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PYRAMID
SCIENCE FICTION

ONE AGAINST THE LEGION

An incredible web of terror shrouded
the Universe—the work of a phantom
that called itself God

JACK WILLIAMSON



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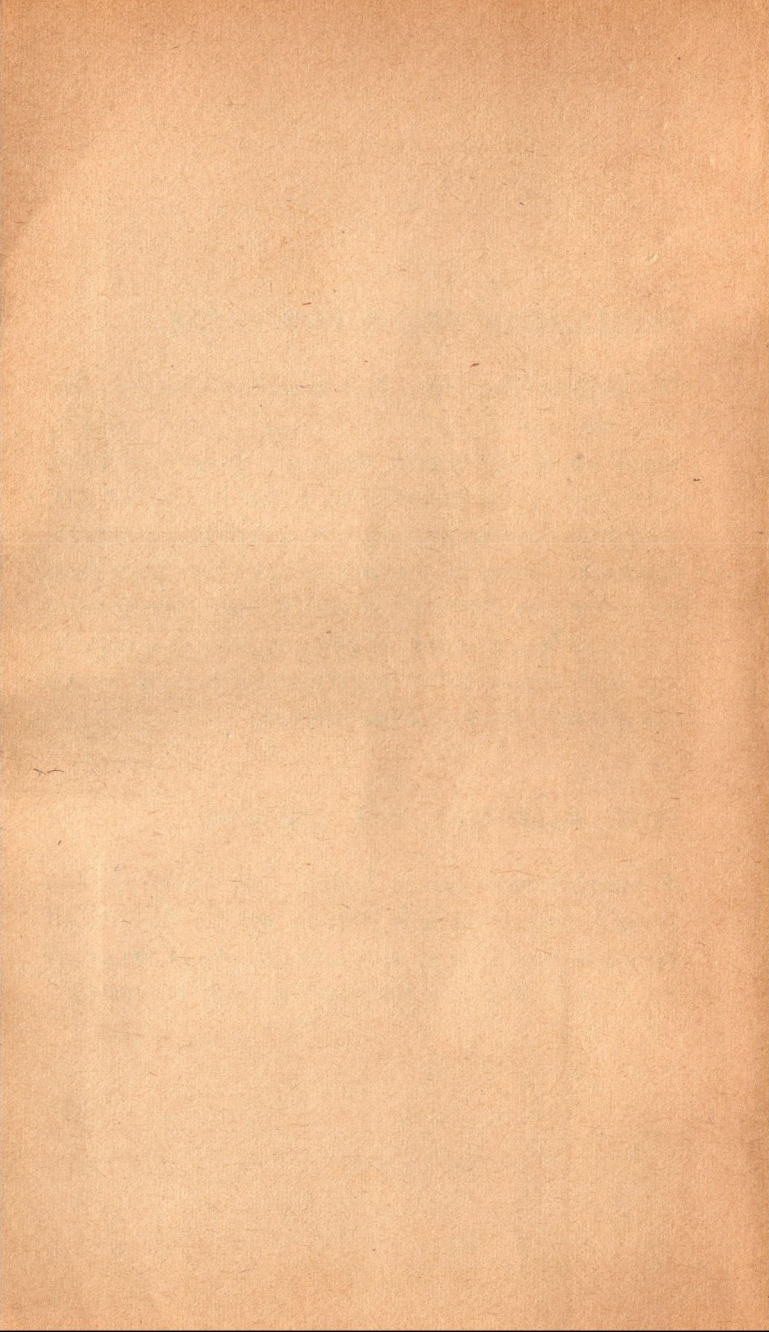
First publication anywhere of a
NEW LEGION OF SPACE novelette

MESSENGER FROM NOWHERE

The legionnaire heard that familiar, hideous purring. He saw little Davian flicker, grow queerly rigid—and disappear. He felt a breath of dank and ice-cold air followed by a choking, acrid gas. And then he was staring with bewildered and incredulous eyes at the monstrous thing that had appeared in Davian's place. It was like nothing men had found in all the System. And it was moving with ungainly but amazing swiftness towards the girl their lives all depended on.

ONE AGAINST THE LEGION

A magnificent science fiction epic featuring the famed and invincible heroes of the Legion of Space—Jay Kalam, Hal Samdu, the Keeper of the Peace, and the incorrigible Giles Habibula.



***ONE AGAINST
THE LEGION***

JACK WILLIAMSON

PYRAMID BOOKS



NEW YORK



ONE AGAINST THE LEGION

A PYRAMID BOOK

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ONE AGAINST
THE LEGION

1 *THE DEADLY INVENTION*

"UNUSUAL. IMPORTANT. Indubitably dangerous." The low grave voice of Commander Kalam, without losing its deliberate calm, had emphasized each word. "You have been selected for this duty, Captain Derron, because the Legion feels that you have earned implicit trust."

After four grim years, that scene was still as vivid in the mind of Chan Derron, as if a red-hot die had stamped it there. For that strange assignment had turned all his life, out of beckoning promise, into the dark incredible web of mystery and terror and despair.

"Yes, sir."

Chan Derron saluted briskly. He stood eagerly at attention, waiting in that huge, simply furnished chamber in the Green Hall that was the office of the Commander of the Legion of Space.

A big man, lean and trim and straight in the green of the Legion, he looked steadfast as a statue of bronze. His hair, rebellious against the comb, was like red-bronze wire. His skin was deeply bronzed with space-burn. Even his eyes held glints of unchanging bronze. His whole bearing held a promise of uncrushable strength that it warmed the Commander's heart to see.

Beneath his military readiness, however, Chan Derron's heart was thumping. He was proud of the uniform that had been his for less than a year; fiercely proud of the decorations he had already won, in the war with the Cometeers. And he was desperately eager to know what was coming next. His breath caught, and he watched the lean dark face of Jay Kalam.

"I have ordered all of Admiral-General Samdu's fleet to assist with this assignment—it is important enough to justify that," the Commander was saying. "But the crucial

duty is such that one ship—and one man, Captain Derron—must be trusted to carry it out.”

Chan Derron tried to swallow the little lump of eagerness in his throat. A duly commissioned captain—he mustn’t tremble like a wide-eyed cadet. After all, he was twenty-two. But the low-voiced question startled him:

“You know of Dr. Max Eleroid?”

“Of—of course,” he stammered. “If you mean the geodesic engineer? The man who redesigned the geodyne, and invented the geopeller? At the academy we studied his text on geodesy.”

“So you were an engineer?” The Commander faintly smiled. “Dr. Eleroid,” he said, “is probably the greatest physical scientist living—although his dread of publicity has kept him from becoming widely known. And he has just done something new.”

Chan Derron waited, wondering.

“This morning,” Jay Kalam said, “Eleroid came into this office, with an assistant behind him staggering under a box of equipment. He was frightened. He begged me to take him and his invention under the protection of the Legion.

“The invention is his most important, he said, and his most dangerous. He had decided not to work it out at all, he told me—until the System was placed in danger by the coming of the Cometeers.

“He set out to complete it, then, as a weapon. It is a little too late for the war. But he intends to entrust it to the Legion, as an adjunct to AKKA in the defense of mankind.

“Yesterday, anyhow, he found evidence that an intruder had been in his laboratory—that’s somewhere west, in the Painted Desert. This unknown spy has him baffled and very thoroughly scared. Only two people had been trusted with any details of his work, he said—his daughter, and this assistant, Jonas Thwayne. He has no clue to the spy’s identity; but he gives him credit for being a remarkably clever man.”

The Commander straightened sternly.

“That’s the background of the matter, Captain Derron. And here are your orders.”

“Yes, sir.”

“We are going to aid Dr. Eleroid with a field test of this

invention—it has never been tested, he says, except on the minutest scale—and then, if the test is successful, he will leave it in your hands.

“You will go back aboard your cruiser and proceed at once to Rocky Mountain Base. There you will find awaiting you twenty workmen, with atomotored excavating equipment, explosives, and building materials. You will take them aboard, and then rise without delay on a course for the New Moon. You follow me, Captain?”

“I do, sir.”

“When you have reached an altitude of two thousand miles,” Jay Kalam continued, “you will open this envelope and proceed to the spot designated inside.”

Chan Derron accepted a small green envelope, sealed with the wings of the Legion in dark green wax, and put it in an inside pocket of his tunic.

“You will land at the designated spot, and disembark the workmen and equipment. At a point you will select, they are to dig an excavation twenty feet square and twenty deep. In that, working under your orders, they are to build a room armored with two feet of perdurite, provided with a stair and a concealed door with a special lock—you will be given the specifications.

“This task must be completed by twelve noon, tomorrow, Legion time. You will put the men and equipment back aboard the *Corsair*. The cruiser will return at once, under your first officer, to Rocky Mountain Base. And you, Captain Derron—”

Chan Derron caught his breath, as the Commander suddenly rose.

“You will remain on guard, near the hidden door. You will keep your ultrawave communicator, emergency rations, and your proton needle and bayonet. You will stand guard while Dr. Eleroid and his assistant land, enter the hidden chamber, and test the invention.

“Finally, if the experiment is successful, Dr. Eleroid will deliver his apparatus and notes into your care, for the Legion. You will call your cruiser to return, go aboard with Eleroid, the assistant, and the machine, and come back at once to Rocky Mountain Base. Is that all clear, Captain Derron?”

“Clear enough, sir,” said Chan Derron. “If you feel that one man is enough—”

"Samdu's fleet will be on duty to see that there is no outside interference," the grave Commander assured him. "For the rest, we must rely upon secrecy, precision of action, and division of knowledge. Upon you, Captain Derron, rests the final responsibility." His dark eyes stabbed into Chan's. "This is as great a trust as the Legion has ever given any man, but I believe you are equal to it."

Chan gulped. "I'll do my best, sir."

"The Legion can ask no more."

The matter already appeared grave enough, perhaps, but Chan Derron was not used to being depressed by the details of his duty. The mystery surrounding this affair he found pleasantly exciting, and the faint hint of danger was like a tonic to him.

On his way back to the *Corsair*—the trim little geodesic cruiser that was his proud first command—he was humming a song. He had never been to the New Moon, then. But he had often seen the artificial satellite, careening backward across the sky of Earth. And soon, no doubt, with Commander Kalam trusting him with such important assignments as this, he should have a furlough earned—his heart leapt at the promise—on the gay New Moon.

Striding toward the vast space-port that sprawled brown across the desert mesa beside the Green Hall's slender spire, he kept time to the popular tune, whose age-hallowed sentiments ran:

*Where first we danced,
On the bright New Moon,
Where we romanced,
On the far New Moon,
I lost a million dollars—
But I found you, dear!*

He strode aboard the slim silver *Corsair*. In his bright expectations, this strange duty had already taken him to some far planet. When he came to open the sealed envelope, however, his ship two thousand miles out toward the New Moon, the destination he read was back on Earth—a barren islet in the bleak Antarctic Ocean.

The *Corsair* dropped among screaming birds. Chan selected a level spot on the highest granite ledge, a hundred

feet above the gray unresting sea. The twenty workmen fell to. Humming atomic drills sliced into the living rock. A web of structural metal was flung across the pit. Rock debris was fused into massive walls and roof of adamantine perdurite.

Next day the cruiser departed on the very stroke of noon. Left alone among the settling birds, that soon covered even the hidden door, Chan Derron shuddered to something colder than the bitter south wind.

Beyond this black pinnacle, and the green-white chaos that forever roared about its foot, the polar sea ran empty and illimitable. Low and yellowed in the gray northward sky, the sun glinted on the summits of a few icebergs. So far as he could tell, he might have been the only man upon the planet. And a sudden bleak fear rose in him, that all Commander Kalam's elaborate precautions against the unknown spy had not been enough.

Once more, anxiously, he inspected his proton blaster. Perfected since the cometary war to replace the lighter proton pistols that had served so long, it projected an intense jet of nucleonic bullets far swifter and more deadly than any solid projectile. The holster became a stock, for accurate long range work. A folding bayonet snapped out for use at close quarters.

Chan tried to find comfort in the fine, silent mechanism, in its chromium trimness and its balanced weight. But the lonely wail of the bitter wind, the empty hostility of the cold sky and the ice-studded sea, awoke in his heart a brooding apprehension.

He shouted with relief when the *Bellatrix*—the long bright flagship of Admiral-General Hal Samdu—plunged down through a cloud of shrieking birds. Two men were put off, and a heavy wooden box. The *Bellatrix* roared back spaceward. In seconds, it had vanished.

Chan Derron had never seen Dr. Eleroid, but he knew the scientist now from his portrait in the geodesic text. Eleroid was a big, slightly awkward, slow-moving man, with a red, rugged, genial face. But for his eyes, he might have been taken for a butcher or a bartender. His eyes, however, wide-set and seen through heavy lenses, possessed the magnetic power of genius.

Eleroid was still afraid. That was obvious from his anxious peering about the islet, from a sudden start when

the white-cloaked assistant touched him, from the relief on his broad face when Chan strode to meet him.

"Glad to thee you, Captain." His deep soft voice had an occasional lisp. "Where ith the vault. We must hathen!"

Chan indicated the door, disguised with a slab of natural rock, and returned to help the small, perspiring assistant with the box. Dr. Eleroid watched it very anxiously, and lent his own strength to help them down the narrow stair.

They set the box down in the middle of the bare, square, gray-armored room. The assistant was rubbing at red weals on his thin hands. Suddenly he began to sneeze, and covered his face with his handkerchief. Max Eleroid gestured imperatively toward the stair.

"You are to stand guard, Captain." His voice was hoarse with tension. "We'll lock the room. I'll call you, by ultrawave, when we are done." His trembling hand touched Chan Derron's arm. "Keep a vigilant watch, Captain," he begged. "For the thafety of the System may be at stake."

The massive door thudded shut. Chan moved a little away, and the birds settled over it again. Rock and sky and sea were empty as before. The south wind was more biting, the northward sun feebler. Pacing back and forth, he shuddered again.

His apprehension, he was trying to tell himself, was silly—when something touched him. At first he thought that only a bird had brushed him. Then he felt the fatal lightness of his belt and his hand flashed with well-trained swiftness for his blaster. He found that it was gone!

He stared around him, bewildered. Rock and sky and sea were ominously vacant as ever. What could have happened to the weapon? He could see no possible answer. The screaming birds mocked his sanity. This clearly meant danger—the operation of some unknown and hostile agency. But how was he to meet it? Samdu's guarding fleet must be somewhere not far beyond that bleak gray sky. He would call the Admiral—

But his own signal was already humming from the little black disk of the ultrawave communicator, that hung by its cord from his neck. He touched the receiver key and slapped the instrument to his ear.

"*Help!*" It was Max Eleroid. "Thith man—" The lisping

voice was queerly muffled, choked. "*Thith man—he ith not—*"

An odd purring hum came out of the communicator, and then it was silent.

2 ADEQUATE EVIDENCE

THE SAME disturbing message had been picked up by the fleet. When the *Bellatrix* landed, not an hour afterward, Chan Derron was found staggering aimlessly about the rock.

"My blaster's gone!" he gasped to the Admiral-General. "If it hadn't been taken, I might have been able to cut a way in, in time to help."

"Where is your vault?" demanded the rugged old space-man. His huge ugly face was ashen gray, and the anxious gestures of his great scarred hands had already set all the stiff white mass of his hair on end. "We'll have a look."

Chan pointed out the scarcely visible seam.

"It's locked." His voice trembled with the dread of the hour that he had waited. "Eleroid locked it, on the inside. I tried it, after he called. You'll have to cut through the perdurite."

"If we can—" Hal Samdu's battered hands clutched, in tortured indecision. "If only old Giles Habibula were here! He has a gift for locks—but he's off on Phobos, beyond the sun from us now, eating and drinking himself to death at John Star's table." He shook his head. "I don't know quite what to do—"

"We can't wait, sir," Chan Derron urged him. "I'm afraid to think what must have happened in that room. Haven't you equipment, on the battleship, that can cut through that door—"

His voice dropped into a chasm of incredulity.

For the huge Legionnaire had bent and seized the projecting knob of rock that formed a disguised handle for

the massive slab of armor balanced on its pivots in the doorway, as if he would break the lock with his own unaided muscles. And the door swung smoothly open.

Hal Samdu straightened to stare grimly at Chan. "Locked, eh?"

Chan Derron stepped dazedly back, and a black wind of terror blew cold about his heart.

"It was locked!" he gasped. "I tried it!"

But a cold deadliness of doubt glittered abruptly in the blue eyes of the Admiral-General. His big hand deliberately hauled out his own proton needle and he covered the weaponless Chan.

"Hold him, men," he commanded. "I'm going to look inside." Hal Samdu and his officers went down into the small square chamber. In the garish light of the tube still burning against the ceiling, they found Dr. Max Eleroid and the man in white. They were both sprawled still, and the slighter body of the assistant was already stiffening into the rigor of death.

Rivulets and pools of darkening blood stained the new gray perdurite. Both men had been stabbed. And the weapon still protruding from the back of Dr. Max Eleroid was a service blaster, of the new Legion type, holster-stock and bayonet locked in place. There was nothing else left in the bare, bright-lit room. The long wooden box, with its contents, was gone.

Staggering and gasping for breath, as if he too had been stricken, Hal Samdu came back up the stair, carrying in his great quivering hand the blaster with a thin red drop trembling on the point of the fixed bayonet. He thrust it into Chan's bewildered face.

"Captain, do you know this weapon?"

Chan examined it.

"I do," he gulped hoarsely. "I know it by the serial number, and by the initials etched into the butt. It is mine."

Hal Samdu made a choking, furious sound.

"Then, Derron," he gasped, when he could speak, "you are under arrest. You are charged with insubordination, gross neglect of duty, treason against the Green Hall, and the murder of Dr. Max Eleroid and his assistant, Jonas Thwayne. You will be held in irons, without bail, for trial

by court-martial before your superior officers in the Legion. And God help you, Derron!"

Chan was swaying, paralyzed. A great far wind roared in his ears. The black rock and the shining battleship and the threatening men in green around him, all dimmed and wavered. He swayed, fighting for awareness.

"But I didn't do it," he gasped. "I tell you, sir, this can't be—"

But icy jaws of metal had already caught his wrist, and the great ruthless voice of Hal Samdu was roaring at him:

"Now, Derron, what did you do with Eleroid's invention?"

What did you do with Eleroid's invention? . . . *What did you do with Eleroid's invention?* . . . **WHAT DID YOU DO WITH ELEROID'S INVENTION? . . . WHAT DID YOU DO . . .**

Chan Derron heard that question a million times. It was shouted at him, whispered at him, shrieked at him. He ate it with prison food, and breathed it with dank prison air. It was beaten into him with men's hard fists, and burned into his brain with the blaze of cruel atomic lights.

