, is being done against this invasion by dimensions. That means he won't kill us, or do weird surgery on our brains."

"Of course not," put in the Brain. "Such surgery would make us slaves of his own mind, but it would also wipe out our own knowledge, which he thinks he must have."

"He'll try to get it by torture," suggested Grag. "Of course, I can't feel pain, but I don't know anything he wants to know, anyway."

"I don't see why we can't get out of these metal ropes," interposed the Brain, jiggling in his criss-cross of bonds. "If my traction-beams worked properly, I think I

could set us free, but they're just not as handy as usual."

"And I'm a little clumsy, too," said Grag.

"Perhaps the dimension-shift blurs the finest mechanical performance," suggested Curt. "Yes, if they give us any time whatever, we ought to hit on some way to—"

He broke off. A small trapdoor near the ceiling was opening, and a pallid hand thrust in. A moment later something fell with a solid *chunk* on the flooring. The trapdoor closed.

"What was that?" demanded the Brain, extending his eyestalks through the criss-cross of ropes. "Another captive? What?"

"Just a little thing, the size of a rabbit," said Curt. "Almost hidden from sight in metal cordage."

"But not for long!" boomed Grag exultantly. "That cordage will melt off like snowflakes in the sun, and then we'll be free!"

"How?" the brain rasped.

"Don't you understand? That's Eek, my little Eek! Bound in metal. But Eek eats metal! He'll eat these bonds off of us!"

When the prisoners had been led away and shut up, Ul Quorn stood alone in the vestibule of the invasion headquarters that had been the laboratory-home of the Futuremen. There was no longer any need to pose commandingly before Captain Future and the pallid grotesque beings who obeyed Ul Quorn's orders.

Ul Quorn sagged a little in his brilliant robe. His handsome, sensitive face twitched a little beneath the turban. If anyone had been watching, they would have seen the real weakness of Ul Quorn—he was a mongrel. Martian and Earthman and Venusian were his ancestors—Martian for high, broad cranium and red complexion, Venusian for fineness of feature and proportion, Earthman for sinewy muscle and black hair.

But the best of the races had not come out in the fusion. Ul Quorn was all these peoples, and none of them. He was alien, in body and in spirit.

Now there were no watchers, or he might not have relaxed. He sighed, and headed to his own quarters. These were luxuriously fitted, as Ul Quorn's taste dictated, and on a table stood a telaudio with various new improvements devised by the scientific genius of Ul Quorn himself. He sat in front of it, and sighed again.

"Thinking of me, Ul Quorn?" came a soft, silky voice, the voice of a woman who both questioned and mocked.

He stared at the vision-screen. He saw there a supple figure in the clinging rich robes of a Martian noblewoman. The figure came closer in the image, until only the face smiled out at him, a beautiful rose-tinted face, with brilliant eyes that laughed and challenged.

"N'Rala!" muttered Ul Quorn. "You—have you followed me into this between-dimensional universe, after all?"

"You falter in your mind, Ul Quorn," said the silky voice. "Didn't you invent this dimension-spanning telaudio frequency and give me the only attachment, to communicate with you?"

"I did," said Ul Quorn, "and you said you'd destroy it—wouldn't communicate. You'd stay back in the other dimension and rule your own empire there without me." His voice grew sad and appealing, not at all like the Ul Quorn who had threatened whole systems. "Does this mean, N'Rala, that you'll join me in my own schemes? Because I need you."

"Ah, Ul Quorn needs me!" N'Rala laughed musically. "I fought and toiled for Ul Quorn, tasted defeat at the hands of the Futuremen for Ul Quorn, and he valued me only as I was useful! Now, since we plunged into a new dimension and found that the dwellers there saw us as different individuals, with different wills and wishes, he suddenly misses my presence at his side! No, I stay here, Ul Quorn. Because someone else finds my presence of great value."

"The Overlord," growled Ul Quorn. "You turn to him."

"I turn to nobody," said N'Rala. "I have decided to emulate you, guide myself only by my own wishes and

plans. Much is happening here. Perhaps your plan of conquest back in the universe where we started will affect it, a little, as I wish. Meanwhile I only wanted to see how you were faring, Ul Quorn. Goodby."

The screen went blank. Ul Quorn sagged in his chair, frowning.

Yes, N'Rala had spoken this much truth. She had once done Ul Quorn's bidding like a slave, using her considerable scientific skill, her dazzling personality, to forward schemes that twice almost conquered whole planetary systems. But the final step in the last clash with the Futuremen had whirled them and their ship into Dimension X.

There, as if suddenly realizing how much a subordinate she had remained in his estimation, she had turned from him, and taken her own path.

A knock sounded on the door of Ul Quorn's room. In came one of the pallid creatures, wearing the shiny collar of a junior officer. A big three-fingered hand lifted in salute.

"You are required to present yourself to the High Command," said the officer. "You must report on progress."

Ul Quorn rose.

"The prisoners," he said. "Are they well confined?"

"Yes. Bound and locked up, with guards at every possible entry."

"And the small craft in which Captain Future came?"

"It is being brought from where it landed."

"Treat it carefully," admonished Ul Quorn. "It has dimension-travelling equipment, undoubtedly. That is all."

The officer departed. Ul Quorn rose from his chair and turned to a rear corner of the room. A sort of coffinlike case stood there, of white metal, roughly but strongly made. It was set all over with dials, terminals, strangely fabricated mazes of wiring and bus rods. Though the master switch was turned to "off," there was about it a tiny whisper and throb as of tense power.

Ul Quorn threw the switch. A hum arose, great sparks of light darted out. He stepped inside.

He felt the sudden shock, tearing every fiber of body and brain, that always comes with a switch from dimension to dimension. Recovering, he found himself in blackness so thick that it seemed to choke and deaden any normal sense. But he knew, from previous experience in this meeting-place, that there were enclosing walls, and around him sat entities—high leaders of the strange people with which he was leagued.

Through the utter dark cut a voice—a voice high but harsh, like the clang of metal, dripping danger as liquid venom:

"We will speak, servant, in the language of what you call your Solar System, that my lieutenants and I may accustom ourselves to its sound and use."

"Don't call me a servant," Ul Quorn replied, proudly and disdainfully. "I'm here with you, under these stupid limitations, because I choose it that way."

A moment of silence followed, as if the harsh speaker were considering the daring response and deciding whether to let it pass. Then:

"You blundered into our universe, caused disruption and damage, until we captured you and the other survivor of your party. Your one chance for survival was that offer to betray your native system of worlds to us."

Ul Quorn chuckled.

"What is the chance of survival of my companion? N'Rala—what has she offered? Conquest in another direction—or has she done the conquering?"

"N'Rala does not enter this conversation," said the harsh voice.

"You're a fool to count me as a captive or a subordinate," said Ul Quorn. "And don't accuse me of betraying anything. If I ever felt loyal or friendly to my home string of planets I'd have disdained to help you overwhelm them. I'm serving my own purposes, not yours."

"A little patience, Overlord," came another voice of

the inhuman metal-venom tone, but more calm. "He is valuable to us."

"He's not indispensable," the one addressed as Overlord retorted. "I honor him too much by this bargaining."

"So," interrupted Ul Quorn, who was never at a loss for boldness, "you admit to bargaining? Well, let's forget threats and poses. You want to conquer my native System for reasons we both know. I want to conquer it, too—for revenge. We can help each other without interfering with each other. Your organization of forces, instruments and science is at the peak. I, familiar with these Solar System worlds, am acting as the intelligence and reconnaissance departments—"

"Enough of that," broke in the Overlord. "We have gone to tremendous labor and expense. One of the worlds of our System has been used to snare one of the worlds of yours. We want some word on what progress is being made."

"Great progress," said Ul Quorn. "We have been able to seize the individual most to be feared—Captain Future."

"I thought that his capture had been bungled."

"Only at the first move to seize the satellite. Captain Future, left free, deduced what had happened, as we might have foreseen. He came into the between-dimensional field, and we captured him and also a small craft in which he made the transfer. Now," and Ul Quorn became impressive, "we shall send our first important expedition into the Solar System, in that ship."

"You'll command, of course," said the Overlord.

"Yes, because I am of the Solar System race, and will not be recognized as alien. I want N'Rala to go with me. She is the only other specimen available."

"N'Rala stays here," said the Overlord.

"Without her I can do nothing," sighed Ul Quorn. "Do you not trust us together?"

"I do not need to trust when I do not fear." The Overlord thought for a moment. "She will be sent to you."

Ul Quorn decided to comment no further on N'Rala,

lest he betray his triumph in getting her back. He changed the subject.

"Between dimensions, then, we occupy and dominate an entire world—Luna, satellite of the Solar System's third planet, Earth. To observers throughout the Solar System, Luna seems to have vanished. Captain Future, the only one who knew and met our threat, is also in our hands. His subordinates—"

"Subordinates?" echoed the Overlord. "Will they not know what he knew?"

"Not so clearly as he did. Our first task will be to capture or destroy them as well."

Ul Quorn was maliciously eager.

"Proceed with that. You may go."

Ul Quorn stepped backward, through the dimension-transfer field. A shock, a struggle of all his fibers, and he was again in his quarters.

His first move was to the telaudio. He turned it on.

"N'Rala?"

"I'm listening, Ul Quorn. Orders come fast, don't they?"

"You heard him, then?"

"I am to work with you again, Ul Quorn," said N'Rala, her face smiling from the screen. "But not for you. That's understood—the Overlord is an understanding individual. Stand by to meet me."

Her image vanished from the screen. There was a buzz in the coffin-box in the corner, and she stepped out toward him.

"What do we do first?" she asked. "Where's our destination?"

"Earth—New York," replied Ul Quorn. "Come with me."

CHAPTER VI

Counter-Espionage

For one brief second, aboard the *Comet*, Joan Randall and Otho knew fierce joy when they saw the little life-rocket whip back into view from nowhere; then the joy turned to consternation as the tiny craft plunged past them toward Earth.

Joan, at the controls, leaned to the telaudio. "Curt!" she called.

"Curt—Captain Future! Why don't you come back here?"

No reply. Not even a waver in the course of the smaller craft. It continued toward Earth. Joan whirled the *Comet* and rocketed in pursuit.

Then happened something even more mystifying and daunting. The proton gun mounted aft on the rocket spouted fire. Only by chance did it miss the *Comet*, and Joan quickly slanted and buck-jumped in space to avoid a second blast.

"They've gone mad!" cried Otho. "They don't recognize us."

"Would Curt fail to recognize the *Comet*?" Joan demanded. "That's the life-rocket that left but someone else is aboard! An enemy!"

"Enemy?" Otho was at the gun-levers. "I'll blast him."

"No, we must capture them!" Joan reached a free hand to the telaudio dials. "Hello, Planet Patrol! *Comet* calling! Let me have Ezra Gurney."

"Gurney here," snapped back a gruff voice, and the seamed face of the marshal popped into view on the screen.

"Ezra!" Joan greeted him. "Quick! Send a ship to observe at the point we're quitting—and others to head off a life-rocket dropping down—"

"Too late," groaned Otho. "I see it shooting toward the space-docks—no, the dock warrens beyond!"

It was true. They had followed the fugitive into Earth's atmosphere, tailed it down to New York. And the little craft was heading for the thick of the shabby, unsavory district beyond the docks, where all races and types of men, all of them raffish and some dangerous, lived in furtive and sometimes lawless squalor.

The *Comet* leveled off and spiraled above the place where the life-rocket had settled among spires and towers. Ezra Gurney, in a space-ketch of the Patrol, came alongside, synchronized his speed, and maneuvered aboard through the airlock which was opened for him.

"Glad to see you, Ezra," said Joan hastily. "Take over here, will you? Otho and I must chase that life-rocket."

"What's it all about?" pleaded the old marshal.

"No time to explain. But we'll keep in touch with these." From a locker Joan snatched two pocket transmitters, and handed one to Otho. "Do as we ask, Ezra! We'll tell you everything, when the universe is safe, and Captain Future is back. But we have to go now!"

She fairly dragged him to the *Comet's* controls, and before he could frame another question, she and Otho were into the ketch and dropping down.

As they expected, a small plummet-way showed among the towers. The *Comet* could never have dropped into it, but the ketch could. They slid, like a bullet down the muzzle of a gun, to a small private landing stage, surrounded by dingy structures. Out they jumped.

"There's the life-rocket," said Joan, pointing. "Its hatch is open, the raft is empty. Where did he—or she, or whoever was in there—get to?"

"We'll find out," said Otho. "Look—half a dozen doorways to dives and bars. The trail may lead into, and through, any of them. I'll start one way and you the other, unless you're afraid."

"When was I ever afraid?" demanded Joan.

She strode from the stage into a dingy establishment with a sign promising drinks from all the planets.

But there were only stupid barmen and more stupid customers inside, not the remotest sign of excitement or other evidence that a fugitive might have come in. Flashing her police badge on the proprietor, Joan made him conduct her through the little office, the kitchen and several rooms. She found no trace.

In the bar next door was only a pudgy half-breed Uranian, who had been drinking too much of his own wares. He happily allowed her to search, and was almost too admiring until Joan dropped her hand to the hilt of her proton gun.

The third bar had half a dozen customers. The big green Jovian who was serving them looked up at her as she entered. One of the customers leered and giggled. Another cursed.

"That's one of them," said the man who cursed, a brutal-faced Earthman. "I've seen her. A friend of Captain Future."

"To be sure I'm a friend of Captain Future," replied Joan, walking toward him. "And I'm here on his business. What—"

"Grab her," said the Jovian, and closed his green paw on her elbow before she could draw the proton gun.

She strove frantically and with science, for from Captain Future Joan had learned many a grip and twist of wrestling, but these creatures were too many for her. They had forced her into a corner, and one of them was opening a door, when a hoarse voice hailed them from the entry.

"All of you roughing a lady! Is that the way you do things in this dive? I have a notion to bust yuh!"

The newcomer swayed a little on his feet, as if he had been drinking. His flying-clothes were disarranged, his face flushed, his mop of gingery hair disordered. Only Joan could recognize him as Otho, hastily disguised with makeup from the little kit he always carried. He came toward them, feigning a drunken truculence.

"I never did like fighting women," he told the group.

One of them covered him with a proton pistol. Otho's own weapon was out of sight. He lifted his hands warily, but watched his chance.

"Brave, aren't you?" he jibed. "About six of you, but you need proton artillery against one man and a girl!" He spat on the floor in contempt.

"You don't look hard to handle," boomed the big Jovian, who seemed to head the party. "Get out of here!"

"Wait," said one of the others. "He's seen us grab her—and we've drawn guns. If he goes blubbering to any police, we're finished."

"I'll bet you're afraid of the police," snarled Otho. "Afraid of the little boys of the junior space-scouts, too, even the babies in the orphanage! I came around here looking for life, tough specimens, real live bars, and I find sissies!"

"You'll find a lump on your head," threatened the Jovian.

Otho swung around to face him, still rocking on his feet as if unsteady.

"Oh, oh, what a big brave hero!" he taunted. "Loud-mouthing it, with all his gang of gunmen around him! I could deflate you down to an asteroid-dwarf in about six seconds if I wanted."

The Jovian clenched a fist and darted it. Otho appeared to stumble just then, out of its way. He chuckled thickly.

"Let's grab him," said the brute-faced Earthman, and three of them advanced toward Otho. But the Jovian lifted a huge muscular hand.

"Wait! This space-tramp is saying things to me that I'll take from nobody! He thinks I need a gang of helpers, does he?" Out darted a long arm, throwing open a door. "Come into the back room, you! I'll hammer a little sense into that drink-drenched head of yours!"

"Drink, did you say? Sure!" And Otho lurched into the room beyond. The Jovian followed, closed the door and turned a key. He faced Otho again.

"Now—" he began, and scowled.

The drunken stranger was suddenly sure of himself,

standing lightly and springily on his feet, fists lifted and ready for action. But the Jovian was twice Otho's size. He thrust out his own left arm, long and muscle-knobbed. He had several inches the reach of this boaster, and was almost twice as big.

"All right, let's start this battle!" he growled, and moved in, jabbing.

But Otho's head whipped back. Otho's elastic neck momentarily lengthened and writhed. The fist darted past, and Otho's arm, equally elastic, shot out and seemed to grow about six inches. The Jovian growled as Otho's knuckles barked his chin.

"Owww!" yelled Otho, as if he had felt the punch, and from outside came a laugh.

"Give it to him," called one of the men in the bar. "You'd better grind him to meal, because if you don't, we will."

"Don't worry!" bawled the Jovian, and advanced again.

But again Otho hit him. The Jovian blinked and snarled. How did this strange customer manage to out-reach him. And Otho emitted another cry, as of pain.

More applause from outside, where the Jovian's friends apparently foresaw the pulverization of Otho; and the huge green man, throwing all caution to the winds, rushed and grappled.

It was like grappling a dragon-eel of the Venusian marshes. The mighty Jovian arms clamped around Otho's middle, which readily yielded to them, shrinking and writhing. Otho's legs grew long and snaky, twining in turn around his enemy's middle.

Otho's sharp elbow drove under the spadelike chin, bruising the throat and driving the head back. Otho's long, lightning fingers were everywhere at once, gouging, twisting, probing nerve centers.

The giant let go—he had to—and Otho, rallying his android sinews, put all he had into a roundabout smashing swing, not greatly inferior in power to Captain Fu-

ture's own prize punch. It smacked the point of the great green jaw, and the Jovian went down, cold and senseless, to quiver on the floor.

At once Otho whipped out his pocket transmitter.

"Ezra Gurney!" he called softly into it. "Drop down—carefully, now—outside the window where I'm sending you a beam."

He waited seconds, watching from the window. Gingerly the *Comet* lowered itself into view. A hatchway opened, and Ezra peered out.

"Quiet!" warned Otho. "Reach out, help me drag this man into the ship!"

They hustled the unconscious Jovian in.

"Strip him," commanded Otho. "I want his clothes. Quick! And leave me in my own quarters."

He pulled a variety of strange objects from lockers—make-up pigments, padding, a pair of boots with lifts that would give him height to approximate that of the giant he had felled. His hands, outdoing their own bewildering swiftness, rubbed chemical oil into his features, moulding and altering.

Otho's clear-cut profile vanished under cunning self-sculpture, took on the aspect of the stunned Jovian. Then a quick, smooth coat of green pigment, padding of body, arms, legs. He hustled himself into the garments taken from the captive.

"Take that specimen to your most secret cell," he told Ezra Gurney. "Work on him with everything—arguments, truth-rays, everything. He'll talk. He must talk. He's one of the subordinate rats that threaten us."

"But you and Joan," protested the marshal. "Are you going to be safe?"

Otho shook his disguised head.

"When are the Futuremen ever safe? When did they ever try to be safe? Holy sun-imps, man, we're fighting to get our Moon back!"

He turned his back on Ezra's mystification and sprang through the window again. The men outside the door were pounding and yelling.

Slumping and puffing as though in semiconscious

agony, Otho opened the door. "He—that stranger—beat me almost to death!" he moaned.

"So?" taunted a silky voice he remembered. N'Rala came into the room among the unsavory wastrels who held Joan a prisoner. "I'm glad I came back. It's easy, from what the others tell me, to guess what happened. While your friends were taking every precaution to secure this aide of Captain Future—Joan Randall—you let Otho, in one of his disguises, make a sorry fool out of you!"

"It couldn't be," mumbled Otho. "He had hair and looked entirely different."

"Otho is the greatest disguise artist of all the worlds," snapped N'Rala, her beautiful eyes flashing. "He fooled you, beat you, and escaped. Thank the gods of space I returned. Ul Quorn is going on, but I return to advance headquarters with reports, and I'll take this prisoner and you, too. You'll have a lot of explaining to do."

Otho congratulated himself on not staring, gasping, or asking what strange cosmic freak had brought back Ul Quorn as an adversary. There was much he could not understand, but one thing was clear—he would be taken to the very root of the mystery, as one of the conspirators in disgrace.

"Go, one of you, to the life-rocket," ordered N'Rala. "Bring the dimension-shifting apparatus. We'll modify it to take a larger craft over."

Otho faced Joan. She was bound and guarded. He attempted to cheer her by a stealthy wink, but she drew herself up, glaring at him contemptuously.

She mistook him for the Jovian who had gone into the room with Otho and locked the door. Again Otho forebore to show by his face the thoughts in his head. But he accepted Joan's contempt as the greatest compliment his power of disguise had ever received.

CHAPTER VII

Luna Gone Crazy

Eek ate his way through the bonds of Grag first. Then he attacked the swaddling of Simon Wright's brain-cage while Grag's huge finger fumbled and pulled at the metal cordage that bound Captain Future.

"No knots," reported Grag dolefully. "It's all stuck together, with some quick-setting solder or flux. Here, Eek, have you set the Brain free? Then eat a third helping!"

He held his pet to the strands that crossed over Captain Future's broad chest. Eating more slowly, for he was almost satisfied, Eek finally gnawed Captain Future to freedom.

"Now what?" demanded Grag, as Captain Future stretched and flexed his freed muscles. "Eek's too full to nibble a way out through the bulkheads, even if he hadn't had it drummed into him that he must never make a meal off of our furniture, tools or habitations. And the door"—Grag caught the handle and shook it experimentally—"I might be able to smash it, but that would bring them all around us."

"We ought to get just one or two of them in here," said Curt with a nod. "If we could conquer them separately, that'd help a lot."

"*Hsst!*" warned Simon Wright, hovering near the trap-like window through which Eek had been dropped. "Already you've made a little too much commotion. I hear steps coming along the corridor."

At Captain Future's gesture, Grag drew himself up against the metal partition at one side of the door, while Future took the opposite side. They heard the lock-tumblers falling, the door opened, and one of the pallid guards peered in.

Like a flash Grag's hand caught him around the throat, stilling at once his attempt to cry out. Lifting the creature

by the scruff, as he would have handled a kitten, Grag whirled the body around his great round head as if to dash it to the floor.

"Don't kill him, Grag," said Curt quickly. He pushed the unlocked door shut while Grag lowered his captive. Curt eyed the captive.

"If you speak above a whisper, or even then without our permission, this robot will squash you to pulp. Understand?"

Gasping wretchedly for breath, the pale man made a gesture that he understood.

"Give him air, Grag," ordered Captain Future. His own hand seized the misshapen shoulder of the prisoner, drawing him close.

"Now, answer truthfully—don't stop to think of any lies. Who else guards out in the corridor?"

"Two more," chirruped the pale man shakily.

"Armed?"

"Like me." A three-fingered paw lowered toward a belt of weapons.

"Hold it." Captain Future rapidly unbuckled the girdle and whipped it away around his own waist. "Now, what about the floor above? The way to the open?"

"Several there," was the reply. "No guards, though. They're waiting for a report back from Ul Quorn and his party, that went into the Strange Dimension to prepare."

"Strange Dimension?" echoed Grag. "Where you came from?"

The grotesque head shook.

"No. Where you came from."

"Of course, it's the Strange Dimension to them," offered the Brain, hovering near. "What now, lad?"

"Bind and gag this one." Curt thrust a wad of the flexible metal cordage into the prisoner's mouth. Grag helped bind the bony wrists and ankles with other lengths. Meanwhile, Simon Wright floated to the door, nudged it open a crack, and thrust forth an eye-stalk.

"Now's the time," he reported softly. "Two guards, but they're talking, not paying attention. If we could get at them before they were aware, we might manage it."

Captain Future made one of his swifter-than-light decisions, and transferred it to action almost as swift. In the space between two of Simon Wright's words he had flung open the door, hurled himself down the corridor in three gigantic leaps. As the amazed guards spun to stare, he was upon them, his arms shooting out to clutch.

One arm closed around the neck of each, throttling as Grag had throttled. Like pythons the muscles of Captain Future constricted, squeezed, choked. The two guards he had seized were armed, but instinct was too strong. Their hands went, not to their weapon-belts, but up in a futile tearing effort to relax that grip.

Simon Wright came into view on his traction-beams, then Grag lumbered forth.

Setting his jaw, Captain Future rallied all of the strength of his peerless body and poured it into the double strangle hold. The body of one guard, then the other, went limp and flaccid. When he relaxed his arms, they fell across each other, unconscious.

"Are these the creatures that want to conquer the Solar System," came the metallic growl of the contemptuous Grag. "Any fairly strong man can conquer one. You Chief, handled those two like babies—and I would fight an arenaful."

"Something tells me that they're only the underlings," said Simon Wright, resting his crystal case on Grag's great cliff of a shoulder.

"That's my reaction," nodded Curt, kneeling to strip his victims of their weapons. "Ul Quorn has respect and fear for some sort of high command, that certainly must be of a higher order than these little walking fungi. Never underestimate the enemy, Grag. Though I wish it was a matter of a simple fight between you and a squadron of such specimens. I'd pick you to win."

"Thanks," muttered Grag, whose greatest pride was his strength, and whose one hero was Captain Future. "Now, shall we go to the laboratories?"

"No," said Captain Future. He slung his two beltfuls

of weapons over his shoulders. "We'll try to get along on what arms we've taken from the enemy, because our workshops will naturally be thronged with observers and guards. What I want is to get into the open. Remember what our first captive said—Ul Quorn has visited our system, and is expected back. I'd like to be a sort of surprise welcoming committee."

"The way out is down," said Simon Wright, in the manner of one making a pleasant epigram.

Captain Future smiled, and Grag emitted a steely chuckle. They knew what Simon Wright meant. Long ago, in preparation for just a dire emergency, the Futuremen had prepared a secret exit to their stronghold, a sealed and hidden passage that led into an underground tunnel in the lava rock of the Moon. The entrance was but a single turn distant in the corridor.

With the Brain reconnoitering ahead, they came to the place—seemingly a smooth, solid expanse of bulkhead. But Captain Future had long ago treated this metal with a process that, though intricate and expensive, was relatively simple. A ray action would so modify the speed and action of the metal molecules as to make this bulkhead as penetrable as a wreath of mist. He felt along a juncture of plates for the concealed stud, found and pressed it.

"I'll go first," announced Grag, and walked forward. He bumped into solidity, reeled back and lost his balance, falling with a resounding crash, as of an unwieldy spaceship being landed on a rickety stage by a drunken space-pilot.

"Quiet!" cried Captain Future, just too late.

"The ray must be jammed," said Simon Wright, hovering against the plating that should have gone penetrable as mist.

Grag struggled to his great boatlike feet.

"Say, we forgot to bring Eek," he said, "though maybe he'd better stay here, hiding in the corners, till we can—"

From somewhere little pale gnomes were running, bunching for a charge, drawing weapons.

"Halt!" twittered one at them. "I say, halt!"

"Gas for the man," said another gnome quickly. "For the robot—paralysis by magnetic beam!"

Captain Future charged the bunch. His only hope, he had decided on the instant, was to confuse and panic them.

"Come on, Grag!" he bellowed as he sprang among the enemy. "Use those big iron fists of yours!"

His own fist struck a gaping fungoid face. The flying body of the pale thing struck a companion, tripping him. Captain Future's other hand drew a captured weapon from his belt—what weapon it was, he did not know, but it was in pistol-form. He pointed its muzzle where the enemies were thickest, pressed the trigger switch.

There was intense light, and a mighty howl of agony. The gnomelike figures writhed and fell as if overcome by pain. One, who was clear of the beam, grappled his arm and bit the wrist. More surprised than hurt, Captain Future dropped the weapon, and the light went out.

"Help me," gurgled the gnome who had closed with him. "It's dark again."

Even as Captain Future tore his assailant away, like a leech, he guessed the answer. The weapon had been a bright light, no more. Light was painful, even injurious, to these creatures who must live in the dimness—their absence of color, their great dark eyes, showed that.

More light glowed. Simon Wright's crystal case swam through the upper air of the corridor. It gave off radiance that dazzled Captain Future and sent the would-be captors into a groveling, wailing mass.

"I shorted my ray-mechanism," explained Simon Wright's resonator. "It's not good for my motors, so hurry. Grag's found a way through."

"That was why Grag didn't come to help me," growled Future, turning and running toward a dark oblong that now showed in the bulkhead.

The Brain's light went off, and the crystal case floated after Captain Future into the rocky tunnel beyond. Up ahead in the almost complete darkness moved the vast shadowy bulk of Grag. They negotiated the secret exit

quickly. At one point, the deepest in the passage, Curt's quick ear caught a rhythmic *hub-hub-hub* of a throbbing machine, a vast and complicated and busy machine. Since the Moon was vastly changed in a natural way, had artificial changes been made, too? If not, what made that strange rhythm?

Then he caught up with Grag.

"One of those trees or fungi seems rooted in our doorway," said the robot. "But I can tear it up!"

He fell silent, pouring all his mighty metallic vigor into an effort. The growth collapsed and they were out into the dim twilight.

Captain Future led his companions among the fleshy pale growths, turning this way and that to confuse possible pursuers. At last he dropped down behind some boulders over which grew dense, fat-looking shrubbery.

"Rest here," he commanded, "but keep your ears and eyes alert for any party that follows. Congratulations, Grag! Apparently the modification-power that affects this satellite played tricks with our ray. But how did you get it to working?"

"I didn't," said Grag, sagely nodding his huge ball of a head. "But where your buttons and other devices were set at the edge of the panel—remember?—was a little soft plastic to hold them. I ripped that out, it left a slot where I could get my fingers in, and"—a gesture of the great metal beam that was his arm—"I tore the whole section out by the roots."

"You do have sense, Grag," applauded the Brain, settling down beside him. "Sense to know how to use those metal muscles of yours."

"Tell that to Otho," said Grag. "Otho! I miss him. Where is he, do you suppose?"

"Waiting for us to rejoin him, and thinking kindly of you," replied Curt. "With our dimension-shift machine gone, we'll have trouble seeing him again."

"At least we're on the surface of the Moon," observed Grag.

"Yes, on the surface of Luna," agreed the Brain. "Luna gone crazy! Now which way do we go in this jungle?"

CHAPTER VIII

N'Rala

It would have been suicidal, of course, for N'Rala to fly back in the life-rocket. She realized that. Ezra Gurney's men would be watching for that very craft, even if it were not so small—barely big enough for Ul Quorn and N'Rala to come to New York, and not sufficiently spacious for the two prisoners and the two seedy-looking Earthmen who had been Ul Quorn's henchmen in previous shady adventures. These men Ul Quorn wanted as mechanics and lieutenants.

So a new craft was provided—fetched in sections from a dozen hiding places in the slums beneath the dock district, fitted together on another dingy landing-stage, and equipped with the dimension-shift.

"Step up the power," N'Rala kept saying to the two mechanics. "Captain Future's modifications are good—better than Ul Quorn's, but don't say that I said so. They can carry the load of this bigger rocket easily."

"Please," said a mechanic. "Where do we come in, N'Rala? I mean, in this new game? We're both wanted badly by the police almost everywhere. It's dangerous."

"If and when we finish what we're beginning," said N'Rala cryptically, "there won't be any Solar System police to want you any more. Will you trust me?"

They looked at her, and trusted her. N'Rala was beautiful, and most masculine creatures trusted her before they knew her.

"All set?" continued N'Rala. "Then march Joan Randall into that hold we've sealed off for her special benefit. And get Thikar, too—that big green Jovian fool who had Otho right in his paws and let him get away. He may ride in the control room with us, but watch him. If he was left alone with the girl, maybe she'd find some way to escape from him, too."

The two captives were produced and stowed aboard, manacled and silent. N'Rala also ordered the loading of a various cargo—plans, assorted machine parts, and certain weapons which had been stolen from Government armories. Finally she took the controls and headed upward.

"What's going to happen to me?" asked Otho, in the heavy tone he had heard used by the Jovian he impersonated.

"I'll leave that to your imagination," N'Rala started to say, and then thought of a better taunt. "Oh, I forgot. You don't have any imagination do you, Thikar? Thick—Thikar—I might make a pun about your name, but you'd be too stupid to understand. Maybe we can use your big green carcass without your substitute for a brain."

"You mean—that operation?" Otho prompted. "Remote brain control?"

"Exactly. We may embed an instrument in your brain's nerve centers, so that you'll be an automaton working at a distance by the operator's voice and will. We might let Gurney get you, and put you in jail, so that you could organize criminals for an uprising."

"Ul Quorn will do that?" suggested Otho shakily.

N'Rala shook her head and smiled a dazzling, cruel smile.

"No, Thikar. Not Ul Quorn. Me."

Otho stored that away, without fully understanding.

They nosed close to where the moon should have been, and at N'Rala's order one of the mechanics threw the switch of the dimension-shift. There was the moment of dizzy strain and blackness, then they were spiraling over the strange landscape in the green twilight that now overlay what had been Luna.

"There's our landing field below," pointed out N'Rala. "Captain Future blasted it for his life-rocket when he came down, and we've enlarged and improved it. Stand by to land."

They did so. As the ship settled down and cut its blasts, figures stirred and came into view from the circumfer-

ence of strange jungle—the pale, gnomelike figures of the strange race which planned to invade the Solar System.

N'Rala was the first out, lifting a hand and speaking quickly, in the chirping language of the aliens.

They lowered their weapons and a leader spoke:

"In the tongue of your System, please. The Overlord commands that we grow familiar with it."

"And I want to grow familiar with the tongue of *your* System," said N'Rala with a smile. "The Overlord knows that, too. You keep good guard here. Help unload this craft, and meet two new helpers."

She waved a hand to introduce the Earthmen mechanics.

"And this man?" asked the pallid leader, nodding at the disguised Otho who had come forth, still manacled.

"He's a prisoner, and I have another in this hold. Go ahead, I'll bring up the rear."

She superintended the unloading of the vessel, and after the party had gone toward the Futuremen's laboratory that was now an invasion base, she smiled at Otho again.

"Sit easy, Thikar," she bade. "I'm not worried about you, but that dark-haired girl agent in the hold takes a bit of watching."

She ushered Joan from her prison, covering her with an atom pistol.

"No foolishness," she warned. "I feel toward you a little as Ul Quorn does toward Captain Future. In feminine powers of attraction and mystery you're practically his equal. So much so that there's really very little room in all the universes for both of us. So, if you give me an excuse, it won't really distress me to obliterate you."

She kept her eyes on Joan, backing out of the ship. As she did so, she was aware again that figures were coming from the jungle into the open—figures she knew too well. At one elbow towered Grag, at the other stood Captain Future.

"Don't whirl around suddenly, N'Rala," warned the flat voice of Simon Wright from just above her. "If you

disobey me, I'll have to drop my case on your head—ungentlemanly but effective. Let that gun drop."

For one starkly furious moment N'Rala thought of firing into the face of helpless Joan Randall. But a movement of the big green body she thought was Thikar distracted her. Her prisoner was silently extending his manacled hands, stretching the links between them as if for a target.

N'Rala aimed and sent a crackling spit of atomic force. The manacles broke apart.

"Jump them, Thikar!" she cried. "I'll forgive you then."

But the green giant stepped quickly and coolly forward. One of his hands snatched the weapon from her. "That completes this little scene of the comedy," he said, in Otho's voice. "How was my disguise, Chief? It had both N'Rala and Joan fooled."

N'Rala uttered a most unladylike Martian curse, and her lovely shoulders drooped in an attitude of surrender.

"Stand back against the ship," Captain Future ordered her. "Things are reversed—you're our prisoner. Otho, you're a genius of makeup."

"Because he's a natural, instinctive trickster," rumbled Grag. "I knew who it was all the time."

Otho paused in the midst of tearing off the padding that had made his lithe body seem gigantic. "So you've developed the mental ability to make second guesses, have you?" he snarled. "Some day I'll make up as a robot and see if I can act as stupid as you really are!"

Captain Future, who had taken N'Rala's belt and tool-pouch, was divesting Joan of her handcuffs. He looked up at the hovering Brain, and chuckled in genuine amusement.

"Like old times, eh, Simon?"

"Right, lad," and the Brain's resonator achieved something like a chuckle. "Each of them was as close to tears as an artificial life-form can get, while he thought the other was in danger or destroyed. Now they're quarrelling again! But Joan doesn't look as if she wants to quarrel."

"I don't," said Joan softly. "Curt, I didn't doubt for a moment that you'd save me but I never thought it would be so prompt as this."

"You're not getting away," said N'Rala, who had recovered her mocking smile and her self-possession. "If I don't follow within ten minutes, they'll be back to look for me."

"The ship?" said Grag, taking a ponderous step as if to enter.

"If it should try to sail without clearing with the officer of the guard inside, it would be blasted before it was well above the ground," said N'Rala. "I tell you that because I wouldn't want to be blasted with it."