He was commanded to answer it, threatened, begged, tricked, drugged, flung into solitary, starved, promised freedom and riches, picked to mental shreds by the psychologists and psychiatrists, offered fabulous bribes—and threatened again.

Of course he couldn't answer it.

Because of that fact alone he was kept alive, even after he hungered for the quiet freedom of death.

The court-martial had indeed, when at last the torture of the trial had ended, returned a triple sentence of death, on two counts of murder, and one of treason. But that had been commuted by Commander Kalam, the day he embarked on the great research expedition to the green comet, to life imprisonment at hard labor in the Legion prison on Ebron.

Chan heard that news in his cell with a sense of sick frustration. He knew that now he would not be allowed to die, any more than he was let live, until that unanswerable question was answered. And the great grim prison on the asteroid, as he had foreknown, brought him no escape from those angrily and incredulously demanding voices.

The person, even the person of a convicted criminal, was legally safeguarded by the Green Hall. And the tradition of the Legion was against cruel and unusual methods. The safety of mankind was a greater end, however, than the letter of the law, and the Legion existed to guard that safety.

The court-martial had found adequate circumstantial evidence that Chan Derron had killed Max Eleroid and his assistant, and then, failing to escape with the unknown new device, had somehow disposed of it. The case was absurdly simple. There was only that one question. The entire organization of the Legion moved as ruthlessly to extract the answer from Chan as rollers pressing the juice from a grape. Therein the Legion failed—but only because the answer was not in him.

Chan lived two years in the prison on Ebron.

Then he escaped.

For two years more the Legion hunted him.

3 THE SIGN OF 3 THE BASILISK

"NO." JAY KALAM lifted weary eyes from the documents stacked before him, on his long desk in the tower of the Green Hall. "Tell Gaspar Hannas I can't talk to him." His voice was dull with fatigue. "Not tonight."

For he was deadly tired. In command of the great research expedition to study the sciences and the arts of the half-conquered comet, he had spent three strange, exhausting years among those scores of amazing worlds beyond the barrier of green.

For months more, at the permanent depot of the expedition at Contra-Saturn Station, he had toiled to direct the first preliminary analysis and classification of the results of the expedition—recording the hundreds of tremendous discoveries gleaned from those ancient captive worlds.

Then another, more urgent duty had called him back to Earth. A few apprehensive statesmen in the Green Hall were gaining support for a movement to order the destruction of the departing comet with AKKA. The Commander, in return for the free cooperation of the liberated peoples of the comet, had promised to let them go in peace. Leaving young Robert Star in command of the half-secret, heavily fortified depot, he came back to fight before the Green Hall for the life of the comet.

Now at last the victory was won. The new Cometeers were gone beyond the range of the greatest telescope, pledged never to return. And Jay Kalam felt slow and heavy now with his long fatigue. A few more reports to complete—secret documents dealing with the dreadful matter-annihilating weapon of the Cometeers—and then he was going to John Star's estate on Phobos, to rest.

"But Commander—" The distressed, insistent voice of the orderly hummed through the communicator. "Gaspar Hannas is owner of the New Moon. And he says this is urgent—"

The Commander's lean face grew stern.

"I'll talk to him when I get back from the Purple Hall," he said. "We've already sent Admiral-General Samdu, with his ten cruisers, to help Hannas catch his thief."

"But they've failed, sir," protested the orderly. "An urgent message from Admiral-General Samdu reports—"

"Samdu's in command." Jay Kalam's voice was brittle with fatigue. "He doesn't have to report." He sighed, and pushed thin fingers through the forelock of white that he had brought back from the comet. "If the thief is really Chan Derron," he muttered, "they may fail again!"

Settling limply back in the chair behind his crowded desk, he let his tired eyes look out of the great west window. It was dark. Beyond the five low points of the dead volcanoes on the black horizon, against the fading greenish afterglow, the New Moon was rising.

Not the ancient satellite whose cragged face had looked down upon the Earth since life was born—that had been obliterated a quarter-century ago, by the keeper of the peace when Aladoree Anthar turned her secret ancestral weapon upon the outpost that the invading Medusae had established there.

The New Moon was really new—a glittering creation

of modern science and high finance, the proudest triumph of thirtieth century engineering. The heart of it was a vast hexagonal structure of welded metal, ten miles across, that held eighty cubic miles of expensive, air-conditioned space.

Far nearer Earth than the old Moon, the new satellite had a period of only six hours. From the Earth, its motion appeared faster and more spectacular because of its retrograde direction. It rose in the west, fled across the sky against the tide of the stars and plunged down where the old Moon had risen.

The New Moon was designed to be spectacular. A spinning web of steel wires, held rigid by centrifugal force, spread from it across a thousand miles of space. They supported an intricate system of pivoted mirrors of sodium foil and sliding color filters of cellulite. Reflected sunlight was utilized to illuminate the greatest advertising sign ever conceived.

The thin hand of the Commander had reached wearily for the thick sheaf of green-tinted pages headed: REPORTS OF THE COMETARY RESEARCH EXPEDITION, J. KALAM, DIRECTOR. REPORT CXLVIII: PRELIMINARY ACCOUNT OF METHODS AND EQUIPMENT FOR THE IRREVERSIBLE REDUCTION OF MATTER TO RADIANT NEUTRINOS.

But the rising sign, as it had been designed to do, held his eyes. A vast circle of scarlet stars came up into the greenish desert dusk. They spun giddily, came and went, changed suddenly to a lurid yellow. Then garish blue-and-orange letters flashed a legend:

*Tired, Mister? Bored, Sister? Then come with me—*The disk became a red-framed animated picture of a slender girl in white, tripping up the gangway of a New Moon liner. She turned, and the gay invitation of her smile changed into burning words: *Out in the New Moon, just ask for what you want. Gaspar Hannas has it for you.*

"Anything." Jay Kalam smiled grimly. "Even the System's foremost criminals."

Find health at our sanatoria! flamed the writing in the sky. Sport in our gravity-free games! Recreation in our clubs and theatres! Knowledge in our museums and observatories. Thrills, and beauty—everywhere! Fortune, if

you're lucky, in our gaming salons! Even oblivion if you desire it, at our Clinic of Euthanasia!

"But all the same," Jay Kalam whispered to the sign, "I think I'll still take the quiet peace of John Star's home on Phobos—"

The Commander stiffened, behind his desk.

For the great sign, where a green flaming hand had begun to write some new invitation, suddenly flickered. It went out. For an instant it was dark. Then red, ragged, monstrous letters spelled, startlingly his own name!

"*KALAM!*" Darkness again. Then the fiery scarlet symbols: "*G-39!*"

An explosion of red-and-white pyrotechnics wiped that out. One blue spark grew into an immense blue star. The star framed the Moon Girl again. She laughed, and a white arm beckoned.

But Jay Kalam was no longer watching the sign. For G-39 was his call in the secret emergency intelligence code to be used only in cases of grave necessity. A little chill of cold forewarning shook his hand, as he touched the communicator dial.

"All right, Lundo," he told the orderly. "Get me Gaspar Hannas on the visiwave!"

Builder and master of this gaudiest and most glittering of all resorts, Gaspar Hannas was a man who had come up out of a dubious obscurity. The rumors of his past—that he had been a space-pirate, drug runner, android-agent, crooked gambler, gang-boss, and racketeer-in-general—were many and somewhat contradictory.

The first New Moon had been the battered hulk of an obsolescent space liner, towed into an orbit about the Earth twenty years ago. The charter somehow issued to the New Moon Syndicate in the interplanetary confusion following the First Interstellar War had given that gambling ship the status of a semi-independent planet, which made it a convenient refuge from the more stringent laws of Earth and the rest of the System. Gaspar Hannas, the head of the syndicate, had defied outraged reformers—and prospered exceedingly.

The wondrous artificial satellite, first opened to the public a decade ago, had replaced a whole fleet of luxury liners that once had circled just outside the laws of Earth. The financial rating of the syndicate was still somewhat

uncertain—Hannas had been called, among many other things, a conscienceless commercial octopus; but the new resort was obviously a profitable business enterprise, efficiently administered by Hannas and his special police.

His enemies—and there was no lack of them—liked to call the man a spider. True enough, his sign in the sky was like a gaudy web. True, millions swarmed to it, to leave their wealth—or even, if they accepted the dead-black chip that the croupiers would give any player for the asking, their lives.

The man himself must now have been somewhat beyond sixty. But as he sat, gigantic and impassive, at the odd round desk in his office, watching the flowing tape that recorded the winnings in all the halls, sipping the dark Martian beer that never intoxicated him, no onlooker could have guessed his age within a score of years—or guessed anything at all that moved behind his face.

For the face of Gaspar Hannas, men said, had changed with his fortunes. His old face, they said, had reflected his real nature too well. It had showed the scars of too many battles. And it was printed, they whispered, on too many notices of reward.

The face of Gaspar Hannas, now, like the flesh of his great idle hands, was very white—but whiter still, if one looked closely at its vast smooth expanse, were the tiny scars the surgeons had left. It was oddly blank. The only expression that ever moved it was a slow and meaningless smile—a smile that made its white smoothness like the face of a monstrously overgrown idiot child's.

The eyes of the man, set far apart and deep in that white bald head, were sharp and midnight black. Beyond that idiotic smile, they had a contradictory keenness. But their dark piercing fixity never revealed what was passing in the mind of Gaspar Hannas.

Such a face, men agreed, was singularly useful to a man in his trade. It was what Jay Kalam waited to see upon the shining oval plate of the visiwave cabinet. (One of the System's first useful developments from the conquered science of the comet, this instrument utilized the instantaneous achronic force-fields that the lovely fugitive, Kay Nymidee, had used to escape from the comet.)

The plate flickered, and Jay Kalam saw the vast smooth features of the New Moon's master. And now not even

that senseless smile could hide the apprehension devouring the vitals of Gaspar Hannas. For his whiteness had become a ghastly pallor. He was breathless, and his whole gross body trembled.

"Commander—Commander!" His great voice was dry and ragged-edged with fear. "You've got to help me!"

"What do you want, Hannas?" Jay Kalam asked flatly. "And why was it necessary to use my emergency call—when you already have a Legion fleet detailed to guard your establishment?"

Still Gaspar Hannas smiled that silly baby-smile, but his blank forehead was beaded with fine drops of sweat.

"Admiral-General Samdu gave the authority," he gasped. "He agrees that the situation is urgent. He's here with me now, Commander."

"And what's the trouble?"

"It's this man—this monster—who calls himself the Basilisk!" The huge voice was hoarse and wild. "He's ruining me, Commander. Ruining the New Moon! Time knows where he will stop!"

"What has he done?"

"Last night he took another patron. The high winner at baccaret—Clovis Field—a planter from the asteroids. My police escorted him, with his winnings, to his yacht. They got him there, safe. But he was taken out of the sealed air-lock, Commander—with all his winnings!"

Jay Kalam brushed the white forelock back into his dark hair, impatiently.

"One more gambler robbed?" His tired eyes narrowed. "That has happened many a time on the New Moon, Hannas—when you didn't think it necessary to call the Legion."

A queer tensy stiffened that white, foolish smile.

"Robbed—but that isn't all, Commander. Clovis Field is dead. His body has just been found in the pre-crematory vault at the Euthanasia Clinic. And his right hand is closed on one of those little black clay snakes that this Basilisk uses to sign his crimes!"

"What killed him?"

"Strangled!" boomed Gaspar Hannas. "With a green silk scarf." In his deep black eyes, behind that mindless mask, Jay Kalam saw the glitter of a terrible light. Accusing or triumphant—he didn't know which. "It is em-

broidered in gold, Commander," said the great voice of Hannas, "with the wings of the Legion of space!"

Jay Kalam's lean face tensed.

"If any Legion man was guilty of this crime, he will be punished," he said. "But I see no need to call on me so soon. What's the matter with your own police? You have ten thousand of the toughest men in the System. Put them on the trail."

The black eyes had a glazed expression.

"Commander, you don't understand. It—it's uncanny! The air lock on the yacht was sealed—and stayed sealed. The vault was locked—and not unlocked. Nobody could have done the things. *Nobody*—"

"I advise," said Jay Kalam, "that you examine some of your own employees. You say that Admiral-General Samdu is with you? Please put him on."

The smooth white face was replaced by a cragged ugly red one, equally gigantic. Beneath his snow-white hair, the features of Hal Samdu were stiff with an awed bewilderment.

The Commander smiled a greeting.

"Well, Hal, what is your emergency?"

The battered red face twisted, and the blue eyes of Hal Samdu grew dark as if with pain.

"I don't just know, Jay." His deep voice was worried. "There's not much you can put a finger on." His own big fingers were clenched into baffled fists. "But it *is* an emergency, Jay! I know it. I can feel it. The beginning of something—dreadful! It may turn out to be as bad as the Cometeers!"

Jay Kalam shook his tired dark head.

"I don't see anything that grave—"

Hal Samdu leaned forward and his great battered impotent fist came up to the screen.

"Well, Jay," he rumbled, "maybe you'll listen to this!" His voice sank, with an unconscious caution. "I've been on the Derron case you know, ever since we got back from the comet. Well, I haven't caught him—there was never such a man! But I've got clues. And, well—"

His tone dropped lower still.

"Commander, I've got evidence enough that this Basilisk is Chan Derron!"

"Quite possible." Jay Kalam nodded.

"There was no Basilisk until after Derron got out of prison," argued Hal Samdu. "Soon after, there was. He began with small things. Experiments. He's trying out his power—the weapon he murdered Max Eleroid to get! Time knows how he hid the thing on that rock, when we combed every square inch—unless he could have used a geopeller. But he has it—some frightful unknown thing!"

The great hands twisted together, in a baffled agony.

"And he's getting more confident with it. Bolder! Every job he tries is more daring. And time knows where he will stop!" The great rugged knob of his Adam's apple jerked. "I tell you, Jay, the man who robbed and murdered Clovis Field can do anything—*anything!*"

Hal Samdu's voice dropped again. It was cracked and shaken with alarm.

"I don't like to speak of this, Jay, on the wave. But if this Basilisk—if Derron—can do what he did tonight, then *she* isn't safe! Or—*it!*"

Jay Kalam stiffened. He could not fail to know what Hal Samdu meant by *she* and *it*. He and the giant, with old Giles Habibula, had been too long the guards of Aladoree Anthar and the priceless secret that she guarded; the mysterious weapon, designed by the symbol AKKA, whose very existence was the shield of mankind.

If the keeper of the peace was—

"All right, Hal," he said. "I'll come out to the New Moon—"

"And one thing more, Jay—" The rugged face remained stiffly anxious. "Bring Giles Habibula!"

"But he's on Phobos," protested the Commander, "and Mars is a hundred degrees past opposition. It would take half a day to get him. And I don't see—"

"Call John Star," begged the big Legionnaire, "and have him bring Giles to meet you. Drunk or sober! For we'll need Giles, Jay, before this thing is done. He's getting old and fat, I know. But he has a gift—a talent that we'll need."

"All right, Hal." Jay Kalam nodded. "I'll bring Giles Habibula."

"Thank you, Commander!" It was the great hoarse voice of Gaspar Hannas. Into the visiwave plate, beside Hal Samdu's unkempt head, the smooth white face of

Hannas crowded, smiling idiotically. "And—for Earth's sake—hurry!"

Jay Kalam put through his call to Phobos by ultrawave—the faster visiwave equipment, still experimental, had not yet been installed there. He ordered the *Inflexible*—powerful sister ship of the murdered *Invincible*—made ready to take off. He was on his feet, to leave the office, when he saw the little clay serpent.

It lay on the thick green sheaf of the report that he had been working over a few minutes before. And, beneath it, was a folded square of heavy, bright-red paper.

"Huh!" His breath caught sharply. Now how did *that* come here?

He looked quickly around the room. The heavy door was still closed, the orderly sitting watchful and undisturbed beyond its vitrilith panel. The windows were still secure, the grates over the air ducts intact.

"It *couldn't*—"

Certainly he had seen no movement, heard no footsteps. The Cometeers had known invisibility, but even an invisible man must have opened a door or a window. Baffled, aware of a cold prickling touch of dread, he shook his head and picked up the serpent.

That was crude enough. A roughly molded little figurine, burned black. It lay in a double coil, head across the tail, so that it formed the letter *B*.

Where *had* it come from?

Then delicate hands trembling a little, he unfolded the heavy red sheet. The impression of a black serpent, at the top of it, formed another *B*. Beneath it, in a black script precise as engraving—the ink still damp enough to blot his fingers—was written:

My Dear Kalam:

Since you are going out to the New Moon, will you kindly take Gaspar Hannas a message from me? Will you tell him that nothing—not even the protection of the Legion of Space—will protect his most fortunate patron, every day, from the fate of Clovis Field?

The Basilisk

4 THE PAWN OF 1 MALICE

THE SOLAR SYSTEM is curiously flat. The two dimensions of the ecliptic plane are relatively crowded with worlds and their satellites, and the cosmic debris of meteors, asteroids, and comets. But the third is empty.

Outbound interplanetary traffic, by an ancient rule of the spaceways, arches a little to northward of the ecliptic plane, inbound, a little to the southward, to avoid both the debris of the system and danger of head-on collisions. Beyond these charted lanes, there is nothing.

A tiny ship, however, was now driving outward from the sun, parallel to the ecliptic plane and two hundred million miles beyond the limits of the space-lanes. Its hull was covered with thin photo-electronic cells capable of being adjusted to absorb any desired fraction of the incident radiation—making the vessel, when they were in operation, virtually invisible in space.

Not thirty feet long, and weighing too few tons to have perceptible effect on the mass-detectors of a Legion cruiser beyond ten million miles, the ship had power to race the fleetest of them.

Her geodynes were of the new type designed by Max Eleroid. Far more powerful than the old, they were yet so delicately matched and balanced that the ship could be landed on a planet, or even worked into a berth, without the use of auxiliary rockets.

The *Phantom Atom* had compact accommodations for a crew of four. But only one man was aboard—now staring grimly at his own picture, fastened beside another on the metal bulkhead behind the tiny, vitrilith-windowed pilot bay.

ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLARS REWARD!

That was the heading, in bold crimson letters, above the full color picture. Beneath it was a block of smaller black type:

This sum will be paid by the Legion of Space, for aid and information leading to the capture or the death of Chan Derron, escaped convict, believed to be known also as the "Basilisk."