"That's probably true," nodded Captain Future. "Here, Otho, put these bracelets I took from Joan on N'Rala. If you and Grag really want something to battle about, see which of you can keep closest watch on her. We're getting out of here—on foot—in this jungle."

He turned to lead the way, but N'Rala hung back between her two guards.

"If I refuse to come?" she suggested mockingly. "Will you kill or punish me, Captain Future? Or am I right in diagnosing a weakness in you—hesitancy about rough treatment of women?"

"That's easily fixed," spoke up Joan Randall. From N'Rala's weapon-belt, now worn by Captain Future, she took the atom gun. "I'll be your guard," she told N'Rala. "And I'm no gentleman to be taken advantage of. As a woman, N'Rala, I have no qualms about blasting you with this pistol. March!"

N'Rala marched.

Captain Future led the way, with the Brain soaring high above him, to spy over the blunt-boughed tops of the jungle. Next came N'Rala, guarded by Joan. Grag followed, and Otho, sensitive of ear, held the rear-guard position. The little cavalcade moved along a narrow trail, winding here and there, past the resting place where the Futuremen had paused to watch the landing of N'Rala's

ship. At last they came to a little stream, narrow but swift and apparently deep.

N'Rala chuckled despite herself, and Captain Future paused on its very brink. He stooped, and sniffed.

"Taint of acid," he announced. "Don't step in it, anyone. Thanks, N'Rala, for warning me by that chuckle."

He flexed himself suddenly and sprang across. The two women were not such jumpers, but Simon Wright dropped down, and used his traction beams to help first one, then the other, to make the leap safely. Otho bounded over like a rubber ball, and the heavier, clumsier Grag ripped up treelike stems to make himself a bridge.

At Captain Future's order, he tossed those bridge-poles into the stream itself. They floated only briefly. The liquid of the stream crumbled and dissolved the growths, like sugar lumps in water.

Joan, watching, gave a little shuddering shrug.

"I saw those plants wriggle, as if they were alive. What an awful world, with deadly acid for its natural liquid! We'll die of thirst."

"I doubt it," said Captain Future. "N'Rala doesn't seem parched. Come, draw into the clearing yonder. Simon can watch if any pursuit comes, and that stream will delay it. I have some questions to ask of N'Rala."

"Think I'll answer?" challenged the Martian girl, sitting on a little hummock of mosslike fibers.

"You've already told us some things," said Otho. "One, when you thought I was that big Jovian and suggested that you'd operate on my brain for your own purposes, not Ul Quorn's." He glanced at Captain Future, "Chief, I don't think that N'Rala and Ul Quorn are quite as closely allied as they used to be."

"I don't think so, either," contributed the Brain, from his overhead position of hovering sentry. "Remember that Ul Quorn was a little savage when we mentioned N'Rala to him."

"How clever!" sneered N'Rala. "You don't seem to need to ask questions. You deduce so much."

"Which is half an admission that we're right," com-

mented Captain Future. "I take it that there is more than one viewpoint about this conquest of the Solar System, then."

"Why worry?" she flung at him. "You'll not survive the conquest, so it won't make any difference to you."

"I wish that N'Rala would try to escape," said Joan rather dreamily. The gun stirred in her hand, and N'Rala lost her smile.

"Captain Future, Joan Randall has always hated and resented me," N'Rala said to Captain Future in tones of appeal. "I remind you that I'm a prisoner of war, and deserve certain considerations. Don't let her find an excuse to torture or kill me."

"I thought that she was so sure Ul Quorn would come and get her back," put in Grag.

"Not Ul Quorn," snapped N'Rala, still nervous. "Someone bigger and more terrible than Ul Quorn ever dreamed of being. The Overlord."

She paused, aghast at what she had told. Now it was Captain Future's time to chuckle.

"I gather from that remark that this Overlord is a new friend and ally of yours, closer than Ul Quorn," he said. "I get a hint of attraction—even romance. Maybe through you we'll reach the heart of this riddle, and pierce that heart through."

"You wouldn't dare," N'Rala whispered, deadly and chill.

A moment of silence; then, from overhead came a movement.

"Look out!" shrilled Simon Wright's resonator.

CHAPTER IX

The Devouring Lake

Quickly Captain Future was on his feet and looking up. He had acted even before Otho, who is generally called nimble beyond all human creatures.

Future looked up into a canopy. From somewhere in the surrounding thickets broad-trunked, blunt-boughed growths had sprouted from a hundred places. Long, lean, upshooting tendrils, interlaced at the top, were writhing at them. It was like a sudden assault of sky-climbing snakes.

Within the conical pen thus whipped together, fifteen or twenty yards overhead bobbed the gleaming rectangle of Simon Wright's brain-box. He stabbed upward and outward with his traction-beams, holding at bay the latticework of tendrils, that sought to close in upon those caught inside.

"I'm an idiot," groaned Captain Future. "While worrying about human enemies, I didn't foresee sub-human enemies."

Joan blasted at the living, constricting lattice with the atom pistol that had belonged to N'Rala. The charge tore a momentary glowing hole. Then other tendrils whipped across, larger and thicker and closer twining.

"Useless," said N'Rala, the calmest of them all. "I'm a worse idiot than you, Captain Future. I'd heard of this, and I clean forgot, because I was captured. Now we're all captured."

Grag had rushed at the network where it sprang from the ground. His mighty metal paws seized and tore away stem after stem. But other plants sprang into being, from the ground or from other stems, bigger and tougher, closing the hole he made. Otho caught his shoulder and hustled him back.

"You're only making it stronger," he scolded. "It—or they—can sense prey where there's resistance. Look how it closes in."

The Brain dropped down to hover at Curt's shoulder. The other four humans also clustered close. The entire party seemed to be in a wickerwork tent or teepee, closing in from all sides.

"You knew about this thing, N'Rala?" said Captain Future. "Tell me about it. Quickly!"

"It's a parasite growth, springing from spores," replied N'Rala. "The natives know how to avoid or defeat

it—I don't. Ul Quorn made several laboratory tests. When proper prey—flesh, living flesh—is in the vicinity, the tendrils spring up on all sides and close in. Then," and the thought evoked in N'Rala a shudder that neither capture nor threats had produced, "they feed and give off spores for a new attack."

Otho was frowning. His long forefinger tapped his high temple.

"They eat flesh, crush and absorb it," he summed up. "And a violent defense only makes them grow stronger. But to get around them might be possible."

"They're too close-woven for that," Grag began to say, but Otho had darted toward one segment of the fast-shrinking tent where no attack had been made. The living mesh showed loosest and coarsest here.

"Maybe he will get clear!" exclaimed Curt. "He's thinner than any of us—and he's synthetic, not organic—well done, Otho!"

The android had dived, head first, at the widest opening left. It seemed little more than a foot square, yet at the moment of diving he elongated and shrank his elastic tissues. His head and shoulders were through on the instant. There was a quick curving of tendrils to seize the rest of him, but he writhed like a serpent, slenderized his waist and legs, and kicked clear on the outside.

"Deserting us," groaned Grag.

"Don't say that about Otho," commanded Curt sternly. "He's escaping. And if the rest of us perish, he may still defeat Ul Quorn and these invaders. But look at that mesh!"

The cone had narrowed to a scant dozen feet across and a height of about the same extent. But as Otho escaped, it seemed actually to grow more spacious at that point.

"It's trying to catch him," said Grag. "He'll be gone, though, before they can expand sufficiently."

That part suddenly glowed, as if caught with cold fire. The tendrils writhed, shrank, made wider gaps in their mesh.

"Grag!" Otho was bawling. "Let Grag tackle it there!"

The big robot needed no second bidding. He charged bull-like at the weakened spot, and at his blows the strands broke and crumbled as if charred. In a moment he was struggling free. His companions rushed after him in thankful haste.

Otho stood beyond, playing the powerful glowing light of a captured weapon on the tendrils. They wilted under the beams.

"I remembered that we were in the twilight," he said quickly to Curt. "N'Rala said that the natives—those pale people—could cope with the tendrils, and I counted on their tools or weapons being workable. And they are. It was like scorching grass with fire."

"Light is deadly to anything in this dim dimension," added Simon Wright. "Look how the jungle growths have been marred by it."

"Stay with us, N'Rala," bade Joan, pointing her atom gun at the Martian girl, who had edged apart from the rest.

For answer, N'Rala hurled something, the manacles, from which she had managed to slip her lithe Martian hands. They struck Joan, staggering her for the moment, and the atom pistol missed its mark. N'Rala ran in among the squashy growths, with Joan after her.

"Come on!" snapped Curt, and sprang in pursuit. Simon Wright soared above and ahead of them. Otho, nimble and intent, sped at Curt's elbow and stayed there. Grag, huge and heavy, brought up the rear.

They had not far to go. Ahead showed a clearing. At its very edge, Joan had caught up with N'Rala. The Martian girl fought furiously, but Joan was subduing her with a clamping wrist-and-shoulder lock that had been taught her by Captain Future himself. The Futuremen hurried up, surrounding the two girls.

"Set the manacles tighter," began Captain Future, and got no further.

For the solid-seeming ground of the clearing suddenly seethed and churned. The footing gave way, like a rug whipped from under. They all fell, splashed into liquid,

and found themselves swimming for their lives—all but Grag, the last to come.

He stood among the fringe of jungle, and was able to see what had happened. The clearing was a pool or lake, thirty or forty yards across, and its surface had been masked by a light coating of soil particles. But now it churned and seethed, and not only with the swimming forms inside.

"It—it's alive!" snapped the Brain's resonator. He, in midair, had also escaped. "Look at its edge! The whole thing's contained in some sort of skin. It's a trap, a living sensitive trap!"

N'Rala had swum to the edge. She clutched at it, to draw herself up and out. But then the containing material came into view. It writhed and humped an edge above the sticky surface of the lid. There seemed to be a thick integument, like the rind of a mighty fruit, and here it was thickly lined with lean, sharp spikes, like hundreds of dagger points. These moved to confront N'Rala's clutching hand. She cried with the pain, and dropped back into the bath.

"I'm wounded!" she cried. "And the wound—it burns, it burns!"

Curt Newton, swimming near Joan, called back to N'Rala.

"Swim for the center. There's something solid there."

He scrambled upon the lump of solidity he had found. It bobbed and quivered under him, but did not sink. A moment later N'Rala had come there, whimpering with pain, and Joan and Otho hoisted her upon the lump. Last of all Joan crawled up, helped by Curt's hand.

"What is this raft?" asked Joan.

Captain Future was examining the object. "A creature of some sort—dead and floating. It's the size of an elephant, dome-shaped, several stumpy legs—like a big beetle. Coming out, Otho?"

Otho floated on his back.

"Why should I? It's comfortable here." He paddled toward the brink, splashing liquid up at the hopelessly staring Grag. Joan, who so lately had been wrestling N'Rala

into submission, now gave first aid. The Martian girl's hand had been cruelly ripped in two places by the dagger-thorns, and the touch of the liquid was agony to the exposed flesh. Joan took a first-aid kit from N'Rala's own captured belt-pouch, cleansing and taping the wounds.

"How can a pond be alive?" said Otho.

"It's not a pond," replied Captain Future. "It's a creature with a big liquid trap-organ of some sort. Like a—"

"A pitcher-plant," finished Simon Wright for him. "When you compared this big dead thing to a beetle, I saw what other comparison could be made. A terrestrial pitcher-plant, you know, those big water-filled pods—"

"But they grow well above ground," objected N'Rala.

"The size and weight of this makes it find a depression to grow in and shape itself accordingly." Captain Future told her. "The liquid is digestive, of course; that's why it hurt your hand, N'Rala. And see where it's eaten away part of our raft. Otho, being synthetic, isn't uncomfortable."

"Now you've gotten us into this, how are you going to get us out?" said N'Rala tartly.

"There speaks the eternal woman," chuckled Simon Wright. "Nobody got us into this but you, N'Rala. However, I can get you out."

His traction-beam pushed the floating carcass with its three passengers toward the edge of the pool. Otho, swimming beside, helped push. The dead flesh stuck into the thorns, mooring it, and Grag helped the Futuremen ashore, one at a time.

"The manacles," he said, holding them out to Captain Future. "You were interrupted."

"And you're interrupted again," added the mocking voice of Ul Quorn.

Figures moved into view—the pale gnomes that the Futuremen were beginning to know so well. There were thirty or forty of them, with weapons ready. Ul Quorn had spoken, but he did not show himself.

Overhead, Simon Wright turned in midair as if to soar away. Two of the creatures pointed strange pistol-form devices. From these leaped, like lean, lightning-swift

snakes, long tendril cords. They fell across Simon Wright's crystal case, a quick turn of the wrists of the operators snapped half-hitches on him.

Even then he might have pulled away, but the impeding coils swathed him and slowed him for the moment that others needed to add their quickly-projected cords. He was hauled down and once more bundled into a hammocklike mesh of the metal strands.

Captain Future thought furiously. Only Eek, the metal-eating moon-pup, had won him freedom from such bonds. He dared not risk being bound in that fashion again. He turned to N'Rala.

"You're slightly more attractive to me than Ul Quorn," he said with a smile. "If anybody's to capture me, would you like to have the pleasure?"

"That's the nicest thing a Futureman ever said to me!" N'Rala almost purred with pleasure.

She put her hand toward Grag, who stood again like a statue. A magnetic ray had been flashed upon him, as before in the laboratory, and his metal limbs were frozen. From his helpless fingers she twitched the manacles, and snapped them on Future's big wrists.

"Score one for me," she said, loud enough for Ul Quorn to hear.

"Chief!" gasped Otho. "I never knew you to quit before."

He made a sudden gesture, and metal loops fell around him and over him, trussing him up. Joan, likewise caught in a dozen, made no sound, but her dark eyes glowed as she looked from Captain Future to the smiling N'Rala. Jealousy, hurt pride, wonder and fury were mirrored in her expression.

Now Ul Quorn swaggered into view.

"I knew what you were doing, from the moment that my own craft, with certain supplies and lieutenants, crossed over from the Solar System," he said. "N'Rala carries a little radio-transmitter in that locket you didn't feel it was worth your while to take."

"So that's it!" N'Rala's slim hand flew to the jewel at her throat. "You—you tricked me again."

"I gave it to you as a gift and ornament," said the Magician of Mars, with a mocking bow. "I made it splendid enough for you to wear. But I didn't say that I put a little spy in it, which now does double duty—exposes your full attitude toward me, N'Rala, and at the same time delivers my enemies into my hands. You and I are building up a heavy score to settle between us, N'Rala."

"Would you care to argue it before the Overlord?" snapped N'Rala.

Ul Quorn did not answer. In the dim light, Future saw his enemy's handsome lips tighten and twitch.

"Put bonds on Grag and take the magnetic ray off him," he commanded his men. "We'll march these prisoners back to headquarters."

The pallid men closed in, pushing the Futuremen together in a knot. In silence the group moved back toward the captured laboratory. Only when they reached the door, did Ul Quorn voice another order.

"Put each in a separate cell. When they're together, they got away. Leave Captain Future to me."

He laid his lean, strong hand on Future's elbow, and with his other hand lifted a proton pistol. Quietly Future let himself be led to the level below, and to Ul Quorn's quarters. N'Rala came after them.

"I want to cross back to Dimension X," she said.

Ul Quorn shook his head. "Not now, N'Rala."

"You can't hold me up," she persisted. "The Overlord will be angry."

"Let him rule on that later. These are my personal quarters, and my business with Captain Future will be conducted alone."

He pushed his prisoner inside, and closed the door upon a last angry protest from N'Rala.

Future gazed at the luxurious fittings Ul Quorn had strung around the place, at the telaudio on the table, and fleetingly at the strange coffinlike case in a far corner.

"You like to pamper yourself," Future said. "This room used to be a storage space for rock specimens. I never thought to see so much softness in it."

"I'm changing many things, Captain Future," mocked

Ul Quorn. "Sit down—yes, beyond the desk. Let me say that I admire your dealings with menaces like the tendril-creatures—a troublesome bit of life, that taught my associates the principle of those wire-shooting guns. And the digesting lake was neatly eluded, too, though I gather that Simon Wright was more responsible there. However, I'm no bizarre, sub-intelligent monster. I'm Ul Quorn. And you're my prisoner, beyond rescue this time."

Captain Future had relaxed in the chair to which Ul Quorn had waved him. His shackled hands dropped between his knees. Their fingers interlaced. One finger overlaid the ring he wore.

That ring bore the strange Futureman device, a stone to represent the sun and others moving around it to denote the planets. Within its jewel was a tiny atomic motor. Stealthily Future worked it loose, sliding the jewel inward.

"You have a weakness, a fatal one," he said quietly to Ul Quorn. "You count your triumphs before they hatch."

"Call it savoring sweets in advance," grinned the other. "It's not as great a weakness as your naive passion for fighting wrongs and destroying evil. You're sorry for people, Captain Future, and I'm not. Being ruthless, I can't be hurt through others."

Curt Newton had the ring off and between his clasped hands. Its jewel now faced toward his wrists, pointing toward the link that held them together. The atomic ray, pointed and activated by a touch of his hand on a little stud, might break that bond. He wondered if it had strength and sustaining power enough.

"I suggest," he replied, to keep Ul Quorn's attention away from what he was doing, "that being ruthless to N'Rala has made her your enemy."

"She won't be dangerous."

"This Overlord will."

"What do you know about the Overlord?" snapped Ul Quorn, his hand tightening on the pistol.

Future knew almost nothing, but did not say so. He replied with another question. "She wants to come in here

and use your facilities to travel into the Overlord's dimension, doesn't she?"

"She told you that, eh? Before I tuned in—that I kept my one way of dimension-spanning shut up here?"

That was all that Captain Future needed to know. His quick eye, roving around the room, fixed for a fleeting instant on the case in the corner. It was the only possible device for dimension-spanning that he could see.

He pressed the stud, and felt the manacles come apart. Stealthily he slid back on his finger the ring that had done him such good service.

"You convince me that N'Rala's a traitor," Ul Quorn was saying. "I promise that you'll be destroyed. I promise you that N'Rala will be destroyed with you. Is there any satisfaction in that idea?"

"That idea, in the slang of an old century, is a fair knockout," said Captain Future.

With a sudden outlash of both feet he upset the desk upon Ul Quorn.

Ul Quorn's pistol slammed a charge into the ceiling, where a great hole opened amid a shower of sparks. Cursing by all the gods of peace, the Magician of Mars scrambled out, his weapon ready to aim again.

But Captain Future had sprung across the room, and into the strange upended coffin.

He felt a shuddering assailment of all his fibers, felt himself ready to dissolve, and came to himself in absolute blackness.

CHAPTER X

New Dimensions to Conquer

Possibly Captain Future was making the greatest gamble of his life.

He had but the sketchiest notion of what lay in Dimension X, both in regard to its universe in general and the

reception he would receive beyond the dimension-shift into which he had thrown himself. But, he had taken an instant to reflect.

Ul Quorn had entered that dimension and had withstood its dangers and mysteries so that he was again a power and a menace against all decent worlds. He, Captain Future, must not hesitate to risk the same peril and hope for the same success, that success to be used for the advantage of his universe.

In a word, he was unhesitatingly pitting himself—peerless brawn, brain, courage—against an unknown cosmos. If he failed, oblivion. If he won, safety for all he had lived for from the beginning.

In the dark chamber he now sensed, was a stir of motion.

"You are not Ul Quorn," a voice said, in a language he understood. "Did he send you?"

"And if he did?" temporized Future.

"The Overlord forbade him to send any subordinates except when sent for. Only he, or the Lady N'Rala."

"Take me to your superior," said Captain Future, walking toward the voice.

He heard breathing within arm's length—and made a clutching sweep. One hand caught a throat, the other a wrist that strove to come to where weapons might hang. Captain Future whirled the struggling body up, across his knee, and down on a hard floor. Closing his strangle hold, he throttled the unseen speaker into submission.

A thud and struggle came from behind him, and the voice of Ul Quorn:

"Guards! Lots of them! Captain Future came over just ahead of me!"

The great red-headed Futureman smote his captive's head against the floor, hard enough to induce momentary senselessness. He spun abruptly, and grappled Ul Quorn.

The gun, still in Ul Quorn's hand, again tried to drive death to Captain Future's heart, but its muzzle had been forced up. It kindled a brief shower of sparks in the ceiling, and Captain Future saw momentarily the cubicle, the

rectangular opening of the dimension-shift, a door in a far wall, and the guard he had overpowered.

It seemed that this was not a gnomelike travesty on human form, like the pale men on the Moon, but a really fine figure of a human being, of extraordinarily white skin. Then the sparks died, and he fought Ul Quorn in the dark.

He got a hand over the mouth of the Magician of Mars, stifling another yell. Ul Quorn bit him, but Captain Future's strength asserted itself. A mighty twist that caused bones to grind together, and he made Ul Quorn drop the gun. Another moment, and he turned the smaller man under, though Ul Quorn was wiry and desperate. His thumb sought for a nerve center and pressed as on a mechanical lever. Ul Quorn subsided.

Captain Future groped at his enemy's belt and found one of the weapons that threw glares of light. With its help he found the gun Ul Quorn had dropped. Now he turned to the guard, who was getting up weakly.

"That light—agony!" muttered the fellow. He hid his great dark eyes with his palms.

"Not a false move or I'll dissolve you into atoms," warned Future. He pointed the other weapon. "I am Captain Future, a name you may not know."

"But I do!" The guard was up, still hiding his eyes. As Captain Future had glimpsed before, here was a man of such human proportions as obtained in the Solar System, with none of the grotesque semi-brutishness of Ul Quorn's fungus-complexioned aides. "And I thought Ul Quorn said you were here, Captain Future. Thank the gods of your dimension and mine that you have come to us."

"No tricks," warned Captain Future, more sharply still.

"I mean none. And there is little time for explanation—but let my heart speak. All our people do not want this war against your world. Others of my race must tell you and convince you—in a less dangerous place than this. Do now as I bid you."

"What?"

"My tendril-gun, here at my belt. Quick!"

Without regarding the pointed pistol, the guard drew the device and extended it, butt-first, to Captain Future.

"Use it to bind me, and Ul Quorn. Tear pieces of his robe to gag us. That will keep him safe, and free me from suspicion. Then, in my cloak—" he wore one, and now shrugged it off—"My cloak, drawn up to hood your head, go out as I direct."

Future had seen the tendril-guns work, and one demonstration was enough. He quickly spun loops of the metal wire around the guard, making him helpless, then did the same to the still unconscious Ul Quorn.

"Beyond this is a dark corridor," the guard was telling him. "You come from bright worlds, and will have to grope past three doors. Enter the fourth, and say these words: 'Attention, now, Rrodo kun!' Those within will know you are a friend to us. Then drop your robe, and identify yourself for who you are."

Future snapped off his light.

"What is your name?"

"Thal Thar."

"I will remember that. You may be speaking truth, in which case you will know what gratitude and reward can be. If you lie, you will live to be sorry—and no longer. That's a promise from Captain Future."

"Good. I ask no more. Now the gags."

Captain Future muffled the mouth of the guard, then that of Ul Quorn. He picked up the robe.

He had been thinking hard and furiously of what this creature had told him. It simplified to another chance he must and would take. After all, he could retreat at the first sign of treachery, with a good hope of dimension shifting back to Ul Quorn's quarters on the Moon. Holding the pistol in one hand, he used the other to drape himself in the cloak. He felt his way to the door and went through it.

As he had been told, he was in a dark corridor, and his questing elbow found the jambs of three doors as he moved along the wall. The captured guard had spoken truth so far. Outside the fourth door he paused, ear to the panel.

A voice inside, not of the timber of Solar System voices, but not as twittery as the pale gnomes, was speaking.

"Language of the Solar System," it said. "We must practice as commanded by the Overlord. Also the language makes our conversation secret from most listeners."

"If the Overlord himself came, we'd be punished," answered another voice.

"Space-fates forefend!" broke in the first speaker.

"That was enough for Captain Future. He entered. The room beyond was dim, but he could make out three pale figures at a table, dressed in snug sleeveless mail shirts, with cloaks flung on the backs of their chairs. Weapons hung on the walls, giving the place the aspect of a guard-room.

"Rroda kun!" said Captain Future.

One creature faced him.

"Thal Thar? Who relieved you? Speak the Other-System language because—"

"I'm Captain Future," said the red-haired giant, and dropped his cloak, letting it fall in folds over his hand that held the gun.

At once the three were on their feet.

"Careful!" warned one of the guards, "He may be a spy of Ul Quorn's."

"I'm not. Ul Quorn, if you wonder about him, lies stunned and bound just this side of the dimension-shift. Your friend Thal Thar is there, and will identify me."

A guard started toward the door, but paused, gazing at Captain Future in perplexity. Captain Future spread his arms, still keeping the cloak swathed around his pistol hand.

"Can't you see I'm unarmed? Here," and he threw the glare weapon on the floor. "Go ahead."

The man left hurriedly.

"You're different, you men, different from other Dimension-X people I've seen," Future said.

"Because the advance guard is of our low orders. We ourselves are what you call nobles or aristocrats. Because the Overlord doesn't like us, we're being used here as

guards. Later, he'll probably see we're killed in the invasion we abhor."

"Why does the Overlord dislike you?" persisted Captain Future. "And why do you dislike the invasion?"

"Hold your questions until we're sure of your identity," bade one of the two.

The man who had left returned.

"Thal Thar identifies him. He's Captain Future, and he can be told the truth."

"But when will Thal Thar be discovered helpless?"

"Shortly," said the man who had brought the message. "By one of us who goes to relieve him."

"And meanwhile I'll get you out of here," joined in another. "You will want to know about an invasion at another point of your universe."

"Where?" demanded Captain Future.

"I have a star-map to show you. Come, wrap yourself in that cloak. We can talk on the way to—to where we're going."

Captain Future opened the folds around his hand.

"Gentlemen, I'll confess that I mistrusted you, too. Look at this weapon. It would have blasted you all at the first sign of danger, but it's falling to powder!"

"Of course," said the man who had risen to accompany him. "Weapons of our make are safe in the protective ray-field around this guardroom. But yours was made harmless. A little device of my own, which I framed to guard against a possible piece of violence by Ul Quorn. You will see that fate must work in all universes, and that in this case fate directs us to trust each other."

He held out a hand, like an Earthman.

"My name is Lai Thar, the brother of Thal Thar. Let's be friends and allies. Follow me."

CHAPTER XI

Oog on the Asteroid

Little Oog, the meteor-mimic, was alone and miserable.

Only the news that Luna and all that satellite contained and recalled and stood for could have made Otho forget his tiny pet. But it had turned out that way. When Joan brought the news of the unthinkable vanishment, the Futuremen had trooped to the *Comet's* telaudio for their own eyes to be convinced.

Then, with the grim knowledge that seconds would count in this new adventure, they had sailed away. And Oog, who had been mimicking a bit of sad-colored stone on the floor of their grotto, was left behind on Asteroid No. 697

His little mind, simple and material but shrewd, was almost as keen as Otho boasted. He could, and did, realize that he was forgotten and abandoned. He was full of woe. Turning back into a doughy little toddler of a beast, he made sad grimaces and trotted here and there in search of his friends.

He found the remains of Captain Future's sandwich, and momentarily turned himself into a doll-like figure of the Futuremen's chief. Sniffing around the place where Otho had lolled, he remolded his molecules into a slender, high-craniumed figurine of the android. Finally he went to where the *Comet* had lain careened, and changed himself into a miniature image of that.

Oog's hyper-adaptable species runs rather to physical changes, but change in the brain stuff can take place. It was true, as Otho had said, that the meteor-mimic's mind was able to appreciate some aspects of human affairs. When Oog became himself once more, he sighed almost like a lonesome child.

Scant hours had passed since he had been deserted on Asteroid No. 697—hours that had been crammed with

danger and adventure for the Futuremen, with loneliness and depression for little Oog. He waddled here and there about the tiny world, nosing and sniffing the tracks of his friends, which grew fainter in impress and odor as time went by. His brain grappled with the future, that most difficult of things to comprehend. If he was indeed marooned here, he would live alone, unseen of any other living thing, but he would never forget Otho who had loved him and forgotten him. He turned again into a miniature Otho.

"Ghosts of Ganymede!" half-choked a rough voice in the brush. "Look there, on the ground!"

Still mimicking Otho, Oog looked up. A burly Earthman in unkempt space-suit had come into the open and now stared at him with bloodshot eyes that seemed ready to spring from their sockets.

A moment later, the Earthman turned his head away.

"Don't let me look—don't let me look!" he quavered. "It's that double-power Venusian liquor. No Earthman ought to touch it!"

Oog's impulse for hiding caused him to change at once into a replica of a grassy clod. As he did so, another figure emerged. A Martian this time, rather slackly handsome and high-skulled, with on his wrist the scar that could come only from radio-manacles—bonds of the incorrigible criminal.

"I don't see anything, you fool! What scared you?"

Without daring to look, the Earthman pointed to where Otho was. The Martian followed the gesture with his eyes, sneered, and turned his back.

"Nothing there," he said.

With both strangers facing away, Oog turned back into a little Otho. At this moment the Earthman plucked up courage to steal another look. He howled as if caught in a blister-ray.

"I see it again!" he cried, and clapped his hands over his eyes.

The Martian also looked, but Oog was the clod again. The Martian laughed aloud.

"You'd better lay off mixing your planetary drinks here—

after," he advised. "Now pay attention to me. We're to make this place ready for Ul Quorn's invasion, like on the Moon."

"I only half-understood what's up," grumbled the Earthman. "Why can't he do as he did with the Moon, and gobble it right out of the Solar System?"

"Because he needs an asteroid out of that other dimension to bring here and fit into and around and over this one," the Martian said, in an impatient tone that suggested he was tired of explaining to his more obtuse companion. "Those pale people are jockeying one into position—loads of fuel and machinery go into a space-operation of that sort—but we have to keep guard here to make sure that nobody is on the lookout. The Futuremen have been meddling around here, it's one of the few habitable asteroids, you know."

The Earthman grimaced.

"The Futuremen are all prisoners, I hear," he said. He sat down, close to Oog's position. At his hip, within a foot of Oog, hung a holster with an atomic pistol.

The Martian went into an explanation of how Ul Quorn had communicated, by secret radio, with members of his old crime group who would do key assignments to prepare for the invasion. The trans-dimensional seizure of the asteroid had a twofold purpose, as he explained—to experiment on a small scale with machinery that later might operate against even major planets, and to seize a base at a convenient point from which to observe and move anywhere against the Solar System.

His companion asked for many explanations of astronomy, dimension-engineering and general strategy, and both were too busy to dream of what a creature like Oog might be doing.

Oog half-forgot his forlorn position at sight of the big pistol.

He was fascinated by such things, but the Futuremen took pains to keep them out of his way. Now he became Otho again, and stealthily drew near, hoisting the weapon from its holster with an effort. It was too heavy for him

to examine easily, and he dropped it. A whim made him scramble into the holster, and then to become an image of the pistol.

"All I get out of it," the Earthman was saying, "is that some sort of bad-dream people are coming from another dimension to this one, and that Ul Quorn, being hated and hunted through the Solar System, figures to profit by helping them. He's making sort of dimensional stepping-stones at the Moon and here, and later maybe on Jupiter and Uranus. His friends are a little sick when the light shines on them, so he wants Solar System lieutenants, like us, to do the spade-work."

"That's it, in a nutshell," said the Martian. "I refer to the thick shell of that nut you call a head."

"Will you stop those insults," grumbled the Earthman, getting up, "or I'll—"

"You'll consider yourselves under arrest," said a voice that both men knew, and the Pseudo-Otho, too.

Captain Future came forward out of the undergrowth.

They stared. "How did you get here?" gasped the Earthman.

"Out of Dimension X, one jump ahead of that little world that's supposed to come and coincide with this one," said Captain Future. "You're both my prisoners. You'll come back to New York, in your own ship, and you'll tell us some things we want to know about Ul Quorn's plans."

The Martian had drawn his gun. Its spitting blast would have been fatal to anyone less poised and sudden and lightning-swift than Captain Future. But the big red-haired figure moved aside, a fraction out of line of fire, and sparks flew up in a harmless little volcano among broad-leaved plants.

Coming in around and under the gun-muzzle, as a clever boxer avoids his opponent's jab and gets inside it, Future struck once with his fist. The Martian, his head almost torn off by the blow, whirled backward clear off his feet for half a dozen paces and fell in a silent heap.

The lesser gravity of the asteroid had made that flight through air possible. In falling senseless, the Martian took his gun with him. Future leaped after him to secure it.

"No you don't!" bawled the Earthman, his hand at his own holster.

He whipped out what he found there—and howled in abject terror.

The gun had turned once more into a little Otho figure, kicking and writhing in his grasp.

"It isn't liquor—it's *real*!" he wailed, and dropped to his knees.

Oog, still as Otho, twisted free and ran to where the fallen gun lay. With an effort he pulled it up and stood pointing it like a tiny cannoneer. But the Earthman needed not that threat, nor the motion of Captain Future, who by now had the Martian's weapon.

"I'll talk, I'll talk," sobbed the hoarse voice. "I'll do anything you say. But get me to a doctor who'll fix me so I don't see—and *feel*—things that aren't there!"

Captain Future grinned briefly.

"Get on your feet," he ordered. "Grab up this languid friend of yours and carry him to your ship."

As the prisoner turned his back to obey, Future stooped and scooped Oog into his hand.

"Oog, I'm proud of you," he whispered, "Otho and the others, when we get them free, will be proud of you, too. And the whole Solar System will be prouder still. Because I've started my counter-attack against Ul Quorn, and you're helping me. But that's nothing to how you're going to help me from now on."

CHAPTER XII

Space Ambush

The two captives were not escorted to New York by Captain Future for—on the communication system of the space-craft he had seized—he managed to sort out a certain specific wave-length, and upon it he got into touch with Ezra Gurney.

In a latitude just within the Martian orbit, from which all inhabited planets were remote and where no ships wandered, Future was met by his own *Comet* and a larger police cruiser—the one commanded by Gurney, the other by a junior officer named Elnisor, a Venusian chosen for courage, loyalty and ability to keep secrets.

The three craft lay to in emptiness, and Gurney and Elnisor came aboard to interview Captain Future. The big, powerful redhead lounged by his idled controls, with Oog cuddled in the hollow of his arm. The meteor-mimic greeted the visitors by impersonating first Gurney, then Elnisor, then one of the two melancholy prisoners who sat bound in a corner.

"Glad to see you, Ezra," greeted Captain Future. "I've been far away, but I never doubted that we'd meet again. You brought what I told you?"

"Everything," said the old marshal, his bright eyes inquisitive in his hard-lined face. "Supplies and equipment aboard the *Comet*, and men, the best and closest-mouthed on call, aboard the auxiliary cruiser. But what's it about? Who are these specimens you have all tied up?"

"Two items for our collection of jailbirds," replied Curt. "They were planted for a reception committee to help Ul Quorn's invasion strike home on Asteroid Six-Ninety-Seven. I gathered them in, with priceless help from little Oog here. They've talked some, and I'll talk more in a moment. Meanwhile, we're going to occupy that asteroid ourselves, and knock the invasion back down its own throat."

"But how? And what? Who's invading us? Where are they coming from?" Ezra Gurney had thought he was through being amazed at Captain Future, but now he fairly spluttered with mystified eagerness.

"Briefly, it's like this," began Captain Future.

"A whole system from many dimensions away—I call it Dimension X—wants to overrun us. Dimension X has a dying sun, and its race of struggling people lives on worlds that are dimmed and doomed. Their fight for life has taught them amazing things in the field of big-scale caloric engineering.

"They've activated the central substances of their planets to produce extra internal heat and power, and such sources give them the basis for dimension-shifting devices on a mighty scale. They managed to slide one world of theirs to a point in their space where it coincided with the position of Luna in ours—and, by partial shift to a between-dimensional point, gobbled Luna up. It's a stepping stone between us and Dimension X, if you follow me."

"I follow you, a long way off," said Gurney, "They'll tackle us from the Moon?"

"No. There's only a small way to Dimension X there, and in any case they know that we're at least partially on the defensive on Earth. The asteroid coup will give them a wider beach-head, and in a less suspected place."

"Where does Ul Quorn come into this?" persisted Ezra.

"He came in by chance and cosmic bad luck. Remember when he seemed to burn into nothingness as his ship fell into the sun. But that ship was full of dimension-traveling mechanisms. The heat activated it beyond even his dreams, and he was flung into Dimension X.