Description: Stands six feet three. Earth-weight, two hundred ten. Hair, bronze. Complexion, deeply space-tanned. Eyes, gray. Slight scars on face, neck, and back, such as due to extreme interrogation.

This man is physically powerful, intelligent, and desperate. A former captain in the Legion, he was convicted of murder and treason. Two years ago he escaped from the Legion prison on Ebron. Clues of him have been found on several planets.

Officers of all planets are warned that Derron is a dangerous man. He was trained in the Legion academy. He is believed to be armed with a mysterious and deadly instrumentality. It is advised that he be disabled before he is accosted.

Jay Kalam

Commander of the Legion of Space

Four years had made a difference between the picture and the man. The picture, taken after his arrest, looked bleak and grim enough. But Chan Derron, in those four bitter years, had grown harder and leaner and stronger. Some frank boyish simplicity was gone from his dark-tanned face, and in its place was something—savage.

He turned from the picture to another posted beside his own. His great brown hand saluted it, and a brief, sardonic grin crossed his square-jawed face.

"Comrades, eh, Luroa?" he muttered. "Together against the Legion!"

He had taken the other notice from the same Legion bulletin board, in old mud-walled Ekarhenium, on Mars, where he had found his own. The two notices were displayed side by side, at the top of the board—offering the two biggest rewards. And he had been dazzled by the sheer, startling beauty of the other face.

A woman's face, wondrous with something beyond perfection. Beneath the dark, red-gleaming hair, her features were regular and white—and something shone from them.

Her eyes were a clear green, wide apart, with the slightest hint of a slant. Full-lipped and red, her long mouth smiled with a hidden mockery.

A woman's face—but she was no woman.

For the text beneath her picture ran:

Rewards totalling two hundred and fifty thousand dollars will be paid by the Legion of Space, the Green Hall Council, and various planetary governments, for the being named Luroa, pictured above, living or dead.

She is not a human being, but a female android.

The history of the android traffic is perhaps not generally known. But for many years, at his laboratory hidden on a remote planetoid, a gifted criminal biologist, Eldo Arrynu, engaged in the manufacture of these illegal synthetic beings. He headed a ring of criminals that made a vast income through smuggling these dangerous creatures to wealthy purchasers throughout the system.

Stephen Orco, the male android whose unprincipled cunning came near destroying the system during the war with the Cometeers, is typical of these illicit creations: perfect of body, brilliant of brain, but morally monstrous.

The entity Luroa was the last creation of Eldo Arrynu, and she is believed to be the last android in existence. The scientist refused to sell her. He kept her with him, until the attack of the Cometeers. She escaped, however, when all others on the planetoid were killed. Since, she has been the gifted and ruthless leader of the remnants of this interplanetary gang.

Beyond the single picture above, discovered in the records on the planetoid, no description of the android Luroa is available. Nothing is known of her surviving associates.

Officers are warned that this sinister being possesses a mind of phenomenal keenness, that she is pitilessly free of all human scruples, and that her alluring beauty is her most deadly weapon. She is fully trained in many lines of science, physically more powerful, and far quicker than most men, and skilled in the use of all weapons.

Officers are advised to destroy this being upon identification.

Jay Kalam

Commander of the Legion of Space

"A quarter of a million, darling!" Chan Derron whispered. "And I think you're worth it—on looks alone!" The hard grin seamed his dark face again. "For your own sake, I hope they haven't got you overestimated as much as they have me."

He blew the smiling picture an ironic kiss, from his big brown hand, and then bent again to the hooded view-plate of the chart cabinet. Miles of microfilm, within the instrument, intricate reels and cams and gears, ingenious prisms and lenses, could give a true stereoscopic picture of the System, as it would appear from any point in its stellar vicinity, at any desired telescopic power, at any time within a thousand years. The integrators could quickly calculate the speediest, safest, or most economical route from any one point to any other.

The big man found the light fleck that was Oberon, outermost satellite of cloudy-green Uranus. His great hands deftly moved the dials, to bring it into coincidence with the tri-crossed hairs in the view-plate. He read the destination from the indicators and set it up on the keys. And then, while the humming mechanism was analysing and re-integrating the many harmonic factors involved in moving the *Phantom Atom* across a billion miles of space, to a safe landing on that cold and lonely moon, his bronze-glinting eyes went back to the smiling picture on the bulkhead.

"Well, Luroa," he said slowly, "I guess it's going to be good-bye." He waved a grave farewell, to her white and mocking loveliness. "You know, we could have made quite a couple, you and I—if I had just been what the Legion takes me for!"

His bronze head shook, his brown face wistful.

"But my lady, I'm not. I'm no reckless pirate of the spaceways—unless by dire necessity. I'm just a plain soldier of the Legion, in incredibly and peculiarly bad luck. I haven't got any 'mysterious and deadly instrumentality.'"

His head lifted a little. His eyes lighted. His voice softened, confidentially.

"But I've one secret, Luroa!"

Smiling again, he pointed at a series of figures on the log-tape beside the hooded glass.

"No secret weapon," he whispered. "And nothing like the secret of your life, Luroa. But it's enough to mean new hope to me." His great head lifted, with a fierce little gesture of pride. "It means one more chance."

A moment he looked silently at the smiling picture and the green-eyed loveliness of Luroa looked back, he thought, almost with a mocking comprehension.

"It was like this, my dear," he said. "The last time Hal Samdu chased me, I got a hundred million miles ahead of his fleet, running out north. I got far beyond visual range. Or beyond the normal range of the mass-detectors. I was rigging up a new hook-up, trying to find if old Hal was still on the trail, when I found—something else."

He shook his finger at her.

"Don't ask me what it is, Luroa. It's too far off, with whatever albedo it has, to show even a point in the system's best telescope. But the mass is of the order of ten million tons, and the distance approximately ten billion miles, estimated by triangulation.

"Doesn't matter, what it is. A chunk of rock, or a projectile from Andromeda. I'm going out there. Just one more landing first, at some out-station, to get food and cathode plates. And then I'm off. I'll find out what it is. And do a bit of research I have in mind. And—well, wait."

Chan Derron's air of lightness was growing very thin. A hoarse little break came in his voice.

"Wait," he whispered slowly. "With all the equipment on the little *Phantom Atom* to manufacture food and air and water with atomic power, I can last a lifetime—if I must. I can wait and listen. Even at that distance, I ought to pick up something with the visiwave—enough to know if Chan Derron can ever come back."

He tried to grin, again, and waved his hand at the picture of Luroa.

"Till then, my darling," his voice came huskily, "I guess it's goodbye. To you and the Legion and the System. To every man and woman I ever knew. To every street I ever walked. To every bird and every tree. To every living being I ever saw.

"Goodby—"

Chan Derron gulped suddenly. He turned quickly away from the two pictures on the bulkhead, and looked out into the depthless dark of space. His eyes blinked, once or twice. And his great tanned hands stiffened like iron on the vernier-wheel of the *Phantom Atom*.

The geodynes made a soft musical humming. There was a slow muffled clicking from the automatic pilot. Chan Derron stared northward, into the star-shot dark. There—somewhere in Draco—lay that unknown object, the only possible haven left.

It would be like this, always, he thought. Silence and darkness. He would hear the murmur of his machines, and his own rusty voice, and nothing else. He would talk too much to himself. He would look across the cold dark at the bright points of other worlds. And wonder—

Tchlink!

It was a soft little sound. But Chan Derron stiffened as if it had been the crash of a meteor's impact. He spun, and his hand flashed for the blaster hanging in its holster on the bulkhead. Then he saw the thing that had made the sound, lying on the view-plate of the star-chart cabinet.

The breath went out of him. His hand dropped from the weapon, helplessly. His great shoulders sagged a little. For a long time he stood staring at it, with all the strength and hope running out of him like blood from a wound.

"Even here!" His bronze head shook, wearily. "Even out here."

Slowly, at last, he picked up the sheet of heavy red paper, that had been pinned beneath the crude little serpent of black-burned clay. He read the neat black script:

My Dear Captain Derron:

Congratulations on the brilliance and the daring of your last escape. Samdu has long since turned back, to try to guard the New Moon—from me! For the moment, you are safe. But I must give you two points of warning.

You will find alarm and danger waiting for you on the moons of Uranus. For the Legion base there has been tipped off that you are on your way.

And you will be held responsible, Captain, I fear,

for the things that are going to happen on the New Moon at every midnight—whether you are there or a billion miles away.

Your faithful shadow,
The Basilisk

Stark dread had driven its stunning needle into Chan Derron's spine. He stood dazed, motionless. The mockery of that message swam and blurred upon the red page. And a slow, deadly cold crept into his paralyzed body.

It was more than frightening to know that his every act was followed by a sinister and unescapable power. Frightful to know that the incredible arm of the Basilisk could reach him, even here. Omniscience! Omnipotence! The powers, almost of a god, in the hands of—what?

Almost he could feel that fearful presence with him. He peered about the tiny pilot bay. It was dimly lit with the shaded instrument lights and the faint starlight that struck through the ports. He snapped on a brighter light. He wanted to search the ship. But of course that was no use. There couldn't be anybody here. The mass-detectors with his new hook-up would have given automatic warning of the approach of the mass of a man's body, within a million miles of the ship.

He caught his breath, trying to shake off that shuddery chill, and in spite of himself he began to talk.

"Why keep after me?" he begged the empty air. "I suppose you picked me to take the blame at first, just because I happened to be there outside when you murdered Dr. Eleroid. But haven't I suffered enough—for nothing at all?"

His great clenched fists came up against his breast. He choked back the words—trying doggedly to keep loneliness and strain from cracking his mind. But he couldn't stop the stream of bitter recollection. Ever since his escape in the light cruiser he had since rebuilt into the *Phantom Atom*, he had been in flight from that merciless and omnipotent tormentor. All he wanted was a chance—half a chance—to find a new identity and begin a new life—anywhere!

But that man—if it was a man—who hid behind the name of a fabulous dragon and confused his other victims

with a trail of clues pointing always at Chan himself—the Basilisk wouldn't let him get away.

There was the time he landed at a lonely plantation on Ceres, hoping to buy supplies with a few pounds of platinum he had mined from a chance strike in the meteor drift. He found the planter and his wife murdered, their mansion plundered, and a Legion cruiser approaching. He barely got away—to find the loot in his own cabin aboard the *Phantom Atom*.

His bronze-gray eyes began to blink when he thought of the time in old Ekarhenium, when he had left the little ship hidden in the desert and found an honest laboratory job. The first day he worked, his new employer's office safe was robbed—and the plunder found in Chan's own desk.

"And that's not half!" In spite of him, his savage emotion burst into speech again. "There was the time I left the *Phantom Atom* on an eccentric orbit around Venus, and dropped down the shadow cone with a geopeller. Buried my space suit in the jungle and slipped into New Chicago. That time you let me think I had got away—"

He tried to laugh, and caught a sobbing gasp of breath.

"Until I began seeing my face on all the telescreens! Wanted for another killing—" He shrugged heavily. "That murdered guard at the Terrestrial Bank, with my face on the film of his gun-camera—I don't know how you did it.

"But isn't all that enough?"

Choking back the useless words, he stared around the pilot bay again. He was alone. There was only the automatic pilot, clocking softly now and then as it set the cruiser back on course, and the silent serpent of black clay lying on that thick red sheet, and the cold feel of mocking eyes upon him.

"All right, Mr. Basilisk!"

He snatched the serpent, suddenly, and hurled it to shatter into black fragments on the deck. A savage anger took his breath and shook his limbs and roared in his ears.

"Look out!" He gasped harshly. "Because I'm through running away. I don't quite know what I can do—or how—against you and all the Legion. But—look out!"

He stopped the geodynes, and swung grimly to the

chart cabinet. The view-plate showed him the greenish point of Earth, and presently the silver atom of the New Moon beside it. He read its position on the calibrated screen, and turned to the calculator to set up his first hopeless move against his unknown tormentor.

5 "AT THE BLUE UNICORN—"

THE MIGHTY *Inflexible* slipped gently into a berth against one of the six vast tubular arms of the New Moon's structure. Massive keys locked her trim hundred thousand tons of fighting strength into position. Her valves opened, to communicate with the artificial satellite.

Three men in plain clothes were sitting at a table in a long, richly simple chamber hidden aft the chart-room of the flagship. The slender man had chosen conservatively dark, exquisitely tailored civilian garb. The white-haired, rugged faced giant had attired himself in lustrous silks that reflected every bright hue of the New Moon's mirrors; he had left behind his tinkling sheaf of medals with a visible reluctance. The careless gray cloak of the third fell loose on his short but massive figure; a heavy cane was gripped in his pudgy yellow hand.

"For like's sake, Jay, what's the mortal haste?" The round, blue-nosed face of Giles Habibula looked imploringly at the tall Commander. "Here we've just sat down to get our precious breath, after that frightful dash across the void of space. We've had but a whiff of dinner, Jay. And now you say that we must go!"

Great Hal Samdu looked at him grimly.

"The dashing could have harmed you little, Giles," he rumbled, "when you were fast in a drunken sleep. And if you've had but a whiff of Jay's good food—then a whole taste would founder a Venusian gorox!"

Jay Kalam nodded gravely.

"We're at the New Moon, Giles. Gaspar Hannas is waiting for us, at the valve. And we've a job to do."

Giles Habibula shook the wrinkled yellow sphere of his head, and turned fishy pleading eyes to the Commander.

"I can't stand it, Jay," he whimpered. "It's a turn I can't endure." He pointed a trembling yellow thumb at his protruding middle. "Look at Giles Habibula. He's an old, old man, Giles is. He must ration his precious wine. He must have a cane to aid his limping step. He'll be dead soon, Giles will."

The pale eyes blinked.

"Ah, so, dead—unless the scientists come at the secret of rejuvenation. And precious soon! There's a specialist, Jay, on this very New Moon, whose advertising promised that—but John Star wouldn't let me come!"

He sighed, sadly.

"Aye, the whole world plots for the death of poor old Giles. Look at him, Jay. He was drinking up his last miserable drop of happiness at the Purple Hall. For Phobos is a pleasant world, Jay. The sun in its gardens is kind to the aches in an old man's bones. John Star is a generous host—not always rushing famished guests away from his table, Jay!

"Ah, and it's a comfort to see Aladoree every day—to see her so happy with John Star, Jay, after all the fearful dangers they've come through. A comfort to be near, to guard her, if trouble comes again."

His seamed face smiled a little.

"It gives a lonely, friendless old soldier a tiny mite of happiness, Jay, to dandle Bob Star's daughter on his knee. And to see Kay herself still so lovely, after all the horror of the comet, and so eager for Bob's visits home. The next one, the doctors say, is sure to be a son—but that's a secret, Jay!"

Leaning heavily back in his chair, the old man sighed again.

"Old Giles was happy on Phobos, Jay—happy as the shattered wreck of a dying Legionnaire can be. He had his bit of supper, amid the dear familiar faces. He sipped his precious drop of wine. He dozed quietly away—ah, so, and it might have been into a poor old soldier's well earned last repose! But—no!"

His pale eyes stared accusingly.

"He wakes up in a strange cramped bunk. And he finds he is upon a cruiser of the Legion, shrieking through the frigid gulf of space. Ah, Jay, and his dimming old senses feel the shadow of a frightful danger, rushing down upon him! That's an evil way to serve a defenseless old man, Jay, in his miserable sleep. The shock might stop his heart!"

His fat hands clutched the edges of the table.

"'Tis a fearful thing, Jay, to alarm folks so! Ah, it made me think of the Medusae. And that evil man-thing Orco, and the fearful Cometeers." He leaned forward, earnestly. "Tell old Giles there's no alarm, Jay! Tell him it's only a monstrous joke."

His small eyes looked anxiously back and forth, between the grave face of Jay Kalam, and the grimly rugged one of Hal Samdu. His wrinkled face faded slowly, to a paler, sickly yellow.

"Life's name!" he gasped. "Can the thing be so mortal serious? Speak, Jay! Tell old Giles the truth, before his poor brain cracks."

Rising beside the table, Jay Kalam shook his head.

"There's little enough to tell, Giles," he said. "We have to deal with a criminal, who calls himself the Basilisk. He has got some uncanny mastery of space, so that distance and material barriers apparently mean nothing to him.

"He began in a small way, nearly two years ago. Taking things from secure places. Putting notes and his little clay snakes in impossible places—I recently received one in my office in the Green Hall.

"He keeps attempting something bigger. There have been murders. How he has served notice that he is going to rob and murder one of the New Moon's patrons, every day. If he goes on—well, Hal is afraid—"

"Afraid?"

Hal Samdu crushed a great fist into the palm of his hand, and towered to his feet.

"Afraid," he rumbled. "Aye, Giles, I'm sick and cold with fear. For if this goes on, the Basilisk can take the keeper of the peace as easily as any luckless gambler—"

"The keeper?" In his own turn, lifting himself with the table and his cane, Giles Habibula heaved anxiously to his feet. His pale eyes blinked at Jay Kalam. "Then why can't she use—AKKA?" His voice had dropped, almost rever-

ently, as he spoke those symbolic letters. "And so end the danger?"

The Commander's dark head shook regretfully.

"Because we don't know who the Basilisk is, Giles," he said. "Or where. Aladoree can't use her weapon, without a target to train it on. If we can ever discover the precise location of the Basilisk in space—before he takes her—that is all we need to know."

"Aye, Giles," Hal Samdu rumbled urgently. "And that is why we sent for you. For you have a gift for opening locks, and discovering hidden things."

Giles Habibula inflated himself.

"Ah, so, Hal," he wheezed. "Old Giles had a spark of genius once—a precious glow of talent that has twice saved the System. And little thanks he got for the saving of it. Ah, once—but it's rusted now. It is dying. Ah, Jay, you might better have left old Giles to his peaceful sleep on Phobos."

His small eyes were blinking at them, swiftly.

"But we must seek the identity of this master of crime. Have you no clue, Jay? No precious clue at all?"

"Aye, Giles," broke in Hal Samdu again. "We've clues enough. Or too many. And they all tell the same story. The Basilisk is the convict, Derron."

"Derron?" wheezed Giles Habibula. "I've heard the name."

"A captain in the Legion," Jay Kalam told him, "Chan Derron was convicted of the murder of Dr. Max Eleroid and suspected of the theft of a mysterious device invented as a weapon for use against the Cometeers. The model was never recovered. Derron escaped from the prison on Ebron, two years ago. The activities of the Basilisk began soon after."

A green light blinked above the door.

"The orderly," Jay Kalam said. "We must go. Gaspar Hannas is expecting us, and we've only two hours."

"Two hours!" gasped Giles Habibula. "Jay, you speak as if we were condemned and waiting to die."

"It's two hours until midnight, New Moon time," Jay Kalam explained. "That is when this criminal has promised to appear—and we may have a chance to trap him."

Giles Habibula squirmed uneasily. "How do you hope to do that?"

"We are taking steps," Jay Kalam answered. "First, the ten cruisers of Hal's fleet are on guard against the approach of any strange ship. Second, within the New Moon, Gaspar Hannas has promised the full cooperation of his special police—they'll be on duty everywhere. Third, we will be waiting within the New Moon ourselves, with a score of Legion men in plain clothes."

"It is this man Derron, that we must take," grimly added Hal Samdu. "There's evidence enough that he's the one we want. Gaspar Hannas has raised the reward for him to a quarter of a million. We've papered all the New Moon with his likeness. The guards, and the players, too, will be alert. If he comes here tonight, we'll get him!"

"Ah, so, Hal!" wheezed Giles Habibula. "But if all you've told me is true—if distance and walls mean nothing to this strange power with which the Basilisk is armed—then perhaps he can strike down the poor gambler without coming here himself."

"Anyhow—" and Jay Kalam beckoned toward the door where the green light was blinking still—"we must go. If he comes, we may take him. If he doesn't, we may still discover some clue. Anything—"

His lean jaw set.

"Anything to tell us where he is, so that he can be destroyed."

Gigantic Hal Samdu stalking ahead, Giles Habibula waddling and puffing and laboring with his cane behind, they went out of the Commander's apartment, out through the chart room and the great armored valves of the *Inflexible*, into the New Moon.

Gaspar Hannas met them. Huge as Hal Samdu, he was dressed in loose flowing black. The black emphasized the whiteness of his monstrous soft-fleshed hands and his vast smooth face. His black, deepset eyes were distended and darting with fear. Sweat shone on his forehead and his white bald head. But his blank face greeted them with its slow and idiotic grin.

"Gentlemen!" he gasped hoarsely. "Commander! We must hasten. Time draws short. The guards are posted, and I've been waiting—"

His voice choked off, abruptly, and he started back

from Giles Habibula. Leaning heavily on his cane, the old man was peering at him. The old soldier's yellow face broke slowly into a wondering grin.

"In life's name!" he wheezed. "It's Pedro the Shar—"

The mindless smile congealed on the white lax face of Gaspar Hannas, and his huge hands made a frightened gesture for silence. His eyes swept the fat man swaying on the cane, and he whispered hoarsely:

"Habibula. It's been fifty years. But I know you. You're Giles the Gh—"

"Stop!" gasped Giles Habibula. "For I know you—Gaspar Hannas—in spite of your artificial face. And I've more on you than you do on me. So you had better hold your mortal tongue!"

He steadied himself, with both hands on the cane, and his pale eyes blinked at the giant in black.

"Gaspar Hannas!" he wheezed. "The great Gaspar Hannas, the New Moon's master! Well, you've come a long way, since the time of the Blue Unicorn. You must have eluded the posse in the jungle—"

The big man lifted his hand again, fearfully.

"Wait, Habibula!" he gasped. "And forget—"

"Ah, so, old Giles can forget—for a price." The old man sighed. "Life has served us mortals different. Here you have made a mighty fortune. Men say the New Moon has made you the System's richest man. Your poor old comrade is but a penniless veteran of the Legion, starved and friendless and ill." He quivered to a sob. "Pity old Giles Habibula—"

"In fifty years, you have not changed!" Admiration rang in the husky voice of Hannas. "What do you want?"

The yellow face was suddenly beaming.

"Ah, Mr. Hannas, you can trust the discretion of Giles Habibula! The luxury of your accommodations here is famous, Mr. Hannas. The excellence of your food. The vintages of your wines."

Gaspar Hannas smiled his senseless smile.

"You are the guests of the New Moon," he said. "You and your comrades of the Legion. You shall have the best."

The fishy eyes of Giles Habibula blinked triumphantly at his companions.

"Ah, thank you, Mr. Hannas!" he wheezed. "And I

believe that duty is now carrying us into your salons of chance. It's many a long year, Mr. Hannas, since old Giles risked a dollar for more than fun. But this meeting has brought the old days back, when the wheels of chance were meat and drink—aye, and life's precious blood—"

Gaspar Hannas nodded, and his smile seemed to stiffen again.

"I remember, Giles," he said. "Too well. But come. We've no time to waste on games." He looked at the old soldier again, and added reluctantly, "But if you really wish to play, the head croupier in the no-limit hall will give you a hundred blue chips."

"I, too, remember," sighed Giles Habibula. "At the Blue Unicorn—"

"Five hundred!" cried Gaspar Hannas, hastily. "And let us go."

Jay Kalam nodded, and Hal Samdu stalked impatiently ahead.

"Ah, so," gasped Giles Habibula. "Post your guards. And set your traps. And let's go on to the tables. Let your bright wheels turn, your precious blood race fast as the numbers fall. Let brain meet brain in the battle where wits are the victor. Ah, the breath of the old days is in my lungs again!" He waddled ponderously forward.

"There'll be no danger from this Chan Derron," he wheezed hopefully. "There's no human being—aye, none but old Giles Habibula himself—could pass Hal's fleet and the New Moon's walls and all these guards, to come here tonight.

"And as for your precious Basilisk—I trust he'll prove to be no more than some hoax—*In life's name, what was that?*"

Some little dark object had fallen out of the air before him. It had struck the floor and shattered. From the fragments of it, however, he could see that it had been the small figurine of a serpent, crudely formed of black-burned clay.

6 "YOU'RE CHAN DERRON!"

THE OLD MOON had been eclipsed two or three times a year, whenever the month-long circuit of its orbit carried it through the diminishing tip of Earth's shadow cone. The New Moon, nearer the planet, plunged through a brief eclipse every six hours. Upon that fact, Chan Derron made his plan.

During his strenuous years at the Legion academy, Chan had somehow found time for amateur theatricals. Often enough, in these last two fugitive years, his actor's skill had served him well. And now he called upon it for a new identity.

He became Dr. Charles Derrel, marine biologist, just returned from a benthosphere exploration of the polar seas of Venus, now in search of recreation on the New Moon. His bronze hair was dyed black, his bronze-gray eyes darkened with a chemical stain, his tanned skin bleached to a Venusian pallor. A blue scar twisted his face, where the fangs of a sea-monster had torn it. He limped on the foot that a closing valve had crushed. His brown eyes squinted, against unfamiliar sun.

"That will do." He nodded at the stranger in the mirror. "If you ever get past the fleet and the guards."

Another bit of preparation, he took the geopeller unit out of a spare space suit and strapped it to his shoulders under his clothing. (The geopeller, invented by Max El-eroid, was a delicate miniature geodesic deflector, with its own atomic power pack. Little larger than a man's hand, controlled from a spindle-shaped knob on a short cable, it converted an ordinary space suit into a complete geodesic ship. A tiny thing, yet already it had brought many a spacewrecked flier across a hundred million miles or more to safety.)

The *Phantom Atom* drifted into the Earth's shadow

cone, beyond the old Moon's orbit. It dropped inertly Earthward. Hal Samdu's patrolling cruisers set red points to blazing on the detector screens, but they would not discover Chan so easily, for the few tons of his ship were as nothing, against their many thousands. And the powerful, ever-shifting gravitational, magnetic, and electrostatic fields of the Earth far reduced the sensitivity of any detector in the planet's close vicinity.

The Earth grew beneath him. A great disk of denser darkness, it was ringed with supernal fire, where the atmosphere refracted the hidden sun's rays into a wondrous circle that blazed with the red essence of all sunsets. The silvery web of the spinning sign slid into that ring and vanished in the dark.

With a careful hand on the vernier-wheel, straining his eyes in the faint red dusk, Chan Derron found it again. He piloted the *Phantom Atom* to the motor-house that controlled a great flimsy mirror of sodium foil out at the rim of that vast wheel, and locked the ship against it with a magnetic anchor.

Slipping into white, trim-fitting metal, Chan snapped his blaster to its belt, and went out through the valve. One bolt from his blaster severed the power leads. And he waited, at the mirror's edge, until the sun came back. The great sheet burned with white fire, and the little ship behind it lay hidden in total darkness. But if the mirror turned—

At last the technician arrived, sliding up a pilot wire from the metal star of the New Moon's heart, carrying a kit of tools to repair the disabled unit. Gripping the control-spindle of the geopeller, Chan flung himself to meet him.

They sprawled together in space. The technician, after his first surprise, displayed a wiry strength. He groped for his atomic torch, that would have cut Chan's armor like paper.

"I've got a blaster." Vibration of metal in furious contact carried Chan's word. "But I don't want your life—only your number and your keys."

"Derron!" The man's face went white within his helmet. "The convict—we were warned." Chan grabbed for the torch. But the fight had gone out of the other. Limp

with terror, he was gasping: "For God's sake, Derron, don't kill me. I'll do anything you want!"

His name, it seemed to Chan, had grown stronger than his body! And more dangerous than any enemy. Swiftly, he took the prisoner's tools, his work-sheet, his keys, and the number-plate—a black-stencilled yellow crescent—from his helmet. With the man's own torch, he welded the shoulder-piece of his armor to the motor-house.

"In three hours," Chan promised, "I'll be back, and let you go."

He grasped a sliding ring on the pilot wire, and the geopeller sent him plunging down five hundred miles to the New Moon's heart. The wire brought him to a great platform, on one of the vast tubular arms of the central star. He dropped amid half a score of other men, all with kits of tools, and hastened with them into a great air-valve.

His own face looked at him, from the wall of the valve. \$250,000 REWARD! shrieked crimson letters. LOOK! This man may be beside you—NOW!

At a wicket, as he filed with the others out of the valve, he turned in his captured work-sheet. "Inspect and repair Mirror 17-B-285" was the order at its head. He scrawled at the bottom of it, *Defective switch located and repaired.*

How long would he have, he wondered, before some other repairman, sent out to do a better job, would find the first welded to the motor-house beside the *Phantom Atom*? But if he had won just three hours—

In the locker rooms, where the men were squirming out of their metal, hastening under the showers, gratefully donning their clothing, he saw that ominous poster again. And all the talk he heard was of Chan Derron and the Basilisk, and whether the two could be the same, and whether the promised robbery and murder would be carried out at midnight.

Chan Derron found the locker to which his borrowed number corresponded. He hung up his suit, hastily donned the somewhat-too-small lounging pajamas and loose cloak that he discovered there, and thrust himself into a group of tired men bound for home and supper.

"Keep yer optics hot," advised a little mechanic beside

him. "Any big man you see tonight might be good for that quarter million. You don't know who—"

"You don't know who," Chan agreed.

He left the workmen, and a little door let him out upon the vast, noisy open space beneath the docks, thronged with incoming passengers from the space liners above. He closed the door, and sighed with relief. For he had passed the fleet, and the New Moon's walls, and the alert inspectors scrutinizing every man that came down the gang-planks above. He was safe—

"Your reservation check, sir?"

It was an attentive, dark-skinned Martian porter. The grimy paper sticking from the pocket of his yellow uniform, Chan saw, was another copy of that notice of reward. With a worried frown, Chan patted his borrowed pockets.

"Oh, I remember!" He squinted and blinked. "Left it in my baggage. Can you get me a duplicate?"

Were the dark eyes studying his scar? He eased the crippled foot.

"Yes, sir. A temporary check. Your name, sir?"

"Dr. Charles Derrel. Marine biologist. From Venus, in route to Earth. Two days here." He squinted again. "Can you get me some dark glasses? Not used to the light. The clouds on Venus, you know—"

The check, evidently a necessary passport to the New Moon's wonders, was presently procured. Chan dispatched the porter to look for non-existent baggage, and hurried on alone. The transit bands—a series of gliding belts whose moving coffee-tables and bars were crowded with bright-clad vacationists—carried him through endless enormous halls, past glittering shops and the tall black portals of the Hall of Euthanasia. But Chan had eyes for nothing until he saw the Casino—for it was there that he might hope to meet the Basilisk at midnight.

Transparent and illuminated from within, the pillars at the entrance looked like columns hewn from living gems. Ruby and emerald, they were covered with a delicate rime of gold. Tiny beneath their unbelievable glitter, a woman stood waiting.

He swung off the belt.

The girl was tall, with a proud grace of poise that he had rarely seen. The wealth of her hair was platinum

white; her fine skin was white; she wore a fortune in white Callistonian furs. And her eyes, he saw, were a rare true violet.

He hurried on, to pass her.

She was utterly beautiful. Her loveliness set a painful throb to going in his throat. He could not help a twinge of bitterness at thought of the double barrier between them—her obvious wealth and reserve, and his own more than desperate situation. If he had been some idle billionaire, he was thinking bleakly, perhaps returning from his colonial mines and plantations, she might have been waiting for him—

His heart came up in his mouth.

For the girl was coming swiftly toward him, across the vast gold-veined emerald that floored the entrance. The white perfection of her face lit with a welcoming smile. Her eyes were warm with recognition. In a joyous voice—but one too low for any other to hear—she greeted him by name:

“Why, Chan! You’re Chan Derron!”

Rooted with wonder, Chan shuddered to those syllables that made his body worth a quarter of a million dollars, living or dead. The smile of admiration congealed on his face. Moving with the weightless life of a flame, the girl came up to him, and eagerly seized his nerveless hand in hers.

7 THE LUCK OF GILES HABIBULA

THE SALONS of chance occupied a series of six immense halls radiating from the private office of Gaspar Hannas, which was situated at the very hub of the New Moon’s wheel. The walls of the office were transparent from within, and Hannas, from the huge swivel chair within his ring-shaped desk, could look at will down any one of the halls.

They were huge and costly rooms. The walls bore expensive statues, expensive murals, golden statues set in niches. And their polished floors were covered with thousands of tables of chance.

Beneath each hall ran an armored tunnel, unsuspected by most of the players above, where their losses were swiftly examined for counterfeit, counted, tabulated, and dispatched to the impregnable armored treasure vault beneath the office of Gaspar Hannas. A continuous tape, fed through a slot in the circular desk, revealed minute by minute the New Moon's gains and losses. The losses all appeared in red but that color was rarely seen.

"The laws of probability," Gaspar Hannas always insisted, smiling his fixed and mindless smile, "are all I need. Every game is fair."

And cynics, it had been suspected, were apt to find their doubts very unexpectedly terminated in the Hall of Euthanasia.

The six halls, tonight, were more than commonly crowded. For the whisper of the Basilisk had run over all the New Moon, and a great many thrill-seekers in their gayest silks and jewels had turned out to see what would happen at midnight. The play, however, as recorded on the endless tape, was somewhat slow—too many had heard that the highest winner was unlikely to keep his winnings.

Gaspar Hannas, for once, was not watching the tape. He was walking with the three Legionnaires through the Diamond Room, where no limit was placed upon the stakes. Hal Samdu, in his great gnarled hand, carried a tattered notice of reward.

"This convict, Derron," he insisted. "He's your Basilisk."

And he refreshed his memory, from time to time, with another look at the bronze-haired, space-tanned likeness of Chan Derron.

"Yonder!" Jay Kalam paused abruptly. "Derron was a big man. There's one as big."

They followed his grave dark eyes.

"Ah, so!" Giles Habibula was puffing mightily, from keeping pace with Hal Samdu's impatient stride. "A majestic figure of manhood. And a lovely lass at his side!"

The man stood like a tower above all the restless,

bright-clad players. His hair was dark, dark glasses shaded his eyes, and his skin had a singular pallor. A long scar marred his face.

The blond girl beside him was equally striking. With a queen's proud grace, she wore a lustrous cloak of priceless white Callistonian fur. A queer white star-shaped jewel—it looked, Jay Kalam thought, like a hugely magnified snow-crystal—hung at her throat.

"Six-feet-three!" Hal Samdu caught a gasping breath, and the poster trembled in his mighty hand. "He can't hide that—and the paleness and the dark hair and the glasses could be disguise!" He beckoned to one of the soldiers in plain clothes, trailing unobtrusively behind. "We'll arrest him, and soon find out."

Jay Kalam's head shook sharply.

"Shadow him," he whispered. "But if he is Derron—and the Basilisk—we must see more of his methods. Meantime—"

He breathed something to Giles Habibula.

"In life's name, Jay!" The small fishy eyes of the old man rolled at him, startled. "Don't ask me that! Don't command a poor old soldier to throw away his life!"

"Remember, Giles." Hal Samdu caught his shoulder. "It's for the keeper of the peace."

Giles Habibula winced, and heaved himself away.

"Don't mangle me, Hal!" he gasped. "For life's blessed sake! Of course I'll do what Jay desires. Aye, for the keeper—". He turned ponderously to the white giant in black. "Ah, Mr. Hannas," he wheezed, "now I must have your order for a thousand blue chips."

"A thousand! A million dollars worth?" The idiot's smile stiffened upon the face of Gaspar Hannas, and he looked protestingly at Jay Kalam. "Commander, this is blackmail!"

"No blacker," whispered Giles Habibula, "than the bloody career of Pedro the Shark!"

"I'll give it to you!"

Clutching the order, Giles Habibula waddled toward the table. A smart jab with his cane, in the ribs of a purple-clad woman as corpulent as himself, made him a place beside the green-cloaked giant and the girl in white. He presented the order to the startled croupier.

"A thousand blue chips, mister—or make it a hundred of your mortal diamond ones."

He turned to the pale tall stranger.

"Begging your pardon, sir," he wheezed. "But my poor old hands scatter the chips, they tremble so. And your lucky touch, I see, has won a fortune for the lovely lass beside you. Would you kindly place my bets, sir?"

"If you like." The big man relaxed. "How much are you playing?"

Giles Habibula gestured at the stacks of his chips.

"The million," he said. "On thirty-nine."

Even here in the Diamond Room, such a play made a stir. Spectators crowded up to watch the wheel. With his small eyes half closed, Giles Habibula watched the croupier flick the ball into its polished track, and then lift his hand dramatically over the wheel.

"Eh!" he muttered. "Not when old Giles plays!"

He turned to the man and the girl.

"Thank you, sir!" he puffed. "And now we await the turn of luck—or skill!" His leaden eyes lit with a sudden admiration of the girl's proud grace. "A lovely thing!" he wheezed. "As lovely as you are, my dear—that blue tapestry from Titan!"

His cane pointed suddenly across the table, held with an odd sure steadiness in his pudgy yellow hands, so that its polished green head was precisely opposite the still uplifted hand of the croupier, across the wheel.

The croupier gulped and whitened. His hand dropped, dramatically, as he followed the racing ball.