"He got into trouble—trust Ul Quorn for that—and then he succeeded in lining up the greedy element to invade us—trust Ul Quorn for that, too. There's an Overlord and a whole mob of would-be conquerors, who see their own salvation and that of their race in seizing our system and setting up a new life under a bright, warm sun."

"But can they?" demanded Ezra Gurney. "If they can shift whole worlds across dimensions, they must be invincible."

Curt shook his head.

"I don't think they are. In the first place, we're a tough race ourselves, on our home worlds. In the second, the very brightness of the sun will be agony to them. Even as undisputed masters, they'll take much conditioning and modifying to stand the light and heat of Old Sol. To attack, they must come armored and shaded, attacking by night. In the third place, they're not all conquest-mad."

Sudden astonishment caused the mouth of the old marshal to drop open.

"Curt!" cried Ezra. "You've met, and made friends with some of them?"

"Indeed I have. As I say, there's an Overlord. He dictates, successfully, ruthlessly, energetically. He's just an upstart, of a type familiar in our dimension, too. The older, quieter class of politely reared X-people doesn't like him, doesn't want him, doesn't approve of him. I've been across, Ezra, seen their worlds and their cities, their best men and their worst. I've met a very pallid but decent X-gentleman called Thal Thar. He and his group of friends are to be placed in the forefront of the invading forces. You see, the Overlord wants them killed and wiped out in the first fighting. But they plotted with me, sent me a jump ahead of the invasion to skip back home at Asteroid Six-Ninety-Seven. And, instead of killing them, we'll ally with them."

"Fill in the gaps of that story while we work," said old Ezra. "What do we do first?"

"These prisoners and this ship go back to New York," replied Captain Future. "Glad you brought Elnisor. He'll know enough to take them home without talking to anyone. The rest of us head for Asteroid Six-Ninety-Seven and prepare to meet the initial waves of the invasion."

"Exactly," agreed Curt. "But it's a poor sort of tunnel that doesn't run both ways. As a matter of fact, we'll invade them."

It later became a commonplace, in philosophizing on space-and-time relativities, to say that Dimension X's invaders established their cosmic bridgehead on Asteroid No. 697 within one terrestrial hour, and that they lost that bridgehead by surprise counter-attack within ten terrestrial seconds.

The mechanism and operation that accomplished so great a hole between dimensions were not so freely to be discussed, for their principles remain locked in the secret archives of the Cosmic Science Department, in the Government Library at New York.

Outside the trusted official experts of the Government, nobody knows of them except the Futuremen. But it can be said that they represented prodigies of planning, and labor and equipment such as only a dictatorial government with many worlds under its sway could command. The completion of the action involved the use of an entire planetoid that, moving through Dimension X to a position approximating that of Asteroid No. 697, was then bodily shifted over.

Six fighting spacecraft, no more than cruiser class but heavily armed with weapons designed under Ul Quorn's supervision to fight and destroy Solar System forces, hovered in the dim-lighted ether of Dimension X. Before them yawned a seeming black emptiness, a true hole in emptiness.

"In," came the order of the Commander, Thal Thar, over his speaker system.

"In," echoed the senior officers of the other ships.

One after another, the craft whisked into the emptiness, negotiating the dizzy change from dimension to dimension, and dropped down upon the quiet surface that was no longer identifiable as the captured asteroid.

"All out!" Thal Thar was commanding, and the six crews poured into the open.

The followings drew up before Thal Thar.

"Have the men stack arms," he ordered.

Three of the junior commanders stared. They were Ul Quorn's lieutenants drawn from the Solar System, a little nervous because their chief was reported in confinement—Captain Future, rumor had it, had made a fool of him once again. They wanted to counterbalance Ul Quorn's disgrace by a bold stroke into invasion territory.

"What does this mean?" asked an officer.

"Stack arms!" repeated Thal Thar. "Assemble the men before me in close order. I have important things to say."

It was done. The invasion force, several hundred Pale People, drew up expectantly on smooth ground between fungoid thickets. The rank and file was of the lower order, gnomelike little men with long arms, bandy legs and apelike posture.

Junior officers were of the aristocrat class like Thal Thar, resembling handsome but blanched Earthmen. To one side, as directed, were gathered the weapons—rifles, tendril-spitting devices, and agonizing light-casters that could blind eyes not fitted to endure the glare.

"Junior officers fall out and guard the stacked arms," said Thal Thar.

At this, one of the subordinates objected.

"That's not according to plan," growled one of Ul Quorn's henchmen. "This is no time for lectures. Already the observatories on Earth and Mars may have learned that an asteroid has slipped away between dimensions. Cruisers will be heading this way. We ought to set up shifts to get into their dimension, ready to grab them and carry out the next phase of our conquest."

"You're insubordinate," snapped Thal Thar, and the fellow subsided. Thal Thar faced the close ranks of Pale People.

"You are all prisoners of war," he announced.

Instantly the junior officers seized weapons from the stacks and came to the ready. On the opposite side, figures stole forth from the thickets—figures in space-suits with police insignia, Earthmen and Martians and others, armed and tense.

The quickest witted of Ul Quorn's men sprang at Thal Thar. Somebody laughed in his ear. He knew that laugh—and then he knew nothing as the big fist of Captain Future knocked him spinning into senselessness.

"Anybody else want to argue?" inquired Captain Future. "No? Ezra, these specimens are Ul Quorn's gutter-sweepings, who hoped to be heroes of his sneak invasion. Take them into custody."

Thal Thar smiled at the leaderless, bewildered rank and file.

"This part of the war is over," he said for all to hear. "I shall now tell what the Overlord planned for our group." He paused. "Will you judge by what I say."

"Talk, Thal Thar," ventured someone. "You have always been fair."

"Perhaps that was my downfall," continued Thal Thar. "The Overlord hates me and the class for which I stand, the old leadership that hoped to make the best of our dimming, dying system. I was assigned here, and these officers with me, to die in the first battles and interfere with the Overlord's power-dreams no more. For you rank and file, he cared not one way or the other. You were assigned at random to dead men's duty. While we fought a surprise action, drawing the defending fleet toward one point, another force—led by his favorites—would burst through to reap the fruits of invasion of the defenseless principal bases. We would be sacrificed. That often happens to advance parties."

"Is that true?" blubbered Ul Quorn's quickest-minded man to Captain Future. "Were we to be killed off?"

"Why not?" smiled Captain Future.

"But he said—he promised—honors, riches!"

"Bah!" growled his neighbor. "Stop and think how often he's used and deserted men he needed no more."

The first speaker made a grimace.

"Why, that vile trickster!"

Ezra Gurney hustled them away.

Thal Thar concluded his remarks.

"Because there has been from the first a group opposing the Overlord, spying on his secrets and anticipating his moves, we were able to plan a counter-stroke. The defenders against this invasion have no sure knowledge of us, and only picked men among them even knew of the danger. My friends and I are working with those picked men. We shall go back—and the Overlord shall be the Overlord no more."

"And we?" ventured one of the prisoners.

"You shall be kept here, prisoners of war. There is no need for you to worry, and you can serve no purpose by striking for one side or the other."

Thal Thar turned to Captain Future.

"Ready, my friend. Will you take command in my flagship?"

Captain Future shook his flaming head.

"With your permission, there's a new flagship—over there among the thickets. The *Comet* leads the counter-attack."

CHAPTER XIII

The Fleets Clash

Dimension X, with its vast airless space, was not velvet-black, as in the other dimensions Captain Future knew—it had a grayness like an old blanket in a dingy, unlighted room. There were stars, but not bright stars. They hung and glowed dully, sometimes waxing or waning a trifle, like half-dead sparks on the blanket.

"Our universe is old, inconceivably older, than yours," said Thal Thar, who was standing beside Captain Future in the *Comet*'s control room. "So much of its matter has become radiation that the radiation gives an actual tinge to space. And there is no single sun which burns even a fair fraction so clear and hot as those you tell me of in your own space-latitudes."

Future looked into the telaudio screen.

"You have many dwarf suns, almost burnt out," he answered with a nod. "Many of your dark stars render your universe unfit for habitation for us. Up ahead—that's your own string of worlds, isn't it?"

"Yes, somewhat like yours, I judge. And our sun—its remains—can be seen beyond."

The sun showed dim and blue. Future's big hand juggled a moment with spectro-finders. They gave fuzzy reactions—Dimension X did that to all his equipment—but Future could see that there were no elements in the sun he did not know. He recognized certain vibrating patterns, and a germ of inspiration came to him.

"Directly ahead, hovering," continued Thal Thar, "is

the second fleet, the fleet that was to come through and triumph while my own ships sacrificed themselves against your Solar System defenses."

The screen showed a cluster of dull-silver specks toward the front, and a further, smaller cluster away to the left—two ship groups, idling in space. Captain Future knew that these craft were armed for battle with Ul Quorn's weapons, that they were manned with picked and chosen officers and hands, loyal to the Overlord and keyed up to desperation and audacity. Too, they outnumbered his own forces considerably. He saw that at a glance.

"The nearer group includes nine war craft, each with smaller scout ships in its hold—one-man and five-man craft," said Thal Thar, as if reading his thoughts. "The other, eleven. With the six that I brought, and your own *Comet* and seven police craft, we have fourteen against their twenty."

"And they won't be dazzled into submission by bright lights, will they?" rejoined Captain Future. "They were riding prepared for battle in the full glare of my universe."

"Of course. Goggles and dimmed ports and all that, as with my force. Fighting will be with guns and rays of your own culture designed and manufactured under the direction of Ul Quorn. There will be fighting, won't there?"

"There will," promised Captain Future, switching on the telaudio speech system. "Attention, all ship commanders. Controls and weapon stations to be manned by Solar System personnel. Dimension X personnel to observe—they know these latitudes best. Gurney, take point position. Head to left of nearer enemy group. Full speed on."

"Who is that?" demanded someone on the receiver system, in the burbling language of Dimension X which Captain Future, with his peerlessly trained adaptability, had begun to pick up from the beginning of the adventure. "Thal Thar, why did your ships fall back? Answer me!"

Nobody answered. The combined forces of Thal Thar's group and the police cruisers quickly slid into "dart" formation—Ezra Gurney's raking, speedy craft leading, then the *Comet* in command position, then the others two by two, blasts open, speeds checking or increasing to equality throughout.

Like an arrow from a macrocosmic bow, the formation drove forward—not at the nearest enemy group, but toward a point well to the left, a point between the enemy formations.

This was elementary strategy for Captain Future. His force was smaller in number of craft, and not overmanned, for he had had to divide the crews of the police ships to operate Thal Thar's vessels, but the weapons which would decide the battle were weapons which his personnel knew to the hilt, and elements of surprise and plan were on his side.

If he could get between the enemy units, their superior numbers might not be effective—bold, intelligent action might carry the day.

He sighed as his big hands moved musician-wise over the *Comet's* intricate controls. If his brother Futuremen were here—lightning-coordinated Otho, brilliant Simon Wright, Grag, the indomitable and massive-limbed—yes, and Joan, who seemed all gentleness and loveliness, but whose resolute courage was not inferior to his own—where were they? How imprisoned, how threatened? Captain Future swore in his heart to save them all, even from the innermost prison of the Overlord.

"Answer!" repeated the strange voice from the receiver. "Or we open fire."

Even in this deadly moment of crisis, part of Captain Future's brain could meditate. He now reflected that the strange tongue of Dimension X was partially understandable to him because, basically, it derived from the universal Denebian language of all humanoid creatures in all universes and dimensions. The parent stock from far Deneb had peopled everywhere. This fact was beyond common science or rationality.

There must be a plan, cosmically involving all worlds and spaces, that included a final assurance of what was right and good, what was wrong and evil. Captain Future knew an instant of confidence in the outcome of the fight that was, paradoxically, almost serene.

"Open fire," he commanded into the transmitter. "All long-range arms."

Thal Thar corrected the telaudio vision-viewpoint for him. Now he could see, as in a miniature scale-drawing come to life, both his own dart-formation and the two enemy groups, as if from a point apart from all three.

The nearer enemy still idled, though the ships seemed to tremble and huddle, like indecisive girls at the edge of a ballroom before the music strikes up and partners claim them. The further group was going into action, commencing an approach. The commander of that unit had grasped an inkling of what was about to happen. His ships were moving swiftly to join their sister force.

If the near group retreated, effected a junction—but Captain Future's ships were firing.

With speed and telaudio and direction-instruments able to accomplish what they did in space, the battle began at a distance comparable to that between Earth and Moon. The vision-screen of the *Comet* shortened apparent distances, made everything seem compact. Rays and proton bombs cut great pyrotechnic streaks through the musty ether of Dimension X, scoring on targets afar, but not strongly enough to cripple—only to disconcert. There was a replying spray of flame, but the enemy was unfamiliar with Ul Quorn's weapons, and not a single hit was scored.

From the receiver came the strange voice again, giving its own orders:

"Retreat. Join Group Two and form to repel attack."

That must not be allowed, Captain Future quickly told himself. The two units must be kept apart, defeated in detail. He barked orders of his own.

"Gurney! Continue with advance and attack plan. All other ships, maintain formation and follow Gurney. I'll meet you there."

His hand dropped below the control board to other controls, which he and the other Futuremen alone understood properly—the space-warping principle that could shift the *Comet* from point to point across the limitless miles swifter than light.

He turned from the master microphone to the ship speaker.

"Hang on!" he cried. "This will be abrupt!" Then he touched a key, and another.

A whip of motion and a buzzing assailment of every physical fiber, rather like the dimension-shift. Then there he was—there the *Comet* was—alone in airlessness and between the two enemy groups—nine bearing down from the right, and eleven, a little more distant but cutting the distance fast, on the left.

"Open fire starboard and port," he commanded on the ship speaker, and his man did.

Rays and projectiles spattered the incoming enemy craft like handfuls of sand thrown in the eyes of charging beasts. After a moment, which the opposing commanders must have needed to adjust themselves to this new situation, came the reply.

Captain Future thought, as the multitude of impacts all but jarred him from his controls, of all that had gone into the making of the *Comet*. Not only the engines and instruments and controls that made her the swiftest, furthest-ranging, most efficient craft for exploration that the universe had known, but the peerlessly deadly weapons and perfect armor that made her the last word and the last syllable in fighting power.

She'd be going to pieces now, under the bombardment of twenty war craft, but for those vibration-absorbing elements in her plating. And he had made the *Comet*, he and his friends, and now their work gave a fighting chance to all the worlds against destruction.

"They're cutting speed," gasped Thal Thar, also bracing himself against the shock-shock-shock of the bombardment. "They must, to hit us—and they are hitting us, again, again—but our fire scores, too."

Future was by the telaudio screen.

"Here comes Gurney, and the rest!" he cried.

The moments had been saved, enough for his force to cross the space and needle in between the enemy units. Captain Future leaned toward the master transmitter.

"All craft! Follow Plan G-Six!"

They knew what Plan G-6 was. They changed formation as they came up with the *Comet*, two lines of ships that staggered their order further and became a disc-shaped formation, like a curtain hanging between the two Dimension X forces.

At Captain Future's word this curtain moved left, firing with all arms against the larger, more remote enemy group. Two of the eleven opposing ships disintegrated in varicolored fountains of sparks, beautiful and terrible.

A third spun back out of action, crippled and rudderless.

A fourth retreated, its weapons silenced by the shock of a ray-explosion that wrecked its controls.

The seven remaining craft also drew back, trying to reform for defense—and with abrupt, disciplined blast-reversals, the curtain of Captain Future's fleet threw itself in the opposite direction full at the second threat.

Again at a word from Captain Future the formation changed. The inner ships of the disc lagged a bit and the outer speeded up, so that the disc became a saucer.

Opening order as it came close, that saucer scooped up the smaller and more compact enemy.

With deadly accuracy, Captain Future's twenty ships opened fire on the nine adversaries.

It was over within seconds. Ship after ship of the Dimension X force fluffed into a brief glow of incandescence, and then into dead nothingness. Four of the nine were smashed, then five, then seven. The last two tried to escape. A final fusillade finished them.

"Form to pursue the others," Captain Future was ordering by microphone. "No, they won't wait to fight. They run like rock-rats on Callisto. Who's been hit, Thal Thar?"

Two of the fleet were gone, one police craft disintegrated and one of Thal Thar's badly damaged.

"Start repairs, we'll need her," continued Captain Future. "Gurney, take the two nearest ships with you. Scoop up the damaged enemy craft, the two that can't get away. We'll refit them and spare enough men from among us to fly and fight them."

He took time to sigh, and grin at Thal Thar.

"How did those twenty ships think to conquer my whole home system?" he demanded. "We beat them, outnumbered almost two to one. This invasion was insignificant."

"It was only beginning," Thal Thar told him. "Look in your screen."

Captain Future obeyed. His eyes widened, his jaw-muscles grew tense.

"The—the size of the thing!" he cried. "Is it an illusion?"

"Just as big as you judge it to be," said Thal Thar.

"But what is it? A giant fighting ship? Or a dirigible world?"

"Both," Thal Thar replied. "And it's coming to attack us."

CHAPTER XIV

The Lair of the Overlord

Clumsily moving into combat, with a slowness that was calculated rather than unwieldy, came a craft which was a slightly ovate sphere, like a fat egg. Its narrowest diameter was a little less than a mile, its greatest a little more. Captain Future, at the telaudio, saw no rocket blasts—it must have been working on flameless atomic impulses, nothing else could possibly propel such a bulk, but it was studded with countless cockpits, weapon ports and observation traps.

"Plan H-Twelve," snapped Captain Future into the speaker, and himself led the way in a long, buck-jumping dash to closer quarters.

A few moments later the line of ten craft still active in his command were looping into a circle that spun around the great lumbering vehicle. The formation had some features of a minor planetary system—the big ship in the center might stand for the parent world, the ring of smaller fighters a series of satellites. But these were satellites impelled by deadly enmity. They gushed fire and destruction upon the body in the center, like Indian horsemen on the Western plains of old, galloping around a pioneer wagon and shooting into it.

The volleys were utterly ineffectual. Mighty proton blasts and destroying rays, that would have ripped holes in solid rock or whiffed battalions into vapor, bounced from the impervious surface of the great egg, and the bulk and mass of the target was too great to allow it to shift in space, or even to stagger.