"Ah, and that golden nymph!" The cane fell, precisely as the hand, pointing to a statue in its niche. And the quick eyes of Giles Habibula came back to the girl in white. "Dancing as you might dance, my dear!"

The croupier stood trembling. His pale face ran sudden little rivulets of sweat. And the clicking ball fell at last into the slot. Blank, distended, stricken, the eyes of the croupier came up to the seamed yellow face of Giles Habibula.

"You are the winner, sir," he croaked. "At forty to one!"

"Precisely," agreed Giles Habibula. "And none of your chips or scrip—give me forty millions in good new Green Hall certificates."

The quivering fingers of the croupier tapped the keys before him, and presently a thick packet of currency popped up out of the magnetic tube. While hushed spectators stared, he counted out forty crisp million-dollar bills.

Trembling suddenly as violently as the other man, Giles Habibula snatched up the forty stiff new certificates. He swung hastily, and his fat arm struck the pale man in green, scattering the bills out of his hand.

"My life!" he sobbed. "My forty millions! For Earth's sweet sake, help a poor old man to save his miserable mite!"

After the first awed moment, there was an excited scramble after the bills. Giles Habibula, stooping and snatching, fell against the tall man. The stranger caught him and helped him back to his feet.

"Ah, thank you, sir!" Small eyes glittering, he was avidly seizing and counting the returned money. "Thank you. Thank you generously, madam!" He heaved a vast sigh of relief. "Ah, it's all here! Thank you!"

He waddled triumphantly back to where his three companions were ostensibly watching another table. Ignoring the peculiarly pale and sick-looking smile on the face of Gaspar Hannas, he dropped something into Jay Kalam's palm.

"Ah, Jay," he panted, "it cost me mortal peril—aye, and the last desperate exertion of my failing genius—but here are your suspect's keys, and his reservation check."

"Mortal peril?" echoed Gaspar Hannas, faintly. "It cost me forty million dollars!"

The Commander studied the oblong yellow card.

"Charles Derrel," he muttered. "Marine biologist, from Venus." His dark eyes narrowed. "It's just a temporary check—'original mislaid.' And the initials—Charles Derrel and Chan Derron!"

Hal Samdu's great fists clenched.

"Aye, Jay!" he whispered. "Shall we arrest him now?"

"Not yet," said the Commander. "Wait for me here."

He walked quickly to the table, and touched the tall man's arm. The stranger turned very quickly to meet him. And the quickly checked movement of his arm told the

Commander that some weapon hung ready beneath the green cloak.

"These were dropped when the money was being picked up, just now." Jay Kalam allowed a glimpse of the keys and the yellow card. "If you can identify the check—"

The stranger stared through his dark glasses, speechless. But the girl stepped forward. Her gracious white arm slipped through the stranger's and she gave Jay Kalam a smile that took his breath.

"Of course he can." Rich as a singer's, her voice was quick and positive. "Or I can identify him. Sir, this is Dr. Charles Derrel. Recently from Venus. My fiance."

"Thank you." With a sudden intense effort of memory, Jay Kalam studied the girl. "Who, may I ask, are you?"

The proud, impersonal violet eyes met his.

"Vanya Eloyan." She spoke as if she were saying, *I am a princess*. "From Thule."

The Commander bowed, and dropped the card and the ring of keys into the stranger's powerful hand. The girl smiled dazzling thanks, and then took her companion's arm and turned him back to the table.

Rubbing thoughtfully at his lean, dark chin, Jay Kalam found his own companions at another table, where the wheel paid one hundred to one. Giles Habibula, his moon-face intent, was pointing with his cane, across the spinning wheel, toward the stupendous magnificence of a mural depicting the old Moon's end.

The croupier behind the table, with a desperate illness in his eyes, was staring slack-jawed at Gaspar Hannas. His hand moved, in a convulsive gesture, to mop his brow. And the old man's cane moved swiftly also, pointing.

"And there," he wheezed, "stands the lovely likeness of Aladoree!"

"Restrain yourself, Habibula," rasped Gaspar Hannas. "Or you'll destroy the New Moon as surely as she did the old! For honor's sake—"

The number fell. The croupier's mouth opened in a strangled moan. He gulped, and made a helpless little shrug at Gaspar Hannas.

"You are the winner, sir," at last his voice came squeakily. "Twenty million played, at one hundred to one. You have won two billion dollars." He tapped uncertainly

at his keys. "We'll have it for you in a moment, from the vaults."

The great white hand of Gaspar Hannas caught the old man's cloak.

"Habibula," he croaked huskily, "have you no mercy? In honor's name—"

The fishy eyes of Giles Habibula blinked reprovingly.

"Ah, me! But that's a strange word to hear from you, Gaspar Hannas! Precious little honor has been found in anything your foul hands have touched, in the forty years that I have known you." He turned back to the table. "I want my two billion."

In hundred-million-dollar Green Hall certificates, the first his blinking eyes had ever seen, his winnings were pushed toward him. With that amazing quick dexterity that his fat hands sometimes displayed, he shuffled through them to check the count.

"Pedro," he wheezed sadly, "you shouldn't begrudge me this—not when all your New Moon's splendor is built upon the cornerstone of my poor old brain. For I find you still using the same simple devices I invented for the tables of the Blue Unicorn!"

He patted his crackling pocket, contentedly.

"It would serve you right, Hannas, if I played all the night. Ah, so! Even if I broke your New Moon, and made you beg for the black chip of admission to your own Euthanasia Clinic!

"But I won't do that, Hannas." He swung heavily on his cane. "Because I'm more honest than you ever were, Pedro—aye, there's a limit to my stealing. Ah, so, one more play is all I want. Just one billion dollars, Hannas, at a hundred to one."

Gaspar Hannas staggered, and his white jaw slackened.

"Habibula!" he husked. "In the name of Ethyra Coran—"

"Don't utter her name!" gasped Giles Habibula. "To show you why not, I'll just play two billion!"

"You can't do that!" Hannas choked. "I—I think that table's out of order. We're closing it—"

"Then I'll find another," wheezed Giles Habibula.

But Jay Kalam touched his arm.

"Better keep close beside us, Giles," the Commander

whispered. "Move slowly, so that the plain-clothes men can gather in around you. And you had better keep your own eyes on Dr. Derrel, for you've got just twenty minutes now."

"I?" Giles Habibula blinked at him. "You make me feel like a convict on Devil's Rock waiting for the ray." He touched his pocket again, with a sidewise look at Gaspar Hannas. "I know he'd slit my poor old throat in an instant, Jay. But surely, with so many of you here, he wouldn't dare. For Pedro was ever a white-livered coward at the core."

"I was speaking, Giles," Jay Kalam told him gravely, "of your danger at midnight, when the Basilisk has threatened to strike."

"The B-B-B-Basilisk?" Giles Habibula stuttered through ashen, quivering lips. "Aye, the mortal Basilisk! You told me he had threatened to abduct and murder some luckless p-p-p-player. But why should he pick on m-m-m-me?"

Gaspar Hannas caught his breath, and his white baby-grin seemed for an instant genuinely mirthful.

"Didn't we tell you, Giles?" asked Jay Kalam's grave, astonished voice. "Didn't we tell you that the Basilisk has promised to come at midnight—in eighteen minutes now, to rob and murder the highest winner?"

"And your two billions, Habibula, are the richest winnings in the New Moon's history." The great voice of Gaspar Hannas had a ring of savage glee. "But I'll cash them, if you like—for one black chip!"

0 THE MAN WHO 0 FLICKERED

GILES HABIBULA began to tremble. His bulging middle quivered. Drops of sweat stood out on his furrowed yellow face. His small eyes seemed to glaze. His teeth chattered violently, and then, false to him, fell out on the floor.

"*Ahuh!*" he gasped. "*Yuh—whuh—!*"

He began tearing furiously to get his winnings out of his pocket. Jay Kalam recovered and returned the teeth. He took them clattering into the cavern of his mouth, and cried piteously:

"Jay! Ah, Jay, why didn't you tell me? A poor blind old man, tottering on the very brink of life, a creeping famished toothless wretch. Jay, would you let old Giles thrust his neck into the very noose of death?"

"You've Hal's fleet to guard you," the Commander sought to reassure him, "and ten thousand of the New Moon's police. We'll protect you, Giles."

"Ayel!" An eager fighting glint lit the blue eyes of Hal Samdu. "We've set a trap for this Basilisk—and now you've baited it well, Giles, with your two billion dollars!"

"Ah, no!" sobbed Giles Habibula. "Old Giles will bait no traps—not with his poor old flesh!" He was staggering back to the table he had just left so triumphantly. "How long did you say, Jay?" he gasped. "Eighteen minutes—to lose more than two billion dollars?"

The croupier went white again, to see him returning.

"Hasten, man!" The old soldier gasped. "Call for the bets, and spin your ball! In life's mortal name, is this place a hall of chance—or the black Euthanasia Clinic?"

The croupier gulped and whispered hoarsely:

"Place your bets, gentlemen! Bets on the table!"

The leaden eyes of Giles Habibula were peering along the row of players.

"Some mortal fool has got to win," he croaked. His glance fell upon a little gray man, opposite: a dried-up wisp of humanity, whose pale anxious eyes, through heavy-lensed glasses, were peering at endless rows of notations in a small black book. His thin nervous fingers were tapping at the keys of a compact, noiseless computing machine. Only three blue chips remained before him on the board. Giles Habibula called to him, "Brother, do you want to win?"

The little stranger blinked up at him, in near-sighted bewilderment.

"Sir," came a shrill piping voice, "I do. More than anything else in the world. I have been laboring many years—I have made twenty million calculations—endeavoring to perfect my system of play. I have three chips left."

"Forget your mortal system," wheezed Giles Habibula. "And play your three chips on one hundred and one."

The little man scratched his gray head uncertainly, peering vaguely back at his book and his calculating machine.

"But my system, sir, based on the permutations of numbers and the gravitational influence of the planets—my system—"

"Fool!" hissed a mousetrap-faced female beside him. "Play! Old blubber-guts has got something! He just cleaned up a couple of billions!"

She set a stack of her own chips on one-hundred-one.

Giles blinked, and the croupier spun his ball.

The little gray man looked at his machine, and put one chip on forty-nine. The fat yellow hands of Giles Habibula, handling the green certificates as if they had been incandescent metal, laid the stack of his winnings on the double-zero.

"Two billions and a few odd millions," he told the chalk-faced croupier. And his voice dropped to a rasp of deadly menace. "And don't you move until that ball stops. Don't take a mortal breath! I'll handle the relays."

He looked back at the little gray man.

"On second thought, brother," he wheezed, "your forty-nine will win. Due to gravitational influences!" He thrust

the green handle of his cane abruptly into the croupier's pasty face. "You stand still!"

The cane lifted, with a slow, deliberate sweep, and the ball clicked into the slot.

"Forty-nine is the winner!" Sobbing with pale faced relief, the croupier snatched up the sheaf of bills from zero-zero. With a trembling wand, he raked in the other bets. He pushed a stack of a hundred chips to the small gray man.

The bleak faced woman made some sound, very much under her breath, and abruptly departed.

"My system!" piped the frail little man, excitedly. "At last—it wins!"

His thin fingers recorded the play in his little black book. They tapped the silent keys of his machine. He peered at the dial, and then pushed the stack of his chips back upon the number forty-nine.

The colorless eyes of Giles Habibula glittered at the croupier.

"Forty-nine," he predicted, "will win again."

The croupier licked his dry lips. His glazing eyes shot a despairing glance at Gaspar Hannas. He hoarsely called for bets, and spun the ball, and watched its clicking circle with a kind of white horror on his face.

And forty-nine won!

"My system!" The gray man clutched with shaking hands at chips pushed toward him. "For twenty years," he whispered, "Dr. Abel Davian has been thought a visionary fool. But now—" His heavy lenses stared about the hushed, wondering table. "Now, sirs, he must be acknowledged a mathematical genius!"

"He's still a fool." Gaspar Hannas spoke to Jay Kalam, not troubling to lower his contemptuous voice. "A pathological gambler. I've seen thousands like him—egotistical enough to think they can invent some lunatic system to cheat the mathematics of probability. They never know when they've had enough, until they finally come begging for a free black chip. Davian probably will tomorrow, when he has lost what he wins tonight."

The commander nodded with a glance of pity at the trembling man, whose frantic fingers were stabbing now at the keyboard of the calculator. He turned slowly back to

the master of the New Moon, his dark face drawn firm as if to veil some unspoken accusation.

"An old client, eh?"

"He has been fighting for twenty years to break me." Blinking implacably, Hannas stood watching Davian enter the results of his play in the little black book. "I've got to know him well, from all the times he has come whining for me to cash his worthless I O U's. I even met his wife, on their first trip out to my old ship—a charming girl, who tried for years to save him, after he had thrown away everything they had, before she finally realized that euthanasia is the only cure for his kind. He used to have a responsible position in the statistical department of some research firm. Look at him now—a ragged nobody."

Hannas chuckled, with a mirthless scorn.

"They're all alike," he said. "They lose everything, and the syndicate pays their way home. But they aren't content. They never learn. They've got to get even. They sell their homes. They break their relatives. They borrow from their friends, until they have no friends. They live in squalor, and scrape and beg and steal—and keep coming back out here to try again to break the bank."

"An unfortunate case." Jay Kalam turned thoughtfully from the white-faced gambler, to study the idiot smile of Hannas. "Don't you ever feel responsible?"

"I didn't invent human nature," Hannas shrugged disdainfully. "But the syndicate doesn't encourage such patrons. The personal disasters they bring upon themselves tend to reflect on our establishment, and too many of them finally become bitter and desperate enough to create unpleasant public scenes by killing themselves at the tables, or even sometimes attacking our own people, instead of decently requesting that free black chip."

He sniffed derisively.

"They're all alike," he repeated. "This Davian is only a little more persistent than the rest—"

Jay Kalam glanced at his chronometer and touched the big man's arm.

"Twelve minutes to midnight," he said softly. "I think we had better be moving along. But signal your men to keep their eyes on this Dr. Derrel."

They went on across the vast floor, Hal Samdu stalking

impatiently ahead. Laboring and puffing, Giles Habibula fell behind. Sweat broke out on his yellow face.

"In life's name!" he sobbed. "Jay, Hal, can't you wait for poor old Giles? Would you leave him alone with the fearful Basilisk at his heels? Can't you feel the tensivity of doom in the very air, aye, and see the stark print of fear on every mortal face?"

Jay Kalam had paused, and the old man snatched at his arm.

"Come, Jay!" he gasped. "For life's sake, let's make ready for the moment. Let's stand against the wall, Jay, and gather all our men about us, with blasters ready—"

"Shut up, Giles!" rapped Hal Samdu. "There's no danger, but to the winner. None, I think, if we surround this Dr. Derrel—"

"My mortal life!"

It was an apprehensive croak from Giles Habibula. Trembling, his arm was pointing at a table where the play had stopped. A tall man dressed in white was setting upon it some bulky object wrapped in brown canvas.

Giles Habibula stared anxiously, as he uncovered it. A square black box was revealed, with polished brass rods projecting from the sides and the top. A little instrument-board was wired to the box, and a set of phones that the man slipped off his head.

"Who is he?" Giles Habibula had caught the arm of Hannas. "In life's precious name, what is that machine?" His thin voice quavered. "I don't like the look of such strange machines—not when we're dealing with such an unknown monster as the Basilisk!"

"That's only John Comaine," said the rusty voice of Gaspar Hannas. "We'll speak to him."

He lead them to the man whose brain had conceived the New Moon. Comaine, in his white laboratory jacket, looked robust and athletic. His stiff blond hair stood on end. He had a square stern mask of a face, with slightly protruding, emotionless blue eyes. He nodded to Gaspar Hannas, in stiff and uncordial greeting.

"Comaine," said Hannas, "this is Commander Kalam and his aides; they have come to hunt the Basilisk."

The glassy, bulging eyes looked at them briefly, coldly.

"Gentlemen." His voice was dry, metallic, inflectionless.

"I am attacking the problem in my own way. I built the New Moon. I am going to defend it."

Giles Habibula was gaping at the black box.

"Ah, so, Dr. Comaine. And what is that?"

"The operation of the Basilisk," Comaine said briefly, "display the use of an unfamiliar scientific instrumentality. The first step, obviously, is to detect and analyze the forces used."

And he turned abruptly back to his instrument panel.

"Ah, so," wheezed Giles Habibula. "You are right. And that is that!"

And they went on among the tables, watchfully scanning the thousands of players. An increasing tension charged the air. Play had almost stopped. A nervous hush was spreading, broken now and then by a voice too loud, by a laugh that jangled with unadmitted fear. Many who had come to watch the work of the Basilisk seemed to regret their early courage, and there was an increasing trickle of silent men and women toward the doors.

Abruptly Giles Habibula stopped again.

"I know that man!" He pointed furtively ahead. "Aye, forty years ago, at the Blue Unicorn! He is Amo Brelekko!"

"Naturally you know him," rasped the great voice of Gaspar Hannas. "For you and he and I were three of a kind, in those old days."

"Ah, what's that?" Giles Habibula inflated himself, indignantly. "In life's name, Hannas, I'll not have you say three of a kind!" His fat lips made a sharp, startling sound, as if he had spat. "Neither you nor the Eel ever did a mortal thing, but Giles could do it quicker and smoother and more silently, with precious less danger from the law!"

His leaden eyes went back to the tall man strolling toward them. Amo Brelekko was gaunt to the point of emaciation. His huge head was completely bald. A long hatchet nose accented the knife-like sharpness of his face. He now wore brilliant purple lounging pajamas, and a flaming yellow robe. A great diamond pinned his tunic, and the lean yellow claws of his fingers were glittering with rings.

"Amo the Eel!" whispered Giles Habibula. "You wouldn't know that forty mortal years had gone. He looks

just the same. He had the swiftest hands I ever knew—aye, beside my precious own!”

His pale eyes blinked shrewdly at the New Moon’s master.

“What is he doing here, Hannas? You couldn’t let him play. He knows your tricks as well as I do.”

The white giant smiled his silly smile.

“Brelekko has been here since the New Moon was built,” said Gaspar Hannas. “I offered him ten thousand dollars a day to play for the house. He refused. He said that he would prefer to take his money from the other side of the table.

“And he does. But he is more moderate than you were, Habibula. He limits his winnings scrupulously to ten thousand dollars a day. I don’t regret his presence. His spectacular methods of play make him a valuable advertisement.”

“Aye, he’d be good.” Giles Habibula nodded. “Though he was only a youth when I knew him, he already showed a precious promise, in the quickness of his hands.”