Captain Future, whirling the *Comet* around the perimeter of the fighting circle, had time now to bark questions at Thal Thar.

"How could your Overlord make so huge a fighting ship?"

"It was made decades ago," Thal Thar explained hastily. "The wealth and material of this System went into it. It has become the artificial master world of the System. The Overlord means to sail it into your Universe, attack and seize your Government center at New York and arsenals, proceeding then to arm and launch new attacks." Thal Thar's voice shook in fury. "Do you wonder that decent men hate him? That great mass of flying luxury and power, monopolized by himself while his subjects must live on a darkening, dying string of worlds?"

There was no time to discuss the point. The Overlord was responding to the attack. From a host of weapon-ports burst forth volleys. The speed of Captain Future's ships made aiming difficult, but one charge struck, then another. One of Thal Thar's fleet was gone, and one of the police cruisers—smashed to fragments, all on board

destroyed. Curt Newton growled between his teeth, his eyes flashed like steel.

"Gurney!" he barked into the microphone. "Take over. Continue fire."

Shifting his controls, he swerved the *Comet* inward from the circle, and straight at the enemy he drove.

"Open fire," he said to Thal Thar, who stepped to the bow-weapons.

A lean incandescent ray stabbed at the massive armored curve ahead. Along it, as on a path, tore proton charge after proton charge, bursting at the same spot, a concerted bombardment to force a breach.

From ports all around the point sailed protruded weapons. They volleyed as one. The *Comet* was hurled back like a straw in a tornado, saved from obliteration only by the peerless defense devices of the Futuremen. Curt Newton somersaulted into a corner, momentarily stunned as his ship staggered away through space, out of control.

Ezra Gurney's voice, hoarsely yelling on the telaudio, brought back Captain Future's half-scrambled wits.

"They got the *Comet*," Ezra thundered. "Got Captain Future! Next senior commander, take over. I'm going to peel off and hit them where it hurts, or die like my friend!"

Wavering to his feet again, Future reached his controls.

"No, Ezra!" he called into the speaker. "Continue your mission. Buck-jump, everybody, get hard to hit! Don't worry about the *Comet*! We're all right, I'll see you later!"

Thal Thar also got up, shaky but full of fight.

"Back to the bow-weapons," Future bade him. "Ready to blast the same spot we aimed at. It was giving a little."

"They knocked us clear out past the attacking circle," objected Thal Thar. "They've marked us for special attention. We'll never get close enough for real damage. Another racking like that, even though you've got something of a triply defended craft here, might finish us."

"That's what you think," said the big red-haired Fu-

tureman. "That's what the Overlord thinks, too. But you and he both forget—this!"

His hand shifted again to the controls of the space-warp.

In a single tooth-rattling trice of time, the *Comet* was moved across space to nuzzle the very flank of the enemy. Thal Thar, at the bow weapons, poured every ounce of his blasting power into the beginning of the breach.

It was too quickly done for defense weapons to come to bear. Humming with the recoil from her own proton discharges, the *Comet* slammed home charge after charge. A seam appeared, widening to a crack, like ice floe breaking up in a spring freshet. A whole great flake of outer armor flew off into space. Another and another. Black emptiness showed beyond.

"In, in!" Captain Future muttered fiercely, and, obeying his own voice, slipped the *Comet* forward as into a hangar. Thal Thar, doffing his dark goggles, peered from the bow port.

"We're in an inner chamber," he reported at once. "Pierced many feet of outer plating, and now we enter an empty cushion-space. Beyond is an inner armor."

"Blast it," said Captain Future. He urged the *Comet* forward at a crawl.

Thal Thar obeyed, and suddenly stepped back from his weapons. His hands flew to his eyes, which he had not bothered to cover with the goggles again.

"Light," he stammered. "Beyond is light—blazing light!"

It was true. A brilliant glow beat through the port, white as noonday at home on Earth. The Overlord lived in light, as all his subjects lived in darkness.

"Your goggles," said Future, and thrust them into Thal Thar's hand. He shut off power as the *Comet's* nose crept into the inner aperture.

"Alert at all ports!" he commanded over the ship system.

"Hand arms and respirator—goggles for Dimension X

personnel. Prepare for sortie or to repel boarding attempt!"

Through the bow port he could see a corridor, wide as a street, curving away out of sight to left and right. The heavy walls had door panels, and bright lights gleamed at intervals in the lofty ceiling.

To him, from both directions, approached enemy, both the dwarfed lower order of the Pale People and, as officers, men of Thal Thar's handsome type. They wore no goggles—these, the Overlord's retainers, were plainly accustomed to light, by natural or artificial change.

Shrewd policy, Captain Future agreed at once. The Overlord and his circle basked in radiance. The great throngs of common people would be unable to overthrow them here, even if they wanted to. How could the night-born eyes of rebels turn toward these brilliant hallways.

The approaching forces had weapons, well-made proton guns and their native tendril-throwers. Their officers jabbered commands, pointing to the *Comet's* nose and fanning their followers out into the skirmish lines.

Captain Future's own men were coming into the control room. The first to arrive were all Solar System police, hard-bitten, peerless fighters. Curt pointed through the port at the two forces closing in.

"Together, they outnumber us," he said quickly. "But we'll beat them here, with the same tactics we used out in space. Ready for action?"

"Dying for action," said the nearest man for them all.

"Cover me as I jump out," directed Captain Future. "Pour all your fire into the enemy to the right. The rest of you follow, one at a time. Make every blast count."

Flinging open a port to the right, he sprang out and fell flat to make himself a smaller target. Air swept over and past him in a gale, rushing away through the hole the *Comet* had made.

Leveling his proton pistol, he fired and brought down the nearest of the pallid figures approaching. At the same time there were shots from the open portway above him,

and under the cover of the volley the men leaped out, each dropping to a prone position and resuming fire. The marksmanship was excellent. The enemy gave back, and some men slid into doorways or behind projections of the corridor wall.

Captain Future had hoped and planned for that moment.

"Thal Thar!" he yelled. "Fire on the enemy at the right, you and all your men. You others, follow me! Advance on the other party! Fire at will!"

Abruptly they were on their feet, reversing position, running around the projecting nose of the *Comet*.

With practiced efficiency they fanned out into open order, Captain Future in the lead, and charged.

The enemy neither expected nor wanted that. The first shots of Future's men were directed at officers. When these were down, the remainder was leaderless. A ragged, ineffectual fire was not enough to check the advance. A moment later the second enemy force fell back, and the shots of Captain Future's followers whipped the retreat into a flight, away around the curve of the corridor.

"Back, back!" Future commanded at once. "We hold the corridor both ways from the *Comet* for as far as we can see. Thal Thar's fire has driven back the first group. Let's keep what we have. One of you get out a space-scout, sail back and report to Ezra Gurney."

"I'm right here," said Ezra's gruff voice as they retired to the *Comet*.

The old marshal, his white hair bristling with excitement, pushed forward among a throng of new men.

"We whipped in after you when we saw that the weapon-installations to right and left of your breach were silenced."

"Silenced?" echoed Thal Thar, also out in the corridor with his begoggled companions. "We didn't silence them."

"Those two parties we drove away just now must be the weapon crews," said Captain Future. "Quick, Ezra! Send details—your toughest men—to grab those deserted weapon positions. Thal Thar, get back to the telaudio.

Direct the rest of the ships to stand by for action—half to skirmish outside and keep the outer defenses busy, the rest to head in as they can. You,” he told a junior officer, “take a party to patch the outer hole and rig a temporary portway, so that we don’t lose all the air out of this big egg before we take it over.”

He took time to sigh, as he saw the well-trained subordinates slip away to command their details, and fighting men of both his own universe and Dimension X rig defense shields to right and left in the corridor.

“Only the *Comet* could have done it,” he said, half to himself. “This Overlord is like many another who planned to conquer the Cosmos. He reckoned without the little *Comet*, which can stand up and fight where whole fleets fail! Now, if only the others—hey!”

Something had him around the ankle, tugging and joggling. He looked down. A miniature figure of Otho was hugging his leg, looking up into his face.

“Oog!” cried Captain Future. “I’d almost forgotten you! You want to find Otho too, eh?”

Oog, still as a vest-pocket Otho, let go of him and scampered across the floor toward a half-open doorway to a narrower corridor, looked back and beckoned.

“But I don’t know how to find him, just now,” protested Captain Future.

The little Otho pointed down the side corridor. Abruptly the shape shifted into a tiny replica of Joan. Then into a doll-size Grag, then back to Otho, still beckoning and pointing.

“You mean—you know where he is?”

Oog danced up and down, gesturing wildly.

Ezra, returning from dispatching the details, faced around at Captain Future’s hail.

“Take command here. We can concentrate our forces just inside the rind and fight our way to the core. But I—I’m going after my friends! No, nobody comes along, it’s a one-man job!”

Captain Future followed Oog down the side corridor.

CHAPTER XV

Reunion—and the Overlord

Softly Otho spoke, out of the quiet and the dark.

"Are you all here?" he asked. "If so, where is here?"

"I don't know about you," came Simon Wright's rasp. "I'm shut in a box—heavy, massive, sealed with a ray-lock. It's dark inside."

"And dark outside," boomed Grag from another direction. "I'm helpless, too—hands and feet all magnetized together by a sort of electro-shackle."

"They were unoriginal with me," added Joan Randall. "Just yards and yards of those metal tendrils. What about you, Otho?"

"More of the same, with several strands run through a ring or staple in this corner. But how did we get here? The last I remember is the capture on Luna, and being shoved into a kind of coffin-like case."

"Wait," broke in Joan. "Curt didn't speak. Curt, where are you?"

No answer.

"Curt! They got you, too! What have they done with you?" Joan's voice trembled.

"Steady," urged Simon Wright. "As Otho says, they pushed us into that cabinet, that must have been a dimension-shift. But before that, Ul Quorn took Curt away. If they saved us alive, they must have done the same for him. But, as Otho asks, where in Dimension X, or Dimension Y, or all the dimensions, are we?"

Otho stretched himself cautiously. He lay full length on a hard floor, swaddled in bonds which went loose as his hyperelastic android tissues elongated themselves. He felt sudden hope, but did not speak of it.

"If Captain Future was here, he'd set us free," said Otho. "All but Grag. Maybe we can leave you behind when we go home."

"If I wasn't magnetized here," grumbled Grag, "I'd do your legs in a braid, you sneering mockery of normal existence!"

"Save the fighting for Ul Quorn, who got us into this," broke in Joan Randall.

Came a sound of bumping. Simon Wright was experimentally poking inside his box prison.

"Not a hairline of opening," he said. "If I had to breathe, I'd smother in here."

"They didn't put Joan in a box," reminded Grag. "That means we're being saved alive. Otherwise they'd be killing us now."

"Right, Grag!" applauded Simon. "Even Otho will admit that."

Otho admitted nothing. Silently he strove to escape.

The metal bonds that held him were treated so as to adhere wherever they touched. In one place they stuck to his throat, in another to his naked left wrist.

Elsewhere they clung tightly to his flying suit. It fitted snugly—Otho was justly vain of his trim, supple figure. Yet he had hopes.

Silently he contracted his artificial lungs, relaxed his synthetic muscles and tendons. He went a trifle loose inside his garments. The light shoes twitched as his feet, elongating, wriggled clear. The shoes dropped off. Otho began to squirm out of his flying suit, like a snake shedding its skin.

It was hard, sustained work, even for the supple Otho. He strained and struggled in grim quiet, though Grag was booming more taunts. At last he crouched on the floor, clad only in trunks and socks, beside his wire-festooned outer garments. He was free from the wall staple except for the coils of wire that stuck to his wrist and neck.

"There, you have had a demonstration," said a hated voice from somewhere. "Will you believe me now when I say that these Futuremen are perhaps more peculiarly dangerous than all the rest of their universe combined?"

"Take the elastic one to our laboratory for dissection,"

one of the Pale People made high-pitched response. "Continue to observe the others."

"Ul Quorn, you spy!" snarled Otho, trying to rise to his feet but prevented by the bonds still sticking to him. His eyes, adaptable like the rest of him, had grown used to the gloom.

He could make out the dim cubicle in which he and his friends were imprisoned. A panel had opened into a blacker side-chamber, and two fungus-wan figures moved toward him, armed and cautious. From behind them came the laugh of Ul Quorn.

"This, Otho, will go far toward clearing me of the disgrace of defeat," he said. "My allies are only beginning to realize what a slippery hazard you and your comrades can be. Better not resist, Otho."

One word had caught Otho's ear.

"Defeat!" he cried exultantly. "You defeated—that means that Captain Future got away! Hear that, Joan and the rest of you? He'll get us out of this!"

One of the Pale People made a deft play with his tendrill-weapon, snaring both of Otho's hands. Another loop tethered Otho's ankles so that he could barely totter. His captors snipped away the wires that held him to the wall and led him to the doorway. Beyond was a second panel that took him into a narrow corridor. Ul Quorn waited there, a bruise on his delicately handsome chin, but natively clad in Martian robe and turban, and plainly triumphant.

"Return and watch," said Ul Quorn to the two Pale People. "You were told off to observe the captives and their strange abilities. At any moment, another escape method may be tried."

He took the loose ends of Otho's bonds in his right hand, which also held a proton gun.

"You won't really be dissected—yet," he assured Otho mockingly. "That was said only to stir up your friends, to make them try to escape and so betray their methods and secrets. You're all hostages just now."

"Hostages!" echoed Otho, again seizing on a word that revealed Ul Quorn's situation. "In other words, there's a real fight on, and not going your way. Captain Future is knocking at your door this instant, and you'll try to baffle him by threatening to hurt us."

Ul Quorn's smile grew wider and more bitter.

"Why deny that your deductions are fairly good? Future, as you say, is knocking at the door. Indeed, he has one foot inside it. But we'll fight back. He finds us in our stronghold, a very trickbox of weapons, pitfalls, defenses."

"What next?" demanded Otho.

"New York next, and another hole through the dimensions by which we can bring armies to use the weapons we'll seize there. Only an hour and a surprise are needed. And the night hours are wonderful for battle—Dimension X men are at their best, and Solar System defenses at their worst."

Otho stared past Ul Quorn.

On the wall of the corridor was a bracket that held some sort of a mirror. In it Otho saw an image of himself, reduced to only a few inches. But it couldn't be an image in a mirror. He stood still in his bonds, this little figure moved and was free. It made something like a gesture of greeting, then pointed up corridor. Finally its outlines melted. It turned into Captain Future.

Oog. He was telling Otho that rescue was coming!

Otho tore his eyes from the little mimic. He must keep Ul Quorn's attention riveted.

"Of course you don't intend to keep us alive," he sneered. "If you make a pact with Captain Future, you'll break it later."

"Why not? We're enemies to the knife, and closer. That," and he snapped the fingers of his free hand, "for any promise to Captain Future. When it pleases me I make, when it pleases me I break."

"Poetry," taunted Otho. "Bad poetry. I'll try a second verse of your jingle. You'll be smashed, rayed, or shot, and later forgotten."

"That's a lie!" blazed Ul Quorn, his vanity wounded.

"No matter who wins, all the universes will remember me to the end of time!"

He lifted the hand with the gun and wire-ends and Oog sprang from the bracket behind. His little body, still in the semblance of Captain Future, stuck and clung to Ul Quorn's wrist, forcing the muzzle away from Otho.

Shrieking a curse, Ul Quorn shook off the little body. But in that moment, Captain Future sprang from behind a corner of the corridor. His fist shot out like the head of a Venusian swamp-cobra. Ul Quorn dropped as limp and still as an empty garment from a hangar.

Quickly Captain Future pried the sticky coils from Otho's limbs, and used them to tie Ul Quorn's unconscious body. Otho caught up Oog and hugged him with fierce affection and gratitude.

"The others," said Otho. "Just inside here."

Captain Future nodded.

"I know, I've listened," he answered. "Oog and I slipped this far alone, while the battle goes on at our landing-breach. The corridors are like a labyrinth, but Oog seems to tune in on your mental wave-length."

"Battle?" Otho was repeating. "Landing-breach?"

"I'll explain fully when we have time. Suffice it to say that you've been held captive near the center of a spaceship almost the size of a satellite. Most of its garrison is giving our gang a battle near the surface. Twice I almost ran into guards, but Oog warned me twice by turning into a little Dimension X warrior, and I was able to strike first." Captain Future's big hand tapped his holstered gun. "Now, let's free the others."

From the still silent Ul Quorn he took cloak and turban, offering them to Otho.

"How do you mean?" demanded Otho, staring. "Oh, disguise, and then what?"

"Disguise, and then surprise," finished Future for him. "You and Ul Quorn were swapping rickety little rhymes, why shouldn't I? Hurry."

Otho had neither makeup nor the oil that could make his face plastic, but he grimly modelled his face into a

likeness to Ul Quorn and drew the turban low above it. He walked back into the side-room, and peered through the door into the prison cubicle.

The two pale observers stood next to the sealed case that imprisoned the Brain. Their proton-guns were drawn. One chattered in his native tongue at Otho.

"In the language of the Solar System," Otho commanded harshly, imitating Ul Quorn's accents. "You know that we must practice constantly."

"I said, the creature whose Brain lives in a transparent box seems to solve our raylock," answered the Pale Man. "If he emerges, we will slay him."

"No," growled Otho. He walked close. The observer who had spoken drew back a little.

"You are pallid, Ul Quorn. And why do you leave the other captive unguarded. The Overlord does not trust you completely, and neither do we."

Ul Quorn shot out his arm, inches longer than normal. He pinned the creature's weapon wrist, whipped the pallid form close to him. His other hand, balling into a knuckly fist, drove for the scrawny jaw. The apelike figure collapsed.

"Captain Future could have done no better," thought Otho.

"Ul Quorn!" squealed the other. "You are going mad—or traitor to us, as you have been traitor to your own! Stand where you are!"

Captain Future sprang on the speaker, subduing him like a child.

"No cheers," warned Captain Future. "No celebrations, no congratulations. Just get everybody free—quickly."

It was done. Two blows with the butt of a pistol smashed the magnet device that held Grag helpless. Joan caught her breath and suppressed a gasp of pain as Otho pried the adhesive coils from her. Simon Wright's traction beams had already searched out and opened the lock of his cage. The Futuremen stood up at last, free and exultant.

"Now what?" asked Otho.