“Brelekko is a gifted man,” agreed Gaspar Hannas. “He’s a skilled amateur magician—sometimes he gives a special performance for our guests. His brain is as clever as his hands. He invented the game of hyper-chess, and none can beat him at it.”

“I never tried,” muttered Giles Habibula.

“His suite is equipped as an astrophysical laboratory,” Hannas went on, “with an observatory dome outside, on the New Moon’s hull. By avocation he is a brilliant scientist, by vocation the greatest gambler in the System—”

The leaden eye of Giles Habibula had begun to glitter. “Except,” Gaspar Hannas added very hastily, “of course, yourself.”

His great white hand beckoned, and Amo Brelekko came to meet them. When his dark eyes found the waddling old man in gray, however, he stopped abruptly. Gems glittered in a sudden arc, as his lean hand flashed toward his arm-pit.

But the thick cane of Giles Habibula was first. It snapped up level with the gaunt body of Amo Brelekko, and his yellow hand tensed on the head.

“Still, Brelekko!” His thin voice rang cold with menace. “Or I’ll burn you in two.” As the jeweled hand dropped,

his voice softened. "Ah, me, Brelekko," he wheezed, "after forty years, can't we forget?"

"I'll never forget, Habibula." The speech of Brelekko was a voiceless rasping. "Not in forty centuries!"

"Then you had best restrain yourself, Amo," advised Giles Habibula, grimly. "At least until midnight has passed."

The fleshless, cadaverous face of the gambler made an unpleasant grimace.

"So you are here to hunt the Basilisk, Habibula?" his rasping whisper asked. "There's an ancient Terrestrial proverb, 'Set a thief to catch a thief.'" His laugh was queerly muted like his voice, a kind of chuckling hiss. "But I think even that will fail. For the Basilisk is a better thief than you ever were, Habibula."

Giles Habibula caught a choking breath, and the cane lifted swiftly. But Amo Brelekko, with a mocking little gesture of his thin jeweled hand, had turned toward a distant table, where there was a little stir of sudden excitement.

"We'll soon know," he whispered. "For yonder is the winner, I believe—the man in danger. And midnight is almost at hand."

Like a yellow skeleton stalking, he hurried toward the table. The three Legionnaires and Gaspar Hannas hastened after him. The most of the players, when they came to the table, had drawn a few paces back—out of apprehensive respect, it seemed, for the ominous promise of the Basilisk—so that only a few were left about the table, at the center of a hushed, whispering ring of spectators.

Most of those few yet at the table were the plain-clothes men of the Legion. But the big pale man who gave the name of Charles Derrel had pushed through to join them, with the tall blond beauty at his side. Brelekko turned to stand beside the croupier, peering through a monocle at the wheel. The engineer in white, John Comaine, had moved his mysterious equipment to the end of the table; the phones were on his head, and he was fussing with the instrument panel.

The only actual player left at the table—and, obviously, the focus of all the expectant strain that filled that hushed, watching circle—was the little ragged man, Abel Davian.

His stacks of chips were taller now, and he was trembling with elation. His heavy spectacles were awry, and his withered skin, beneath the garish atomic lights, was filmed with bright sweat. His thread-bare tunic was torn open at the throat. With a feverish wildness, he set down the last play and tapped the calculator and pushed out another bet.

Giles Habibula had stopped, panting apprehensively, in the circle of tense onlookers. But his three companions pushed forward to the table, and the little gambler peered up at them. His near-sighted eyes blinked in recognition.

"Thank you, Mr. Hannas," his thin voice piped. "My system has won me twenty million dollars—a fair return, I think, for all my bitter years of washing dishes and living on nothing and saving pennies for your tables. And now I'm going to surprise you."

With a nervous, greedy, haste, he raked in his winnings.

"You used to laugh at me, Mr. Hannas, when I came to ask some small favor." Resentment flashed in his hollowed eyes. "You used to say that I was habitual, and you said habituais couldn't quit. But I'm going to take my money home." His shrill voice quivered, in pathetic defiance. "Goodbye, Mr. Hannas!"

He asked the croupier for an empty money-bag. His hurried hands began stuffing it with his winnings. Blue chips, and the glittering disks of synethetic diamond worth ten times as much. The gold-colored New Moon scrip. Crisp Green Hall certificates.

Jay Kalam snatched a glance at his chronometer, and made an imperative gesture to the alert Legionnaires about him.

"Five seconds!" he whispered. "Guard this man."

Little Abel Davian picked up the bag of his winnings and his calculator and his little black book, and shuffled wearily away from the table. He paused to make a jerky, nervous little gesture of farewell.

"No, Mr. Hannas," he muttered. "I'm not coming back—"

Jay Kalam stiffened where he stood, and caught his breath.

His ears heard a most peculiar noise: a deep vibrant hum. It was like the purr of a monstrous jungle cat in its

suggestion of ominous and ruthless power, yet mechanical in its even rhythm. And it had an uncanny penetration—it throbbed through all his body; it made his bones ache and his head throb and his teeth chatter.

Abel Davian—flickered! Exactly, the Commander thought, as if some perfectly transparent curtain had dropped between them. And his thin, stooped little body seemed for an instant queerly frozen, like a motion picture when the projector stops.

Then Abel Davian was gone.

Even in that stunned and breathless instant, Jay Kalam was aware of the crackle of discharged electricity, of the tingling of his skin. He knew that a sudden force pushed him violently toward the spot where Abel Davian had been, instantly tugged him as violently back.

And then, still swaying and sick to his heart with a cold nausea of fear, Jay Kalam ran his hand before staring, utterly unbelieving eyes. For there beside the table, in the exact spot from which the little man had been so strangely snatched away, was something else! Something—monstrous!

9 THE THING FROM NOWHERE

CHAN DERRON, when the blond girl greeted him by name at the Casino's resplendent entrance, stood for an instant shocked and cold. Then, looking into her shining violet eyes, he let himself respond a little to her smile, and returned the warm pressure of her hand.

"Can we talk for a moment?" he asked, and nodded aside from the busy portal.

"But come with me, inside." Her voice was a golden song that rang in his heart. "I've a table reserved for us in the grille beside the Diamond Room. We can talk as we dine. And then—"

The music of her voice missed a note, and through the

violet depths of her eyes flashed something black and cold as transgalactic space.

"Then," she said softly, and once more the radiance of her smile set a pain to throbbing in his heart, "we shall play."

"Wait, please!" Chan Derron caught his breath, and tried to quiet the wild pulse hammering in his ears. He made his eyes look for a moment away from the girl's disturbing beauty, while he mastered his face and his voice. He turned back to her.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Very sorry—because you are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. But I think you have mistaken my identity. I am Dr. Charles Derrel. Here from Venus, en route back to Earth. I'm sorry, but we've never met before. And I don't know this—did you say—Chan Derron?"

Her fine, proud head shook slightly, and her lustrous platinum hair shimmered in the changing light from the immense, jewel-like columns of the Casino. There was something subtly mocking in her violet eyes, and Chan noticed for the first time that they were very slightly tilted.

"I could not mistake your identity," she said softly. "And if you don't know Chan Derron, I'll refresh your memory."

Her slim quick hands opened a white bag, and allowed him a brief but sufficient glimpse of his own features, beneath the screaming type that offered a quarter of a million dollars in reward. The bag snapped shut, and her white smile dazzled him.

"Now, Charles," she asked, "shall we dine?"

Something in the way she spoke, something far beyond the light, inviting music of her voice, was hard as the great white jewel at her throat, cold as a planet whose sun is dead. Chan Derron tried to conceal the tiny shudder that ran through his big body.

"Whatever you say, my dear," he told her.

Inside the massive, gold-rimmed portal, they had to show their reservation checks. Chan glimpsed the girl's. The name on it was Vanya Eloyan. Residence, Juno. But it was a yellow temporary check, like his own.

In the dining room, which occupied a triangular space

between two of the radiating halls, Chan seated the girl at a secluded, fern-hidden table. She declined champagne, and so, cautiously, did he.

"Vanya Eloyan," he said softly, relishing the name. "Of Juno." He looked up at her white, dynamic loveliness. "But I think you are a girl of Earth, Vanya. I've never met a colonial with quite your manner, though your accent does suggest that you were educated at the Martian universities. In science, I should say. And music. Am I right?"

The white perfection of her face was fixed, suddenly, with a solemnity of purpose almost tragic, though still the sheer beauty of it kept an ache in Chan's throat.

"I prefer not to speak of myself." Her voice, for all its music, was cold as the sun of Neptune. "I came to meet you here, Chan Derron, to ask you a question." She leaned a little forward, her splendid figure tense; her violet eyes lit with a fire bright and terrible. "*What did you do with Dr. Eleroid's invention?*"

All the blood ran out of Chan Derron's face, leaving it the ghastly gray-white of the pigment he had used. A cold blade cleft his heart. Icy, strangling hands stopped his breath. The strength ebbed out of him. His big body sagged toward the table.

In the prison on Ebron he had heard that question ten thousand times, until the very syllables brought back those years of torture. He had been fighting for two years to escape it. It was a little time before the dryness of his throat would let him speak, and then he said:

"I didn't kill Dr. Eleroid. I didn't take his invention. My conviction was unjust. I've been the victim of something—monstrous! Believe me, Vanya—"

Her eyes glinted with the chill of a polar dusk.

"I don't believe you, Chan Derron." Her low voice rang with a deadly resolution. "And you won't escape until I know what you have done—what you are doing—with Dr. Eleroid's secret."

The desperate, ruthless intensity of her ready poise and her searching face made her seem to Chan the most terrible but yet the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. And suddenly he was startled by some mocking familiarity.

"Remember, Chan Derron," her cold voice warned

him, "with two words I can end your life tonight—and the amazing career of the Basilisk!"

Chan Derron drew a long uneven breath, and settled slowly back in his chair. He was staring at the figure of white loveliness across the table. He stared while a silent waiter brought their food, and silently departed. And the thing he saw was more alarming than her icy threat.

For the make-up on her perfect face had dissolved and shifted. Her violet eyes in his mind, had turned a clear ice-green. The platinum splendor of her hair had become a glory of red-lit mahogany. Yes, indeed, he knew her face!

He had studied every feature of it, for lonely hours, on the picture posted beside his own on the bulkhead of the *Phantom Atom*. This splendid and deadly being was no woman! She was Luroa, the last survivor of Eldo Arrynu's synthetic android monsters. The price on her life matched that on his own.

Chan Derron smiled gently, and eased the dark glasses on his face.

"You know two words," he whispered softly. "But I know one—Luroa."

There was a flicker of white tension on her face, he thought. The flash of something dark and deadly in the deep pools of her eyes. But in another instant she was smiling at him radiantly.

"The food, Dr. Charles," she said, "is too good to be neglected—and we must be in the Diamond Room before midnight."

When they were in the gaming room, the girl bought a stack of chips—displaying a sheaf of green certificates that seemed to speak of the sinister skills of Luroa. They played, he placing the chips at her direction. And they won. Perhaps, Chan thought—he had few illusions about the role of chance at the New Moon's tables—because the magnet of her beauty always crowded the table where she played.

Her violet eyes were watching him very closely, he could tell, and seeing all that happened about them, and measuring the minutes that fled. She was waiting, he realized, for midnight—and for him to betray himself as the Basilisk.

"Vanya," he whispered once, when they had a moment

alone, "I only came here to hunt this criminal. If you'll let me—"

"Wait," she returned inexorably, "until midnight."

When the three Legionnaires came upon them, Chan Derron recognized the Commander and Hal Samdu at once. Even in plain clothes, they were unmistakable to any veteran of the Legion. For a little time he put hope in his disguise—fervidly regretting that he had not been six inches shorter.

The return of his check and keys, however, by Jay Kalam, convinced him that he had been identified—and that the short fat man's spectacular maneuvers had been no more than an elaborate accompaniment to the picking of his pocket.

It surprised him that the girl spoke so promptly in his defense. His sense of her surpassing beauty kept rising above his fear of her—even above his cold instinctive horror of the android. When the Commander had gone, he turned to her with a little smile of relief, and gratitude.

"Thank you, Vanya."

Her smile of response was breath-taking—but all intended, he swiftly realized, for the spectators. For her golden voice dropped softer than a whisper; pitilessly cold, it rang ominously in his ear:

"No thanks are due me, Chan Derron. Kalam and Samdu and old Habibula know you as well as I do—and my identification meant nothing to them. They are just waiting—as I am—for midnight."

And midnight came.

The girl, as the moment stalked upon them, had gripped Chan's arm. Her small fingers sank desperately into his flesh—as strong, he thought, as an android's must be. And her keen violet eyes were watching every move he made, he knew, as sharply as he watched the promised victim of the Basilisk—gray, tattered, trembling little Abel Davian.

Her other hand, he noticed, and wondered at it, was toying constantly with the great white jewel at her throat. What manner of jewel, he was asking himself in that final moment, was this huge gem that had the prismatic sheen and the intricate hexagonal perfection of a great snowflake?

Chan Derron heard that hideous, feral purring. He saw little Davian flicker, grow queerly rigid—and saw that he was gone. He felt a breath of dank and ice-cold air. He was flung toward the spot where Davian had been, and dragged instantly back.

Then—hardly aware that he was strangling to a whiff of some choking, acrid gas—he was staring with bewildered and incredulous eyes at the monstrous thing that had appeared in Davian's place. It was like nothing men had found in all the System.

Standing on three thin, swaying, rubbery-looking legs, it reared twelve feet high. Queerly teardrop-shaped, its body was covered with close-set, green-black scales. Three huge eyes, of a dull and lurid crimson, glared from its armored head. Its enormous, jet-black beak yawned open to reveal multiple rows of saber-like teeth. An unpleasant fringe of long green serpentine tentacles hung beneath the beak.

A greenish slime was dripping from that fearful body to the polished floor, exactly, Chan thought, as if the creature had just that instant been snatched out of the muck of some primordial jungle. Beneath the slime, its dark scales had an odd, metallic glint. And there was that strangling, pungent reek, which Chan slowly recognized as the odor of chlorine.

For a little time it stood almost motionless, twisting that frightful, long-beaked head, so that those three enormous red eyes, which looked in three separate directions, could survey all the circle of puny humans about it.

A queer strained hush had fallen on the Diamond Room. For a moment there was not even a scream. Then those nearer, choked and blinded with the breath of chlorine that had come with the creature, began to stumble uncertainly back. The first sound was a hysterical laugh, that became a thin sobbing scream. And then the hush became an insane stampede.

But already the thing had moved. Three wings were abruptly extended from its armored back. Queerly, they *unrolled*. They were translucently green, and delicately ribbed with darker emerald. One on each side and the third, tail-like, behind, they raised and fell, one by one, experimentally, and then became a blur of motion.

Out of that fearful beak came an appalling bellow. Reverberating against the lofty vault of the Diamond

Room, a wild echo out of unknown jungles, it hastened the fugitive thousands. And the creature itself, with an ungainly but amazing swiftness, ran forward on the three swaying limbs. Its wings made a mounting thunder of sound, and the wind rushing from them was choking with chlorine.

"Back, Vanya!" gasped Chan.

Chan sprang after her. But the great wing struck his head and crushed him down. Falling, he glimpsed the girl standing in the monster's path. Both her hands, he saw, were lifted to her strange white pendant.

Then the green tentacles, squirming snake-like beneath that beak, snatched her up. The thing lifted with her above the expanding ring of panic-stricken fugitives, and flew with her swiftly down the hall.

"Get him!" It was the great voice of Hal Samdu, roaring vainly against the shrieking tumult. "Get Chan Derron!"

Blind and coughing from the chlorine, the giant was staggering about, blinking his eyes, waving a long, bright blaster. Jay Kalam, beside him, strangled and voiceless, was trying to call to the plain-clothes men.

"Aye, get him!" wheezed Giles Habibula from beneath a table. "And get the mortal monster!"

"Half a million!" Gaspar Hannas bellowed. "To the man who gets Chan Derron!"

Stunned dismay and poison gas, Chan realized, had given him a few free seconds. And, strapped to his body beneath the green cloak, he had the compact geopellor unit from his spare space suit. The control cable ran down his sleeve, and his fingers gripped the handle. A swift pressure on it—and he rose silently from the midst of his enemies. Flying high beneath the vault of the Diamond Room, he soared after the monster and the girl.

White, silent proton bolts stabbed after him. Plaster exploded from the painted vault, raining down into the panic on the floor. He breathed the sharpness of ozone, and felt one faint shock.

But the geopellor, for all its compactness, was swift. Chan pursued a darting zigzag. Seconds, only, had gone, when he came to the end of the long Diamond Room. But the monster, with the girl, had already vanished.

The trail they had left was plain. The alien creature

must have overlooked the wide doorway, for a ragged opening yawned in the top of the vault. Chan twisted the spindle in his hand. The geopellor flung him up through it.

And his brain, refreshed by the rushing wind of his flight, reached a swift decision. This moment—when he was free and in the air, while the monster was creating a diversion—this was obviously his chance to escape. And dread impelled him to flight, for the girl's accusation and the encounter with Jay Kalam had brought back all the horror of the Devil's Rock.

But he hadn't come to escape. He was hunting the Basilisk, and the monster was the one visible clue to the identity and the methods of that criminal. A shudder tensed his straight-extended flying body. But he knew that he must follow the monster.

The girl herself, he tried to tell himself, didn't matter. The pitiless synthetic brain of Luroa was a greater danger to him than all the Legion. It would be better if the monster destroyed her. Yet, in spite of himself, the thought of Vanya Eloyan spurred his frantic haste.

Beyond the hole in the massive wall—which could only have been torn, he thought, by some sort of explosion, and which therefore meant the monster was armed with something far more formidable than tentacles and fangs—beyond, he plunged into the corridors of the New Moon's museum.

The monster and the girl were gone from sight. Far down one hall a little cluster of people were running frantically. Beside a glass case stood one of the attendants, with a yellow crescent on his uniform. Chan dropped out of the air beside him.

"Which way?" he demanded.

The man stood wooden, glassy-eyed. His arms made a sudden defensive gesture, against Chan—although the geopellor had been used occasionally in sport, it was still new enough so that a flying, wingless man must have seemed almost as startling as the monster.

Chan shook the attendant. "Which way did it take her?"

"It couldn't be!" the man sobbed. "There isn't such a thing!" His eyes came into focus again, and he stared at Chan's face as if doubting its humanity. "A thing carrying

a woman?" he whispered. "It went on up, into the unfinished spaces. That way!"

He pointed—and then bent suddenly, very sick.

Twisting and squeezing the spindle, Chan darted upward again. Wind shrieked in his ears, and tore at his cloak. He found another shattered hole in the ceiling, and plunged through into an incompleted part of the New Moon.

Above bare floors, naked beams and girders and cables soared upward into gulfs of darkness. Unshaded atomic lights burned here and there, like stars in a metal universe. They cast blue, fantastic shadows. It was thousands of feet through that network to the black curving metal of the New Moon's hull.

Chan Derron peered, bewildered for a moment, into that blue mysterious chasm of sinister shadows and spidery metal. His right hand dragged the blaster from beneath his cloak. Then he heard the monster.

The awesome bellow reverberated weirdly through the maze of empty steel, rolling thunderously back from the metal hull, but it gave some clue to direction. The geopellor flung Chan upward again. And at last, on a high platform that the builders had used, he came upon the creature and the girl.

A far blue light cast a grotesque web of black shadows across the scene. The girl lay motionless. Green-black nightmare crouched over her, that hideous beak yawning wide. The serpentine tentacles were writhing about her throat.

The geopellor hurled Chan forward. The blaster flashed in his extended right hand. The first white bolt struck the dark-scaled body with a flare of green incandescence. Without harm, it seemed. And the green tentacles flung up a weapon.

Another service blaster of the newest Legion design, identical with his own!

The merest fraction of its energy would have meant slow death, from radiation sickness. A little more would have killed him instantly, by ionizing his brain tissue. But his second bolt into the monster's central crimson eye, took instant effect. The blaster fell. Queerly stiffened, the creature toppled toward the girl.

Ignoring a voice of fearful protest in his heart, Chan sent himself forward. The same arm that held the blaster

slipped under the girl. The geopellor lifted them both. The monster came crashing down behind them. The diaphanous green wings, when it struck, abruptly unrolled. They remained rigidly extended, and the thing did not move again. Chan dropped beside it, and set the girl upon her feet.

Her lithe body had moved again in his arms, and now she gasped for breath, smiling at him shakenly. Her synthetic loveliness made him glad, for a moment, that he had saved her life.

"Thank you," she whispered, "Chan!"

Her voice was velvet magic. Her violet eyes slowly closed toward his. And then, with an unexpected pantherine quickness, she was gone from his arms. A sudden, numbing blow from her elbow had struck some nerve center in his neck. A clever, savage strength had wrested the blaster out of his hand.

He swayed dazedly. Here, far from the gravity plates in the "bottom" of the New Moon's hull, their attraction was somewhat decreased, and it required a little time for muscles to adjust themselves to lessened strains. When he recovered his balance, the girl was already backing alertly away from him, covering him with his own weapon.

"Well, Mr. Basilisk!" her soft voice mocked him. "Let's see you get away this time!"

Chan caught his breath. The blue darkness and the shadowy strands of steel spun about him. He had foreseen this danger from the girl—and yet the very peril of her beauty made it all incredible. His hand tightened on the spindle of the geopellor. He had small chance of distancing the bolt of protons, but the power of the little unit could hurl his body against her—

"Still, Chan Derron!" her voice rang sharply. "Open your hand." The blaster gestured alertly.

His fingers relaxed. He tried, hopelessly, to protest.

"Vanya, you *can't* believe that I'm the Basilisk. For, all the time, you were there at my side—"

"Silence!" The bright weapon lifted, imperatively. "I was there—close enough to feel the mechanism strapped to your body, Derron. And the wires in your sleeve."

Narrowed, her violet eyes had a deadly glint.

"I had you then, Derron—until you sent your little pet to carry me away. Now I've got you again—and this time

you won't escape." He wondered again at the fingers of her left hand, lifted to that strange white jewel at her throat. "But still I'm going to give you one more chance."

He saw the tension in her hand, and the ruthless purpose behind the white perfect mask of her face. Cold as sleet, her voice whipped at him:

"What did you do with Dr. Eleroid's invention?"

Sick, helpless, he shook his head.

"Where is the machine you control with the instruments on your body—"

He knew she was going to fire, when he didn't answer. He could hurl himself at her with the geopellor. Two deaths, instead of one. But her pitiless beauty—

That monstrous purr came suddenly. The girl and everything beyond her flickered abruptly, as if a wall of vitrilith had dropped between. He saw her hand stiffen on the blaster, saw the white bolt's flash.

The last thing he saw was her strained face, with its grim suspicion changed to amazed and bitter certainty. Her image dissolved in a chasm of star-glinting darkness. And Chan Derron was hurled into black and airless cold.

10 *THE CLUE ON CONTRA-SATURN*

"YOU SAY it's dead?" quavered Giles Habibula. "Jay, you're sure the fearful thing is dead?"

High in the shadowy web of blue-lit metal beneath the New Moon's shell, the grotesque monstrosity sprawled stiffly on the bare platform. Jay Kalam and Hal Samdu and Gaspar Hannas stood peering down at it, but Giles Habibula hung apprehensively back near the elevator that had brought them up.

"Quite dead," Jay Kalam assured him. "Chan Derron evidently beat us to it—who would have guessed he was

wearing a geopellor under his cloak? And then got away—with the girl!"

"Got away!" It was a pained moan, from the gigantic, black-clad master of the New Moon. "And all our guests know he did. There's a panic at the docks. Every vessel going out is already booked to capacity. In twenty-four hours there won't be a visitor in the New Moon—and not many of our own employees—unless the Basilisk is caught."

The great white hands of Hannas clenched, impotently.

"The Basilisk has ruined me, Commander!" he rasped. "Or Chan Derron has. Already."

"Keep your men after him." Jay Kalam's gesture swept the dusky labyrinth of shadow-clotted steel. "He could be here—anywhere. With that woman—" His dark brow furrowed. "There was something about that woman—you observed her, Hal?"

"Aye, Jay," rumbled Hal Samdu. "She was beautiful—far too beautiful for any good. She had the same evil beauty that belonged to those androids of Eldo Ar-rynu."

"Android!" Jay Kalam started at the word. "She could be! She could be Luroa—Stephen Orco's last sinister sister!" He set his lean fingers deliberately tip to tip. "The New Moon would be the natural hunting ground of such a creature, and Chan Derron the sort of confederate she would seek. But she didn't look like—"

"Ah, Jay, but she did!" protested Giles Habibula, plaintively. "That was mortal evident! The hair and the eyes were changed, and make-up cunningly used to alter the shape of her face—ah, it was a lovely one! But still it was that she-monster's."

Jay Kalam spun on him.

"Why didn't you speak?"

Lifting his cane defensively, Giles Habibula stumbled apprehensively back.

"Jay, Jay," he whined plaintively, "don't be too severe on a poor old soldier." He sighed heavily, and one fat yellow hand clutched at his heart. "Giles is an old, old man. His eyes are blurred and dim. But still he can relish the sight of beauty, Jay. And that girl was too beautiful to

be stood before your blaster squad. Ah, she was a dream!"

"If you were any other man, Giles, you'd stand before a blaster squad yourself."

The Commander turned decisively back to Gaspar Hannas.

"Remind your police," he said, "that this female android is worth two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. That makes three quarters of a million, now, for the two."

"I'll make it an even million, Commander," the white giant gasped. "To save the New Moon—"

He stumbled away toward the elevator.

Jay Kalam was rubbing reflectively at his jaw.

"Perhaps Luroa ought to stand beside Derron on our suspect list," he said slowly. "We know the Basilisk is clever, utterly ruthless, and superbly trained in science—and that description certainly fits the android. She must be either the Basilisk or his confederate—or else she came here to snatch his prize away!"

He turned methodically to the rigid thing Chan Derron had slain. Hal Samdu was already playing his light-tube over it, while Giles Habibula prodded rather fearfully at its armored body with his cane.

"Ah, such a horror!" the old man wheezed. "And it came out of nothing—"

"It came from somewhere," Jay Kalam broke in gravely, "and it brings a new complexity into the situation. It's no native of the System. And like nothing we found in the comet. It means—"

"Jay!" It was an astonished gasp, from Giles Habibula. "Jay, look here!" The prodding cane trembled in his hand. "This mortal thing was never alive!"

"What's that?"

"See!" the old man wheezed. "The scales of it are metal, fastened on with rivets. The wings are neither flesh nor feathers—they're blessed cellulite. It had no muscles to make them beat, but this rotating shaft. These serpentine tentacles that raped the poor lass away, are all of metal disks and rubber and wire. And the fearsome eyes have lenses of vitrilith.

"Jay, the thing's a mortal robot!"

"So it is, Giles." He bent over it. "Hal, may I have your light?"

He peered into one of the huge, glassy orbs, felt the frail-seeming elastic stuff of the wings, inspected beak and tentacles and limbs, studied the patch of scorched metal scales, and the fused pit where the central eye had been. At last he stood up, decisively, and returned the light-tube.

"Ah, Jay," inquired Giles Habibula, "what do you discover?"

"A good deal," said the Commander. "A number of inferences are immediately obvious. A thorough scientific investigation will doubtless suggest as many others."

He turned to Hal Samdu.

"Hal, you take charge of this—mechanism. Send to Rocky Mountain base at once for a crew of research technicians—get as many men as possible who were with us on the cometary expedition—and have them disassemble it.

"Make a thorough microscopic, chemical, bacteriological, and spectrographic study of surface specimens and the material of every part. Photograph every part, before and after removal, under ultra-violet light. Make—but your crew will know what to do. Tell them to neglect no possible source of information—for this thing is our one tangible clue to the methods and the headquarters of the Basilisk.

"Have your men write up a complete report of what you find, and all possible deductions as to where this machine was built, by whom, for what purpose, and how it could have come to the New Moon. One word more—guard the robot and your results with the utmost care!"

"Yes, Commander." Hal Samdu saluted, eagerly, and a joyous smile lit his big ugly face. "Aye, and it's good to have something really to do, Jay, at last!"

And he stepped after Hannas into the elevator-beam.

"Now, Giles," the Commander continued, "there are three men I must learn more about. I know the overwhelming weight of evidence that Chan Derron is our Basilisk—perhaps with the android's complicity. But, in a case so grave, we can't afford to overlook any other possibility. Admitting that the Basilisk must have a brilliant, pitiless,

and scientific mind, there were three others present in the Diamond Room who might possibly be suspect."

"Eh, Jay?" The small fishy eyes of Giles Habibula blinked. "Who?"

"The engineer," began Jay Kalam, "John Comaine—"

"Ah, so," agreed Giles Habibula. "I didn't like the look of his mysterious box. And the others?"

"The gambler, Brelekko," said the Commander. "And Hannas, himself."

"Hannas! And Brelekko?" The old man nodded. "Ah, so, I guess they all three fit your classification. I know less of this Comaine. But if two men ever were ravening wolves, Jay, they were Hannas and Brelekko!"

"You knew them, Giles. Were they always friends, as now?"

"Friends, Jay!" The leaden eyes peered at him. "Ah, Jay, they were bitter enemies as ever fought—the three of us, each against the rest. Ah, so! And if any of us had been less a man than he was, the others would have picked his precious bones!"

"Tell me about it, Giles."

"It was forty years ago, and more, Jay." Leaning on the cane, he heaved to a sorrowful sigh. "When Giles was still a man—aye, a fighting man, not the miserable old soldier dying before you now. He was back on Venus, on furlough from the Legion—"

"Furlough, Giles?" inquired the grave Commander. "For five years?"

Giles Habibula sucked in his breath, indignantly.

"The charges of desertion were never proven, Jay," he wheezed. "Ah, all that was a wicked plot of my enemies, to wreck the career of a loyal Legionnaire—"

"Never proven," put in Jay Kalam, solemnly, "because all the documents in the case mysteriously vanished from the files of the Legion."

"I know nothing of that." The fishy eyes blinked. "Jay, Jay! If you've nothing better to do than turn up all the malicious lies that were invented by human demons like Hannas and Brelekko to ruin the bravest soldier that ever risked his life to save the System—"

His thin voice broke, piteously.

"Forget it, Giles." A faint twinkle lit the dark eyes of Jay Kalam. "Just tell me what happened on Venus."

"Ah, thank you, Jay," wheezed the old man, gratefully. "You were never one to dig up mortal skeletons to haunt a poor old soldier with!"

He balanced himself on the cane.

"I went back to the Blue Unicorn, Jay. It was on a little rocky island off New Chicago. The wildest place—and the richest—in all the System. But it was a woman that brought me there, Jay."

He sighed, and his colorless eyes looked far away into that shadowy cavern of raw metal.

"Ah, Jay, such a woman as you wouldn't find in all the whole System today—not unless you picked out the android Luroa. Ah, no other could be so beautiful or so quick or so brave. Her name was Ethyra Coran."

He gulped, and his thin voice trembled.

"The three of us loved her, Jay. Ah, so, every man on Venus was mad with her beauty—but we three were better men than the rest. We knew the matter lay between us. And, for her precious sake, we had to pretend a sort of friendship.

"Amo Brelekko was just off the Jovian liners. He wasn't using that name, then. Or the name he had used on the liners—for one ruined man had killed himself, and another had been murdered. He was made of money. Young as he was, he already had a skill—none but I could ever win from him at cards. He had a voice, then—and not that ghastly whisper. And the same gaudy dress and glitter of jewels he wears today. He had a gentle, flattering way with women—aye, Jay, many a poor lass had given him her soul, and perished for it.

"Gaspar Hannas had come from none knew where. He was known as Pedro the Shark. There were a thousand whispers about his past, but he wore a different face then—and none who had seen it cared to ask the truth. From wherever he came, he had brought a fortune with him, and he found more at the Blue Unicorn. Money and blood—ah, Jay, I've seen sights I can't forget!

"Gaspar Hannas was a man precious few lasses would have dared to refuse, but Ethyra Coran had a courage to match her beauty and her wit. Ah, so, and precious few men would have cared to be the rival of Pedro the Shark. But that was in the old days, Jay, when old Giles was still a man."

The old man's eyes chanced to fall again upon the monstrous robot on the floor, and he started back apprehensively, as if he had not seen it before.

"Ah, the hideous machine! I could make a long story, Jay. Aye, a story of cunning and passion and death that would freeze your heart. For the Shark and the Eel were ruthless, cunning beasts, and I—you know that Giles was ever honest and straightforward, Jay, and simple as a precious child—I had to grapple for their fearful weapons, to hold my own. To make the story short, Jay—"

He paused, and a happy smile crossed his round yellow face.

"I got the girl—aye, and a mortal lovely prize she was!"

His smile twisted into a triumphant grin.

"As for Hannas and Brelekko, why each of them, Jay—through a neat little device of my own—blamed his defeat upon the other. Ah, and then they became enemies indeed. The quickness and the craft of Brelekko matched the brutish strength and the ruthless courage of Hannas, however, and each failed to destroy the other."

"And you think they are still enemies?" the grave Commander asked.

"Deathly enemies," insisted Giles Habibula. "How could they be friends? When Brelekko must be madly jealous of all the wealth and power Hannas has found in the New Moon. When Hannas—aye, and justly—must hate Brelekko for knowing his past and his tricks, for hanging on him like a leech, and winning at his tables.

"Ah, so, Jay, in either of them you have brains enough—and mortal evil, too—to make your Basilisk."

"Possibly." Jay Kalam frowned doubtfully. "Though there's not a shred of evidence against any man except Chan Derron. We'll see them again, below."

When Hal Samdu had returned, with a guard of Legionnaires, to take charge of the robot for his crew of scientists, they went down again to the luxurious quarters that Gaspar Hannas had placed at their disposal. The Commander sent for Amo Brelekko.

Yellow and almost skeletal, strutting in his gaudy silks, great jewels glittering, the gambler made a fantastic figure. The insolence of his swagger, Jay Kalam thought,

must have been put on to cover a deep unease. His dark eyes shot an insanely malicious look at Giles Habibula.

"Brelekko," asked the grave Commander, "as a clever man, on the spot from the beginning, intimately acquainted with the persons involved—what is your opinion about the Basilisk?"

The hawk-face remained a bleak tense mask.

"Obviously the criminal must be an able scientist," the voiceless gambler replied. "Obviously, he knows the New Moon intimately. Obviously, also, he dislikes Gaspar Hannas. I know one man, Commander, who fits those three conditions."

"So?" wheezed Giles Habibula. "Besides yourself?"

The dark unblinking eyes darted at him, venomously.

"Who is that?" Jay Kalam prompted.

"The man who built the New Moon," rasped Brelekko. "John Comaine."

"But isn't he employed by Hannas?"

"John Comaine is the slave of Gaspar Hannas," Brelekko whispered. "I know the story—I alone, beside the two of them. A young man, a brilliant scientist but mad with the thirst for wealth, Comaine came to the battered hulk of a condemned space ship that was the first New Moon. He lost too much—money that was not his to lose. Hannas let him pay the debt with his science—and then held the new crime over him. Comaine tried at first to escape, but every effort left him deeper in the power of Hannas. Yet I think he still has the pride and the heart of a scientist. I know he first dreamed of the New Moon, Commander, not as a gambling resort, but as a super-observatory and laboratory of all the sciences, to be stationed out on Neptune's orbit. It was the ruthless power of Hannas that turned his dream of Contra-Neptune into this. Would it be very strange, Commander, if a scientist, revolting against half a lifetime of such slavery, should make his science strike back?"

"Perhaps not," Jay nodded slowly. "Thank you, Brelekko."

He detailed two plain-clothes men to shadow the gambler, and sent for John Comaine. When the engineer appeared, stiffly awkward, the square stern mask of his slightly pop-eyed face hiding any emotion, the Commander asked him the same question about the Basilisk.

Comaine shook his big blond head, impassive as a statue.

"The Basilisk is a scientist," said his flat harsh voice. "I know, Commander, because I have been attempting to set my own knowledge against his. And I have failed to match him. I have met only one mind equal in ability to the feats of the Basilisk—the mind of Dr. Max Eleroid."

"But Eleroid is dead!"

"My only suggestion, Commander," the engineer said flatly, "is that the cadaver in question was not accurately identified."

Two more operatives were sent to follow Comaine.

An orderly, in the Legion green, was admitted.

"Commander Kalam." He saluted. "We have reports from the principal stock exchanges on all the planets. As you surmised, sir, the shares and obligations of the New Moon syndicate fell precipitately with the news of what happened here—to about three per cent, in fact, of their former value.

"The financial reports confirm your belief, Commander, that a behind-the-scenes battle has been in progress for control of the syndicate. One group has now capitulated, evidently, so that the other is able to buy at its own price."

Jay Kalam nodded gravely.

"Has the buyer been traced?"

"It has always been very difficult to discover anything about the affairs of the New Moon Syndicate, sir. They are handled by very devious means. The Legion has exerted pressure, however, upon several brokers. The reports indicate, almost surely, that the buyer is Gaspar Hannas!"