"Now for the Overlord. You'll have to perfect your disguise, Otho."

"Easily done." Otho had repossessed his garments. "Here in my belt-bag is an adequate makeup kit—oils and pigments."

"As Ul Quorn, you'll take me prisoner to the Overlord," went on Captain Future. "Drag the real Ul Quorn in here, Grag. He's bound tightly, but gag him. Put him in that box that held Simon, and close it just loosely enough to give him air. Then loop it around with tendrils so he can't get away."

"Why not kill him?" demanded Grag bluntly.

"For the same reasons he didn't kill you," said Captain Future. "He may be a valuable hostage. Otho, come with me. The rest stay here, Simon in charge. Let nobody in or out."

They regained the corridor. Otho, in the character of Ul Quorn, carried a pistol and led Captain Future in a deceptive fabric of bonds. "Which way to this Overlord?" asked Otho.

"Oog will show us," said Captain Future.

"But how?" Otho stooped toward his pet. "How, Oog?"

The meteor-mimic's molecules stirred and changed. He stood up as the tiny figure of a supple woman.

"N'Rala!" exclaimed Otho.

"Exactly. She's close to the Overlord. Oog has some way of leading us to her—thought impulse, scent, vibrations. Which means, to the Overlord. Follow him."

Oog scampered off along the outer corridor, through a door. There was a guard in a niche beyond, and further along another, but both saluted the apparent Ul Quorn, and neither noticed the tiny guide that stole past. The third guard they met was at a dead end of a corridor. He saluted with a bright new proton-rifle.

"You were ordered to appear?" he asked Otho.

"No, but—"

"You know the procedure, Ul Quorn. One appears before the Overlord only by his order."

"But," argued Otho, "I've just taken Captain Future prisoner."

The guard stared, but remained stubborn.

"Only by order. Otherwise—" He gazed down at Oog. "What's that?"

Oog was mimicking the guard himself. The fellow scowled and brought his weapon to the ready.

"I don't like this, whatever it is," he muttered, and aimed.

"No, by the holy sun-imps!" growled Otho. His own proton-pistol leveled and exploded. The guard dropped and lay still.

"Sorry, Chief," said Otho. "Couldn't let him kill Oog. But who'll show us the way now?"

"Oog will."

Oog had turned again to a tiny N'Rala, and stood facing a seeming blank stretch of wall. Future stepped close, shedding his simulated bonds, and his knuckles tapped the surface.

"Hollow behind. Must be a secret panel. Look for a lever or button."

But they could find none, not even a hairline crack. Captain Future stooped above the dead guard.

"He has a ray-thrower of some sort." He detached it from the belt. "Look Otho. It has features of the atom-lock—can make solids penetrable. Let's see."

He directed the force against the hollow section of wall. Abruptly a tunnel seemed to come into being, almost clear transparency into a room beyond.

"In," commanded Captain Future. Otho stepped boldly forward, and Captain Future, holding the ray above and behind him, followed.

"What is this intrusion?" demanded a high, harsh voice.

They had come into a domed chamber, of only medium size but richly decorated, set with luxurious furniture, and containing several banks of strange, intricate-seeming machinery. In its center with a great throne-like chair, and on this sat one of the most magnificent specimens of humanity the Futuremen had ever seen.

The man, standing erect, would tower a good two

inches above Curt Newton's six feet four. His facial features had the classic mould of ancient sculptures. His broad shoulders and superbly muscled legs, revealed by the glittering body-armor he wore, might make envious a championship athlete.

Over the back of his throne lay folds of a rich scarlet mantle, and his temples were bound with a fillet of blinding gems. His eyes were deep, lustrous black, his skin as white as a night flower, his hair like closely curled silver floss.

"Ul Quorn!" this person was saying. "To incompetency you now add impudence."

"Wait."

It was N'Rala, moving into view from behind the throne. She was radiant, mocking, beautiful as always.

"You might forgive Ul Quorn, Overlord, when he brings you Captain Future as a captive."

The Overlord's dark eyes fixed themselves on Curt.

"Captive?" he echoed. "No, it's a trick! I'm tuned to every kind of warning ray here. They tell me that he's armed!"

Captain Future reached back to his holster. But the Overlord's great white hand moved to a table beside his throne, studded with levers and push-buttons.

Captain Future felt as if lightning had struck him. Then he felt nothing at all.

CHAPTER XVI

The Fate of Universes

Regardless of the fact that impersonation had always been second nature with Otho, nevertheless he was all but jolted out of his Ul Quorn pose. For, under his very gaze and within arm's length of him, he saw a great yellow block—gold, or some metal like gold—materialize instantly where Captain Future had stood.

It was a block seven feet tall, three feet wide, three feet

thick, large enough to enclose Captain Future like a coffin.

"Don't gape like that, Ul Quorn," came the amused voice of N'Rala. "One would think that the Overlord had never spoken of how easily he can do what he has done."

Her words called Otho back to himself and his job.

"I've heard, yes," he took up the cue. "But the actual sight, the unthinkably weird performance was wonderful!"

"Very simple, like most amazing things."

The Overlord was intrigued with Otho's blank surprise, and half forgot his displeasure at the unapproved entry. He gestured toward the push-buttons on the side table. One had been pressed home, and stayed down under an automatic catch.

"Don't you remember that I explained how this whole chamber is hollowed out of solid alloy—by action of the atom-lock?"

"Like the ray that opened a way for us to enter," supplied Otho.

"Yes. It affects the alloy of the chamber in such a way as to make its every molecule and atom stand still—cease its activity—in short, remove it from its solid nature. Turn off the rays which I control by these buttons, and the open space, or any segment of it which I choose, fills up on the instant. I can create or banish emptiness."

"Captain Future," said Otho, trying to keep his voice from trembling as he eyed the gleaming slab of metal that stood where his chief had been. "He's disintegrated now? His substance destroyed by the solidification?"

"No," the Overlord smiled loftily. "I use a special alloy, as I said. It's atoms, reactivated to solidity, cannot replace another solid which is already there, but they can surround and clamp it tightly. Captain Future is still alive, can hear what we say. But if he remains long as he is, he will smother."

"Keep him alive," urged Otho. "He knows science that I could never tell you."

"That doesn't sound like Ul Quorn," spoke up N'Rala.

"You used to feel very generous when you called Captain Future your equal in mind and training. In any case, the Overlord is well advised to let him perish there. Captain Future may be the difference between victory and defeat."

"You are not complimentary," said the Overlord, a little sharply. "Many have tried to defeat me, and failed. For instance, the force from that other dimension, even now assailing me here in this space-fortress, thinks I am almost overthrown. No man of them all will escape."

"How will you do that?" demanded Otho.

The Overlord lounged, one arm hanging over the arm of his throne. Otho could see big white fingers hooked on the edge of the side-table with the buttons. The other arm jerked a thumb toward a mechanism at the rear of the chamber.

"That lever," he said. "A tug upon it, and this whole flying planetoid will explode into atoms. It would kill my enemies, as well as some servants who have been faithful and helpful and whom I would be sorry to lose, but whom I must sacrifice. Among the enemies thus doomed are Thal Thar and his handful of rebels who might cause trouble if spared."

"And you would escape?" prompted Otho.

"This chamber, made as it is of the material I have chosen, would survive that blast, or a greater one. It would ride clear, with myself inside. Meanwhile, the invasion is shelved for the time, Ul Quorn. Already I have had the great dimension-bridge at the Asteroid closed. The smaller one, to the Futuremen's lair on the imprisoned Moon, will be done away with likewise, as soon as I evacuate my men and supplies there. With Captain Future gone, and his imprisoned friends blown up with the rest, you and I can rebuild a successful invasion machine, striking your native System when we will be least expected and most deadly. Agreed?"

Otho fixed his eyes again on Captain Future's confining block.

"To stifle," he ventured. "A miserable death."

"Again you don't sound like yourself," said N'Rala. "Are you Ul Quorn, or a cheap imitation?"

Otho felt that his unmasking was more than likely.

"Who else?" he snapped on inspiration. "I suppose you think that I'm Otho, escaped and in makeup. This," he suddenly improvised, "is the thanks I get for helping your plan along, N'Rala—and keeping it secret from the Overlord."

"What's this?" demanded the Overlord, sitting up. "Plans? And kept from me?"

"He lies!" protested N'Rala, her voice sharp with anger. "He wants to make you mistrust me!"

"I don't lie," insisted Otho, improvising as he plunged ahead. "Why should I make up a story that would condemn me as an enemy of the Overlord? It's true, and I tell it because I refuse to be insulted by N'Rala, when I've worked with her and come so close to overthrowing—"

"Don't listen!" N'Rala screamed at the Overlord. "He's mad with jealousy—because I neglect him and turn to you—"

She started toward the great pale man on the throne-chair, but he pushed her roughly back.

"Stay clear, until this is explained," he told her. "Ul Quorn, finish what you began. What plotting has been done behind my back?"

Otho's invention had run out. He folded his arms with a great show of dignity.

"Ask N'Rala," he said.

"N'Rala?" said the Overlord, turning to her. "I trusted you. I suppose the proverb is extra-universal about not trusting beautiful women."

Her face twisted grotesquely in her fury, and her hand dropped to the dagger at her belt. The Overlord lifted his eyebrow and jabbed his finger at another push-button—Otho had a notion that there were an amazing number of fingers on his hand.

Where N'Rala had stood was another block of metallic yellow. The Overlord touched a third button, and Otho felt sudden clamping solidity around his limbs and body. But his head remained free.

"I left you able to breathe and observe, Ul Quorn," the Overlord told him. "Plotter or not, you will remain useful to me. I'll find ways to render you harmless. But first, the vibrator-warnings sound an initial success for the attackers. Most of their craft and personnel are where an explosion will wipe them out. Watch."

Rising from his throne, he strode toward the lever that, with one twitch, would disintegrate the mighty fabrication that served as capitol of Dimension X.

But Otho's gaze remained fixed on the side table. The Overlord had departed, but he had left something there, white and hand-shaped. A glove? A dummy?

The hand, detached as it was, crept forward like a big bloodless crab. It was fussing with the release of the automatic catches.

Oog again had come to the rescue!

Otho saw the catches fly back. At the same moment he stood free from the massive yellowness that had materialized about him. And Captain Future was visible, resting on a knee, gulping air into his starved lungs. N'Rala staggered and swayed, a hand to her throat. She saw what had happened, whirled to cry a warning to the Overlord.

"Ul Quorn" sprang forward sweeping N'Rala aside with one arm even as he reached the other for the Overlord. He pushed the big pale form sidewise and flung his own lean, active body in front of the lever.

"There'll be no disintegration," said Otho.

"There was a plot, after all," said the Overlord. His handsome lips curled into the most deadly grin Otho had ever seen. "I was wrong to think you worth keeping alive, Ul Quorn. I'm going to render you thoroughly harmless."

"He's not Ul Quorn, I tell you!" N'Rala was yammering. "He's Otho! That android play-actor!"

The Overlord moved quickly, almost as quickly as Otho himself. Before Otho could squirm away, a huge hand like a multiple vice clutched him, driving its fingers deep into his synthetic flesh.

"I'll tear you into shreds," promised the Overlord. "Little, little shreds."

But other fingers closed on the Overlord's shoulder, tanned against the whiteness.

"Let him go," said Captain Future, panting still but in command of his faculties.

The Overlord started. His grip slackened, and Otho twitched free. He ran back to N'Rala, in time to snatch her away from the table with the pushbuttons.

She struck at him, tried to draw her dagger, then a little proton pistol. Otho was too quick for her, and took both weapons away.

"Watch," he bade her, turning her forcibly around. "This will be a battle well worth seeing."

Captain Future had torn the Overlord's weapon belt away. Now he threw it across the floor.

A moment later the Overlord exerted all his strength, broke the grip on his shoulder, and turned to fight it out.

The Overlord was the bigger of the two, mightily strong, and filled with a rage that cried for the blood of a universe, but Captain Future did not offer to draw the pistol he wore.

He wanted the ruler of Dimension X as a prisoner.

His red head ducked smoothly under a flying white fist, and Captain Future's own hands played for the midriff. But his knuckles bounced back from the body armor, and next instant the Overlord landed his own right to the chin.

Future blinked and stepped back. The Overlord whirled toward the lever once again.

"Don't let him!" yelled Otho, and Captain Future sprang after his enemy. His sinewy left forearm whipped under the Overlord's big, handsome chin from behind, tightened across the throat. Captain Future's right hand grasped his left wrist, doubling the pressure. The Overlord, in the very instant of grasping the lever, yielded to instinct. His hands flew up to claw at the great bar of bone and muscle that strangled him.

Otho, holding N'Rala by the collar of her robe, watched fascinated. He had not the slightest doubt or worry about the result of the battle, but his chief's fighting methods were ever a wonder.

In vain the Overlord struggled. Captain Future began to tramp backward, dragging with him the strangling, heaving bulk, away from the lever and toward Otho. Already the Overlord's arms and legs thrashed less frantically. He would soon subside into unconsciousness.

"Bravo!" cried Otho, and moved a step nearer, and N'Rala with him.

Captain Future had heaved his victim several strides toward the center of the room. He was no more than two yards from Otho. N'Rala threw herself at him.

She did not free herself from Otho's grasp, but for a moment she was within touch of Captain Future. Her hand gained and grasped the proton pistol at the holster just rearward of his hip. She paused only an instant, to touch with her thumb the little stud on the hilt that would modify power of the charge, enough to destroy only Captain Future without burning through and into the Overlord beyond. That instant was enough for Otho—not enough for him to disarm her, but enough for him to scream a warning.

"What's the trouble?" demanded Captain Future, and turned. As he did so, he heaved the Overlord bodily around, between him and N'Rala.

As he did so, she was leveling the gun, pressing the trigger.

The proton charge meant for Captain Future's back slammed into the center of the Overlord's chest, glowed a moment there like some garish ornament or medal. And the mighty pale body went utterly slack, and Captain Future let go of his strangle hold, because the Overlord was breathing no longer.

Otho moved to disarm N'Rala, but she handed him the weapon and burst into tears of unutterable rage.

She was beaten.

CHAPTER XVII

Cleanup

Hastily Otho, with Oog to guide him, hurried back for the other Futuremen. He led them to the central headquarters where the Overlord had reigned, Ul Quorn stumbling along among them in close-drawn bonds. Three officers of the Pale People crossed their path en route, and all three died under the sure protonfire of the Futuremen.

Captain Future himself had been busy in Otho's absence. He greeted the arrival of his friends by showing them a full half dozen captives at one side of the chamber, clamped to the neck in yellow metal like so many snow-bound sheep.

"They were the Overlord's chief staff officers, and they came one after another to ask for orders, because naturally they weren't receiving any," explained Curt. "They were timid about coming, not having been told to come; so they were easy to capture. I got the drop on one, tripped up another, knocked another down with my fist and so on. I've learned the trick of the Overlord's push-buttons, to materialize solid matter around them."

"N'Rala," said Otho. "Where is she?"

Captain Future pointed. The Martian girl crouched behind the throne, where had been laid the body of the dead Overlord. N'Rala's face was calm again, still lovely in its agony of woe. She looked down upon what had been her hope to queen it over two universes. Ul Quorn snorted and cursed by certain disreputable Martian gods.

"Keep her and Ul Quorn apart," bade Captain Future. "They might still turn out to be the worst possible chemical compound if they got together against us. What news of the battle outside?"

"We can hear it," said Simon Wright. "It sounds hot, bitter and undecided."

The Futuremen eyed each other calculatingly.

"I know what's in your minds," said their chief. "Why don't we attack the enemy from the rear, eh? Well, it shall be done. Arm yourselves from the weapons I took from these officers."

They did so. Then, at Captain Future's directions, they marshaled Ul Quorn and N'Rala to opposite quarters of the chamber, and after some experimentation with the push-buttons, Captain Future solidified metal around these two fresh prisoners, shoulder high. Straws were drawn and Joan, much to her disappointment, was selected to guard the place. The other humans emerged into the corridors, and Joan, with the atom-lock, solidified the entry shut behind them.

It was easy to reach the battle. Simon Wright, whose radio ears were best, picked up its sounds and floated ahead.

Things were going bad for Dimension X. The Overlord's flying world had been designed to do battle as a great moving artillery placement.

Like all artillery placements, however, intricate and powerful, it was at a disadvantage when the enemy got too close. The garrison at the weapon-ports was brave enough, but the officers and men were none too sure of the proton guns and rays that Ul Quorn had designed. Too, their central command was gone, killed or shut up in the central chamber.

The breach made by the *Comet* let in more raiders, and more. Ezra Gurney's seasoned police slid along the corridors to one weapon station after another, destroying, killing, capturing. Thal Thar took a chance on broadcasting an appeal over a captured microphone for those who did not trust the Overlord, to change sides; and some did so, enough to disrupt the defenses even further.

By the time the Futuremen came to the battle, it had been localized, several corridors inward from the surface. A junior staff officer of the Overlord, whose name survives on captured records as Zarn Zel, was desperate but game and intelligent.

He managed to gather a great part of the surviving

loyal men into a single fighting force. They held a large chamber designed for conferences and audiences, well armored against possible attacks because the Overlord had so often been present there. Warning devices showed that the attack approached along three corridors, and these the defenders quickly but efficiently mined.

The foremost scouts of Gurney and Thal Thar were blasted into nothing, and the blasts wrecked the corridors and partially blocked the immediate approach of the stronger units who followed. It was the first real check that the Pale People had effected, and Zarn Zel, their commander, permitted himself to grin.

"We may yet win," he said to his subordinates.

"But the Overlord," quavered a nervous youth. "We get no word from him. Perhaps he is destroyed."

"Perhaps," agreed Zarn Zel, without being too appalled by the possibility.

If he could crush this danger, and the Overlord did not survive—who could say? Another Overlord would be needed. Zarn Zel wondered if anyone would be more deserving, or more capable, of assuming the title than himself. . . .

From a rear corridor, to which the enemy was not able to penetrate, tramped a figure he recognized. It was a staff officer, wearing the cloak and insignia that showed him to be two or three places senior to Zarn Zel.

"Attack," growled the newcomer. His voice sounded strange and thick, perhaps because his mouth was puffed and bleeding from a blow or cut.

"Attack?" repeated Zarn Zel. "But we are in an excellent position to meet their assault and throw it back. Let them waste their strength by coming on, while we—"

"Attack," repeated his superior, staring at him in arrogant challenge.

Zarn Zel's dreams of blood-won glory and even supremacy began to fade. Plainly this newcomer wanted to take command—yea, and credit and profit. Why should Zarn Zel permit it?

"You're ill-advised," said Zarn Zel. "I won't obey. I've

estimated the situation, and I'll meet it as I see fit. If you interfere, I'll kill you."

He put his hand to a weapon at his belt. But, before he could draw, the other officer's hand flashed, swifter than thought, to his own holster. While Zarn Zel's fingers still fumbled, the other's proton-gun was out and blazing. Zarn Zel died in the midst of his own protest and amazement.

One or two men stared. The officer who had killed now waved his drawn weapon in the direction of the half-wrecked corridors beyond.

"Attack!" he bellowed commandingly, for the third time.

There was no gainsaying his authority. The junior officers quickly passed the order on. Into each of the corridors pressed a force of Pale People, and they met doom. As Zarn Zel had pointed out before he died, advantage at this point and moment lay all with the defender.

Thal Thar and Gurney, who had paused and quickly reorganized, had the best of it. The front ranks of the Pale People withered before their point-blanked volleys, and those behind might have faltered, except for the insistent cry of their new commander:

"Attack! Attack!"

Obedience was too deeply grained into them, and they pressed forward to their own destruction.

As the reserve units headed into the battle an officer turned to ask a question of the bruised-mouth chieftain:

"Would it not be well if some of us moved through a side corridor, around their flank and behind?"

"Now!" called Captain Future, moving into view from the undefended rear doorway.

His weapon, and Grag's, and Simon Wright's, hurled charges into the rear of the enemy. The Pale People spun around to fight. They saw the Futuremen firing into them. They saw, too, the officer who had commanded them to move against Gurney and Thal Thar, now leveling his gun at them. It was too much to understand, and far too much to resist. Some of the men, and the officer who had spoken, threw down their own weapons.

"Spare those who surrender," Captain Future directed quickly. "Clear over to the side, you prisoners! Keep your hands up! Now, forward after the others!"

That was really the end of it. Caught as in a sandwich of destroying fire, the survivors were overwhelmed, or surrendered gratefully, there in the passageways and among the wreckage.

Thal Thar and Gurney pushed through to greet the Futuremen with wild cries of triumphant joy.

The staff officer with the bloody mouth was divesting himself of his Dimension X accoutrements and insignia.

"I'm glad that's over," he said. With a corner of his cloak he carefully wiped white pigment from his face and neck, and then the smeared crimson color that had simulated blood upon an artificially puffed mouth. His nimble fingers modeled his features quickly back into the familiar face of Otho.

"Your greatest performance of this campaign, Otho," applauded Simon Wright, settling down beside him. "Even better than that impromptu Ul Quorn at the prison chamber."

Otho showed unexpected modesty. "It wasn't much," he said. "You should have seen me at the start of things, when I did a Jovian twice my size. I used padding and lifts in my shoes. And I fooled even N'Rala, who knew the fellow personally."

"You were superb," Captain Future told him. "And you had only one word of the Dimension X language—all I had time to teach you. Attack!"

"He was pretty monotonous with that word toward the end," boomed Grag. "I'll admit he was useful, but so was I. And I don't need to hide behind makeup." He stretched out his great arms, and some prisoners ducked fearfully away from him.

There was a final roundup of enemy, and an end to the last resistance. In the midst of this, one of Thal Thar's lieutenants came forward to where the commanders were gathered.

"Message from the sub-directors of the worlds," he

said. "They're gathered yonder, on the nearest planet. They know the fight's over, and that we've won. They're asking what terms we demand."

Captain Future faced Thal Thar. "That sounds as if they're ready and willing to quit. Are they in earnest?"

"I think they are," replied Thal Thar. "Reflect a moment. It's been like all dictatorships—a supreme power in one individual, a bunch of petted lieutenants close to him, and not even real men in the lower brackets of government doing the routine work. Only machines for carrying out orders. I don't expect any trouble, now we've taken this headquarters and destroyed the cream of the Overlord's personal retinue."

"Proceed carefully," warned Captain Future. "We hold the whip hand, and we'll keep it until we're sure. Direct them to give up or dismantle all weapons. Every individual in authority, down to the little bureau-officials, will gather in convenient groups for us to deal with."

"You'll take charge?" offered Thal Thar, but Captain Future shook his red head.

"You, and your best people, know what must be done for yourselves. I'll help, but I'll not be a ruler—that would make me an invading conqueror and despot."

"Some of them will be disappointed that we don't get into a lighted universe," said Thal Thar, "but better light in the heart than in the sky."

"Oh, we'll do something about that, too," Captain Future assured him. "Get on with forming your new government, and then I'll explain the last move in the campaign."

CHAPTER XVIII

Bombing a Star

Gloomy, dark days of Dimension X had passed. Captain Future stood with Thal Thar and Ezra Gurney and the Futuremen at an airlock of the big flying world, outlining once again his theory and his plan.

"This planetary system has two items that I am going to blend," he explained. "A dim sun and an immense artificial world which can be propelled and guided and, at the proper time, exploded in every atom. I intend to dive her into the sun's depths and, by an explosion, finish matters."

"The sun is half-dead," protested Thal Thar for the hundredth time.

"The sun is half-alive," said Captain Future. "It has spent its free supplies of heat and light to a great degree. But much remains, waiting only for release. A big atomic explosion might start things."

"And what happens to you in the meantime?" Ezra Gurney demanded savagely. "You have to steer this big hulk in, and pull that explosion lever."

"The central chamber, in material and construction, is designed to withstand anything imaginable," said Captain Future. "Even heat and shock beyond anything man can produce. I hope to come out of it inside that central chamber."

"Which brings us back to what I've said and said and said," growled the old marshal. "You're taking the slimmest chance on record."

"Somebody has to take it," said Captain Future. "And not only will I not ask somebody else to take it; I won't allow it. Thal Thar tries to insist that it's his chore, as a Dimension X native, but he's needed to reorganize the government of his system. My explosion will give that government light to flourish by. It will breach the dimmed, cooling outer surface of the sun. The inner core, which my tests indicate is still full of incandescent life, will burst through. The initial atom-explosion of the ship will start other atoms to blasting. Days will pass before the difference is appreciably felt on your worlds, Thal Thar. Years will pass before the sun is truly bright and blazing as in its youth. That, too, is an advantage. Your people, small and great, can spend the time adapting themselves."

Captain Future turned to his Futuremen, drawn together in a melancholy knot.

"Simon," he said to the Brain. "In case I've stupidly overlooked something that will blot me out, you take command of the expedition and the *Comet*." He offered his right hand to Otho, his left to Grag. "Don't say goodbye, friends, because I don't mean this as a goodbye. Chances aren't as slim as Ezra here keeps insisting." He looked long at Joan. "I'm not going to crowd my luck any more by discussing it. Get going."

He turned on his heel and strode away through the empty corridors that had resounded with battle.

The time it took him to reach the central chamber would be enough, and more than enough, for his friends to get into their ships and clear. Now he felt alone, alone in the very heart of this mile-sized egg. He sat down in the throne of the Overlord.

Within reach of him were banks of controls, all of which he had carefully studied, tested, and in some cases altered so that he could fly the great structure solo. A telaudio screen, with dials to show speeds and distances, gave him a view of the dim disk of the sun he meant to attack.

His hands touched the controls appraisingly. Yes, it was lonely, here on the threshold of what was in many respects his mightiest and most perilous attempt—

Not all alone! Up on his knee scrambled a little figure of Thal Thar, which shook itself down to the doughy proportions of Oog.

"You little stowaway!" scolded Captain Future. "If something happens, what will Otho say?"

"Otho won't say anything," said the android, appearing in the entry. "Because Otho will be there, having the same thing happen to him."

"Grag, too," boomed the robot, clanking behind. "Do you think I'd stay away from anything Otho dares face?"

Captain Future was on his feet. "You'll be left behind when the *Comet* clears," he warned.

"The *Comet* has cleared," drily announced the Brain, drifting into view. "You relegated authority to me, I relegated it to Ezra Gurney. Told him to go with Joan."

"But Joan came with you." The girl's lithe figure

joined the group. "Go one, go all. Curt, did you truly think we'd leave you?"

"You're rebels and mutineers," Captain Future rebuked them.

But his voice trembled. His tameless gray eyes, that had looked unawed on every danger that the uttermost spaces could spawn, suddenly were bright with tears. His friends crowded around, and he lifted one hand in a gesture of acceptance.

"We couldn't do otherwise, lad," said Simon Wright for them all. "I know that you thought some of us should be kept in reserve for future service to the universe—but without Captain Future, what would the universe be for us? We go with you, live or die. Give us something to do."

Captain Future divided the work among them. Grag turned his great strength to the final tightening of massive joints in the fuel governing apparatus. Otho's delicate fingers checked micrometric accuracies in the connections, whereby the whole enterprise might succeed or fail. Joan took the observer's post by the vision screen. Simon Wright hovered near Curt Newton's shoulder as, under impulsions of the control starters, the mighty mass began to quiver, then to slide through space.

"What speed can we achieve?" asked the Brain.

"Up to fifteen miles a second," replied Captain Future. "We'll have to taper off as we approach, though. I don't want more than a mile a second, because I don't want to pancake us. You see," and he indicated a special row of controls, "here's what I'll use at the last instant. A pull on the lever yonder begins to disintegrate the atoms—first the armor, then the inner layers, like stripping down an artichoke. But, a second before the initial blast, this little chamber is whipped away into space along a sort of gun-barrel corridor.

"As we approach the sun, I'll face this ship so that the corridor points backward. We want to be going away. Even with all the special cushioning devices—anti-inertia blocks, the space-warp modifications I've fitted in, every-

thing—to reverse our direction at too great a speed might crush us.”

“How much will this chamber withstand?” asked the Brain.

“I don’t know. I’m trusting the luck of the Future-men.”

Grag clumped forward to peer over Joan’s shoulder into the screen, where the sun loomed larger by moments.

“Coolness is relative, like anything else,” he boomed. “How would my metal body heat up in the central core yonder?”

Curt smiled up at him.

“I’m not sure, but it would be several million degrees at the center. If you were heated to that degree, you’d shrivel everything within a thousand-mile radius.”

“Including Otho,” said Grag.

Captain Future set his helm. Then, with Simon’s help, he began attaching timing devices here and there.

“I want to delay at one point and another,” he said. “For instance, this will make the first atom-explosion hang fire awhile. And here’s something that will speed up the ship, seconds after we touch the accelerator. That would give us a chance to clear out before the final speed-up. Getting warm in here.”

“We’re approaching the sun,” reported Joan.

“The outer armor, and this inner chamber, blocks out some heat, but it can’t block it all out,” added Simon Wright.

“Nothing’s perfect,” said Otho. “Except Grag’s self-importance.”

The sun grew in the vision screen, filling it. They could make out the details of the dim-glowing outer envelope, churning and tossing like a steam cloud. Closer they came. The view of the sun became a view of only a portion of its surface. Joan sighed and closed her eyes wearily. Captain Future mopped his own damp brow.

“How close are we?” he asked.

“If we read these Dimension X gauges rightly, we’re

within two hundred thousand miles of the Sun's surface," said Joan. "How close are we going to be?"

"Thirty miles or so," replied Captain Future, turning his attention back to the controls.

Peeling off his space-jacket, he threw it down. Oog toddled upon it, as if he found the floor hot.

Silence. They flew an hour, another. Joan and Curt Newton drank copiously from a thermos canteen. Otho checked a thermometer, decided not to comment on how high it was, and begged water to sprinkle on the languishing Oog. Simon Wright soared out on a tour of the ship, and came back with solemnity in the sound of his resonator.

The Brain paused close to Captain Future's shoulder.

"Those outer plates, that took so much blasting, are beginning to warp and start like plywood," he said. "The closer we get, the bigger the chance that this ship bursts open like a blooming blossom."

"That's the part of the ship facing sunward, of course?" prompted Captain Future. "What about the part turned away?"

"Cooler, comparatively speaking. Not warped, anyway."

"I've been saving it to act as nose for the final rush," said the red-head. "And I've set the machinery in advance for the feat of spinning us around as we go in, without changing general direction or losing speed. Grag, take over the super-charging for the atom-blasts. Otho, stand by the side-table where the lock-rays are governed. Seal up that entry, because we'll not dare venture out again. Now, everybody hold on."

He pressed new controls. There was a ponderous swaying heave as the big ship slowly reversed herself in space. At the same time, Captain Future cut in new blasts. On a slightly different course, the ship drove with all speed toward the sun.

"We're eating miles fast," said Joan. "Closer—the sun's bigger, hotter, I can't bear to watch it."

"Grag, you're strongest," called Captain Future.

"Stand by the lever that starts the explosions. When I say 'Now, slam it hard down, clear into the clamps, and hold it there. Joan, switch off the vision screen. That sun, at this close quarters, will blind you. We'll have to trust our distance gauges. How fast are we going?"

"Fifteen miles a second, I make it," said Joan, her tongue touching lips as dry as parchment.

"I'll cut speed. We want to slow to a mile a second." He did so, gradually and smoothly. "We're close in?"

"Within the outer gas-spurtings of the sun's surface," guessed Simon Wright.

Silence, while Captain Future and Joan studied the gauges.

"Joan," said Captain Future at last, "sing out when we're at forty-five miles distance."

She nodded, saving her breath. The heat seemed unbearable to her. Sinking on one knee, she kept her eyes fastened on the gauges.

"Everybody grab something solid," was Future's next command. "Grag, both hands on the lever."

"Almost there," murmured Joan. "Stand by. Ready. Forty-five."

"Now!" called Captain Future, and as Grag threw in the lever with all his metal-based strength, Captain Future pressed the key that would free the central chamber from the ship.

He could not hold his consciousness during the moments that followed. He felt that he was roasting—floating—sinking—

Then he felt that he was waking up.

He heard the resonator of Simon Wright.

"I didn't black out. I turned on the vision again in time to see the ship drive home. The first blast—the outer armor blowing up—occurred just as it came to the surface of the sun. Then it plunged in, blasting as it went."

Captain Future opened his eyes, and found himself strangely light. The chamber in which they whizzed outward from the sun was divorced from all gravity, and the Futuremen floated as in liquid. Joan, serenely unconscious, drifted close to Captain Future. He caught her

wrist and drew her toward him. She awakened and smiled.

"What does the vision screen show now?" Captain Future demanded.

"I advise nobody to look at the sun," replied Simon Wright. "Its cloudy envelope is gashed open, and the fire-stuff inside is showing through a wound that gets bigger and brighter and hotter all the time. What I've done is swirl our viewpoint the opposite way, the way we're heading on the impetus of the blast that carried us clear."

The Brain's eyes, squirming on their snake-joined antennae, studied the scene.

"I see a space-ship, lighted up by the new radiance, coming this way," he said. "Yes, it's the *Comet*. Old Ezra has been standing by to take us aboard."

CHAPTER XIX

Peace on Luna

Yet the Moon had not changed so much. The green dimness that had shrouded the skies was less green and dim, and the toadstool jungles showed less vigor as the light strengthened. Even between dimensions, the growing radiance of Dimension X's slashed open sun made itself felt.

At home, that sun's planets experienced similar languishing in their fauna, conditioned to flourish in the dark; but the Pale People, adaptive as the human race has been forever and everywhere, ventured forth to look at phenomenon through dark goggles, and to feel the start of new strength in blanched, misshapen limbs.

Years would pass, as Captain Future had said, before the atomic blasts started in the sun's interior would complete the work of making that sun a blazing life-giving center of a newly invigorated system. Those years would see the development of the Pale People into a people no longer pale and groping.

In the largest room of the subterranean lair that had been first the laboratory-home of the Futuremen, then the headquarters of Ul Quorn and the first would-be invaders, sat the strange handful that had made the initial step in opening the night-blinded eyes of Dimension X to other things than tyranny and gloom.

Thal Thar and two of his comrades held chairs of honor. Captain Future sat beside Thal Thar, and grouped behind him were the other Futuremen. Oog perched on Otho's knee, pretending to be a gay handkerchief like the one lying in Joan's lap.

Before the group stood N'Rala, under the guard of a Dimension X soldier. She looked more beautiful and more humble than any of them had ever seen her—more so, perhaps, than ever in her life.

"Give him to me," she said in a miserable, pleading voice. "Give me Ul Quorn. He's sick in his prison cell, nervously exhausted and at the end of his endurance. You have taken away all possible power from him and from me. Be generous to conquered enemies. That will be the best way of showing yourselves great, and fit to rule."

"You surprise us all once again, N'Rala," ventured the dry voice of Simon Wright. "You sneered at Ul Quorn. You seemed to align yourself with the Overlord."

"We were winning then," she reminded. "It is only now, in the moment of despair, that I know where my loyalty rests. Give me Ul Quorn, and we'll go away. No civilized world will ever hear of us again."

"No," said Captain Future. "No civilized world will ever hear of you again. Don't look meltingly at me, N'Rala. Even if I were high in the Dimension X government, and able to set you free, I wouldn't."

"Thank you, Captain Future," said Thal Thar. "N'Rala, the Dimension is ours, and the problem is ours. If we should exhibit any mercy toward you, it would be at the expense of justice, and of common sense. You and Ul Quorn will stand trial for a list of crimes as long as the way from here to that newly revived sun of ours. Take her away."

N'Rala marched out, bowed and trembling. Thal Thar smiled a little.

"Now," he said. "The reward to the Futuremen. Whatever they ask of us."

"Nothing but the shake of your hand, Thal Thar," said Captain Future warmly. "It's been a great adventure, of profit to all except those who wanted to exploit both our universes. I'm a little sorry that we must head home to make reports, and you leave to work further on your new system of fair government."

Thal Thar wrung Future's big hand in both of his.

"As you said once before, on the brink of assaulting our sun, this is not a goodbye. We go now, to work the dimension-shifts that will send your Moon back to the dimension where it belongs."

The three men of Dimension X filed out.

"Sit still for a moment," Captain Future bade his comrades.

There was a moment of dizziness for all, and then Captain Future rose.

"This way to the view-ports," he said. "Look outside."

Outside was the surface of the Moon they had known, airless rocky plains and towering peaks on the horizon. At zenith stood Old Sol, and rising into view came the disk of Mother Earth.

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