"Eh?" Old Giles Habibula stated. "But Hannas is the New Moon's master, already."

"He is head of the syndicate," Jay Kalam told him. "Originally he was sole owner of the enterprise. But the cost of constructing the New Moon, while the actual sum has never been revealed, must have been staggering—far beyond the resources of Hannas. He was forced to sell a vast amount of stock, and the syndicate incurred tremendous obligations. Out of that situation comes the chief

reason for suspecting that Hannas himself is the Basilisk."

"Eh, Jay?" Giles Habibula turned pale and began to perspire. "And here we're in the New Moon, in the very clutch of his mortal power! But why Hannas, Jay?"

"Even through the cloud of legal confusion that is always kept around the dealings of the syndicate, it's clear that Gaspar Hannas was about to lose the New Moon. Now the activities of the Basilisk have enabled him to buy back control at his own price. There—in the difference between bankruptcy and the System's greatest fortune—you have motive enough, I think."

"Aye," agreed Giles Habibula. "But you said this Basilisk must be a scientist—and Gaspar Hannas is no scientist."

"But he has a very able one—if Brelekko told the truth—completely under his thumb. John Comaine." Jay Kalam rubbed abstractedly at his jaw, and then his dark eyes went abruptly to Giles Habibula. "However," he said, "all the weight of evidence still rests against Chan Derron."

"For Chan Derron took Dr. Eleroid's invention—which is probably the very scientific agency that makes possible the feats of the Basilisk. He has been connected with every crime. He was here, loaded down with concealed instruments, when little Davian was taken. And once more he has mysteriously escaped."

"I was for a long time reluctant to believe that so fine a Legionnaire as Captain Derron was, could have turned to such a monster as the Basilisk. But the presence of the female android accounts for that. It may be that Luroa was the mysterious spy who first frightened Dr. Eleroid! And then she met Chan Derron."

Somberly, his dark eyes looked far away.

"He would not be the first man degraded and destroyed by the fatal allure of those inhuman things."

"So, Jay," sighed Giles Habibula, "some of them were mortal beautiful!"

Jay Kalam's glance came back to the old man, suddenly intent.

"Giles," he said softly, "I've an idea!"

"Eh, Jay!" The fishy eyes blinked uneasily. "You're

getting too many ideas about a poor crippled old hero of the Legion, Jay."

"You are ordered, Giles, to find Chan Derron."

"But we're all looking for Derron."

"So we are." Jay Kalam's lips tightened sternly. "But I'm afraid you haven't been exerting your full capacities." His low voice lifted slightly. "Giles, as Commander of the Legion, I order you to find Derron and the woman with him. By any means you can. You will work alone—but keep in touch with us by ultrawave and call for any aid you need."

"Find the Basilisk?" Giles Habibula paled and squirmed. "How do you think—?"

"Use your own methods," Jay Kalam told him. "But you've been boasting enough of your cloudy past—you might pretend to be another criminal. Whatever you do, learn everything you can. Discover the location of the Basilisk's headquarters—find a target for the keeper of the peace. Trap Derron and the android."

Giles Habibula licked his fat blue lips. He gulped. His seamed face turned greenish-yellow, and glittered with sweat. He gasped for breath, and mopped with a trembling hand at his bald brow.

"Jay!" he wheezed at last. "Are you out of your mind? In all these years, hasn't Giles given enough to the System—aye, given all his precious genius!—without being flung into this web of fearful horror?"

His pudgy fingers quivered on Jay Kalam's arm.

"In life's name, Jay, stay your cruel command! Ah, think, Jay! Poor old Giles might be snatched from beside you at this very moment—to be found perhaps in the black Euthanasia vault, with the blade of the Basilisk in his poor dead back!"

"Remember," Jay Kalam said gravely, "that it's for the keeper."

Giles Habibula caught a sobbing breath.

"For the keeper," he wheezed, sadly. "For her, Jay—I'll go."

Then the Commander of the Legion went suddenly tense, and his lean face went a little white.

Krrr! Krrr! Krrr!

The tiny sound, peculiarly penetrating and insistent, was humming from the communicator hung by its thin chain

about his neck. The Commander's lean deliberate hands, drawing the little black disk from under his clothing, trembled slightly.

"It's Legion Intelligence," he told Giles Habibula. "An emergency call."

Giles Habibula watched apprehensively as he touched the dial, whispered a code response, and lifted the little disk to his ear. The straining ears of the old Legionnaire failed to hear anything. And the face of Jay Kalam didn't lose its grave, contained reserve. But his failure to breathe, and his frozen stiffness, betrayed enough.

"You've had bad news, Jay," whispered Giles Habibula, when at last the Commander lowered the disk and broke communication. "Aye, mortal bad!"

Jay Kalam nodded, very slowly. His lean face, beneath that one white lock on his forehead, looked the oldest that Giles Habibula had ever seen it.

"That was one of the subordinate officers calling from the depot of the cometary expedition at Contra-Saturn." His voice was very quiet. "The depot has been robbed, Giles. All our files and specimens rifled."

"Eh, Jay!" Giles Habibula blinked at him. "The secrets of the Cometeers!"

"All our most valuable—or most dangerous—notes were taken, Giles. Weapons and instrumentalities that we had planned to guard for centuries until our civilization might be mature enough to assimilate them safely. All gone!"

"Was it—the Basilisk?"

The stricken head nodded again.

"A little black clay snake was found on Bob Star's desk, inside the vaults—none of the locks on the vaults, by the way, were disturbed. As usual, there was a clue. Dropped on the floor was a yellow reservation check from the New Moon. It was dated yesterday. And the name on it was Dr. Charles Derrel."

"Derrel?" gasped Giles Habibula. "But, Jay, it isn't six hours since I picked that check out of Chan Derron's pocket—and Contra-Saturn, by the swiftest cruiser, is three days away!"

"The best proof yet," Jay Kalam said gravely, "that the Basilisk is Chan Derron." His lean hand gestured sternly. "Get him, Giles."

"But—Bob?" Giles Habibula was wheezing anxiously. "You say a subordinate was speaking? Where was Bob Star?"

The face of Jay Kalam had stiffened bleakly.

"The office said that Captain Robert Star is mysteriously missing from the depot," he said faintly. "Giles, I'm afraid Bob Star is already in the hands of the Basilisk. Alive or not—I'm afraid to guess."

Giles Habibula lifted himself laboriously to his feet with the cane.

"Bob, the poor lad!" he sobbed. "Now my duty's plain enough—but how am I to find the Basilisk?" His head shook hopelessly. "How can one poor old man track down the monster that strikes here at midnight and a billion miles away before the dawn?"

His pale eyes rolled.

"Or—in life's precious name—what if I do find him? And the mortal android? One poor old soldier, to face the System's two most frightful criminals. Aye, to face all the evil power of the Basilisk! And that woman, whose very beauty is a false mirage and a consuming flame and a poisoned blade!"

He blinked, and caught a gasping breath.

"But for all that, I must go. Farewell, Jay. Farewell! And please tell the keeper that poor old Giles Habibula was loyal to the end." He thrust out a trembling hand, and the Commander grasped it. "For it is mortal likely, Jay, that Giles Habibula will never be seen alive again."

And he waddled slowly out into the corridors of the New Moon.

11 THE UNEARTHLY ROBOT

BACK IN the rich, soft-toned simplicity of his hidden, ray-armored apartments aft the chart rooms of the mighty *Inflexible*, once more in the trim gold-and-green of his uniform, Jay Kalam sat waiting impatiently. The deep muffled song of the geodynes reached him briefly, as a door was opened. And Hal Samdu came stalking in, looking worried.

"Well, Hal?" The Commander's quiet reserve did not conceal his eagerness. "What is your report on the robot?"

The big gnarled hands of the Admiral-General laid a thick green envelope on the desk. They clenched, as he raised them, with a savage force.

"If I could only get my fingers on this Derron—" His great voice was thick with an agony of frustration. "To think, Jay, that all the Legion can give the keeper no promise of safety!"

"I know it's appalling." The Commander nodded, white-lipped. "But your report?"

"In the envelope," said Hal Samdu. "I got together twenty men, half of them veterans of the cometary expedition, all of them specialists in some field of science. They took the robot-thing apart, and studied ever piece of it, by every possible means. The lab work was finished, twelve hours ago, at base. Since, they've been discussing and checking the meaning of their discoveries, and writing up the report."

Jay Kalam leaned forward, anxiously.

"What did they find?"

Hal Samdu shook his rugged white head.

"I'm no scientist, Jay. You know that. It's all in the envelope."

"But," the Commander asked, "in brief—"

"As you surmised, Jay, it's an illegal robot. It makes use of biophysical principles forbidden in the same Green Hall statutes that outlawed the androids. The most similar illicit model in the museum was taken shortly after the war with the Medusae. It was built by a young Dr. Enos Clagg, who was run down by the Legion and sentenced to three years on Ebron."

"The details?"

Scowling with a painful effort to be clear, Hal Samdu touched one big knobby finger with another.

"First, Jay," he rumbled, "they concluded that the thing was designed by a human engineer—a man trained on Earth or Mars."

Jay Kalam nodded. "Why?"

"Because so many familiar engineering principles were used in its construction. There were none of those strange freaks of design—strange to us—that we found in the machines of the Cometeers.

"The thing was driven by an atomic power tube. There were pinions, shafts, cams, cables, levers—all used precisely as a supremely good human engineer would use them, if you set him to build a mechanical imitation of—of whatever monster the thing was copied from."

Jay Kalam was rubbing reflectively at his jaw.

"That fits Derron well enough," he said. "He took high honors in the engineering section at the academy. But, for that matter, it also fits the female android, or Hannas, or Brelekko, or Comaine. What else, Hal?"

The gigantic Captain-General bent down another gnarled finger.

"Second," he said, "they agreed that the thing was built outside the System."

Jay Kalam nodded again, without surprise. "Where?"

"On a planet somewhat larger than the Earth, they concluded, comparatively near a dying red sun—a star of the type designated as K9e. The surface gravitation of the planet is about 1250g—about one and a quarter times Earth-gravity. The atmosphere is denser than Earth's. It contains sufficient free oxygen to sustain human life—but also enough free chlorine to be very unpleasant."

The Commander was listening intently.

"The basis of those conclusions—"

"The metals of the robot, in the first place. They are

mostly aluminum and beryllium bronzes. They are alloyed according to standard metallurgical formulae. But spectrographic analysis proves that they were not smelted from any ores mined in the System. The impurities are small in quantity, yet the metallurgists declare that the evidence is conclusive.

"The deposits of corrosion, in the second place, on the body of the thing. They contained chlorides, due to the action of free chlorine. And you recall the stink of chlorine in the air, when the thing appeared?"

Jay Kalam nodded, frowning intently.

"In the third place, Jay, there is the sort of life they found in the green slime clinging to the thing. Micro-organisms of types unknown in the System. I'm no bacteriologist, and you'll find details in the report. But those are queer things. They perish, in the normal conditions of the System, for want of chlorine. And thrive on the chlorine in some of the common bactericides. Some varieties break down chlorides, and liberate free chlorine. If such organisms ever get established in the oceans of earth—" Hal Samdu's rugged face set grimly. "I hope Derron doesn't think of that!"

The Commander was asking, "What else?"

"They attacked the problem from another angle," Hal Samdu continued. "The robot-thing was obviously a mechanical reproduction of a living original. It has many features, such as the scales, beak, teeth, gill, and nostril-vents, which, being useless to a machine, prove that conclusively. And those things also tell a great deal about the alien environment in which the original lived."

Jay Kalam held up a lean hand.

"One question, Hal. Why should the robot have been copied after such an original."

"The scientists discussed that, Jay. Besides any possible intention to deceive other creatures of that world, or to mislead and terrify the people of this—"

The rugged brow of the Admiral-General furrowed with a frown of concentrated effort.

"Besides that, Jay, there is the general speculation that machines designed to operate efficiently, under any given set of conditions, must frequently follow the same principles that life has found most efficient under those condi-

tions—the very words of the report! Why don't you just read it, Jay?"

But the Commander motioned silently for him to go on.

"From the dimensions of the thing, and the amount of power provided for the functioning of its limbs and wings," Hal Samdu resumed laboriously, "particularly from the size, strength, weight and camber of the wings themselves, in relation to the total weight—from all that, the scientists arrived at fairly precise data on the atmospheric density and surface gravity.

"From a study of the cooling system, insulation, and lubricants used—all checked against the optimum temperature conditions for those chlorine-loving micro-organisms—they closely estimated the temperature of the planet.

"The photo-cells that served as eyes for the thing revealed a good deal. From their sensitivity, the adjustment of their iris diaphragms, and the nature of the color filters used, it was possible to determine very exactly the intensity and the color of light to which they were adapted—the light of a K9e sun, within a certain range of distances.

"One deduction checked against another, to verify and refine the first approximations. I've been able to give you but a clumsy sketch of it, Jay. Aye, the science of the System has become a fine and powerful instrument!"

"Too powerful," Jay Kalam said, "in the hands of the Basilisk! But what else, Hal? Anything on how the robot arrived in the New Moon—and how Davian was taken away?"

Hal Samdu shook his shaggy white head.

"There was no real evidence, Jay, but one of the geodesic physicists has a theory. He thinks the Basilisk must be using some application of the same achronic forces the visiwave does—the same sort of warp in the geodesic lines that brought Kay Nymidee out of the comet. You'll find his whole report in the envelope, but he admits that his idea is too vague to be of any practical use. With our data from the cometary expedition, we might have worked out something—but that's gone."

"Then," Jay Kalam demanded, "have you anything on the location of this star?"

"It's in the envelope, Jay," Hal Samdu continued desperately. "The astrophysicists did another remarkable

piece of work. They listed all the K9e stars in telescopic range—they are not very luminous, you know, with a surface temperature just above three thousand, and therefore the number known is relatively small.

"They checked off nearly half which are binaries, and hence could have no planets. Most of the rest were eliminated because spectrographic studies revealed no trace whatever of absorption by free atmospheric chlorine. When they were done, Jay, only one star was left.

The Commander rose abruptly. "What star is that?"

"They showed it to me in the telescope—and showed me the faint dark lines of free chlorine in the spectrograms. It's a faint red star in the constellation Draco, known as Ulnar XIV. Its distance is eighty light-years."

"Eighty light-years!" Jay Kalam's thin lips pursed. "No man has been so far—none except the Basilisk! It would take us two years to reach it, at the full power of the *Inflexible*—and we should arrive without any fuel left for action or return."

His dark head shook slowly. Thin, unconscious fingers combed the one white lock back from his forehead. His dark eyes stared at Hal Samdu, with a fixed intensity.

"Hal—" he whispered suddenly, hoarsely. "Hal—I see but one thing to do. It's a terrible thing—it is terrible for life, the child of a star, to destroy a star. And we've no certainty that even that would end the Basilisk—we may have spun our assumptions out too far."

He caught his breath, as if with an effort.

"However, I'm going to order the destruction of the star Ulnar XIV." His dark eyes closed for a moment, as if against some dreadful sight. "Another time, I waited too long—to urge the keeper to annihilate the green comet. Great as a star may be, the life of the System matters somewhat more to us."

"Aye," Hal Samdu rumbled solemnly. "Strike!"

The Commander of the Legion found the small black disk of his communicator. His thin, trembling fingers turned the tiny dials, and tapped out a code signal. His thin lips whispered into it. Hal Samdu sat watching, his face rigid as a statue's.

At last Jay Kalam lowered the instrument.

"It is unfortunate that no visiwave equipment has yet been installed on Phobos," he said. "I am communicating

direct, by ultra-wave. But Mars is now more than a hundred million miles away. It will take nine minutes for the message to reach the keeper. In ten, the star Ulnar XIV should have ceased to exist in the material universe—although terrestrial astronomers will naturally not be able to detect its disappearance for another eighty years!”

He paced a nervous turn across the end of the big silent room, beyond the desk.

“Twenty minutes,” he muttered. “Before we can get any reply—”

“What was that?”

Hal Samdu was suddenly peering about the empty room, blaster level in his big gnarled hand.

“Didn’t you hear it, Jay?” he demanded. “A muffled purr! Or feel a breath of bitter cold?”

“I heard nothing, Hal.” Jay Kalam sighed, wearily. “We’ve been under too much strain. I’ll order you something to drink. And look through the report, while we’re waiting.”

He broke the seal on the big green envelope.

“Eh!” His jaw fell slack. “This is no report.”

“But it is, Jay! It hasn’t been out of my sight.”

Out upon the desk the Commander poured a score of neatly tied packets of little yellow slips.

“These are I O U’s!” he gasped. “Payable to the New Moon Syndicate. They must have come from the vaults of Gaspar Hannas! And here—here—”

His trembling fingers had found a familiar sheet of stiff crimson parchment. It bore the serpentine monogram. Upon it, in that precise familiar script, was written:

My dear Commander:

Admiral-General Samdu’s brilliant summary has given you a sufficient idea of the genuinely brilliant work of his investigators, and I believe that circumstances will very shortly prove the document to be no longer of value to you.

The Basilisk

“Derron!” Waving the blaster, Hal Samdu was peering wildly about the great armored room. “We can’t escape him—not even here! If Giles doesn’t get him—”

Jay Kalam was still staring at the red sheet, with dull lifeless eyes, when:

Krrr! Krrr! Krrr! shrilled the tiny, piercing emergency call from his communicator. With stiff fingers he groped again for the little black disk, set the dial, and held it to his ear.

Hal Samdu, watching, saw his face grow taut and white. The instrument at last dropped out of his fingers, and he swayed over the desk, holding himself up with trembling arms.

"It wasn't the reply," Hal Samdu was rasping hoarsely. "There hasn't been time! What has happened, Jay?"

The lustreless, glazing eyes of Jay Kalam stared at him.

"The worst, Hal," he whispered. "That was a frightened bodyguard calling from Phobos—the call crossed ours. The Basilisk has struck again. This time he has taken them all. John Star. And Bob's wife and her child. And—"

He made a little shrug of hopeless defeat.

"And—the keeper of the peace!"

12 THE PLUNDERED VAULT

THAT MIGHTY, feral purr receded. The icy cold was gone. Chan Derron could breathe again. Swaying unsteadily, still on his feet, he tried to see where he was, but a smothering darkness wrapped him. His heart was hammering. His breath was a rapid gasping. Cold goose pimples still roughened his body. He had been snatched from before the menacing weapon of Vanya Eloyan, he knew, by that uncanny agency of the Basilisk—and his very vanishing, the girl would take for absolute proof that he was himself the criminal!

But now—*where was he?*

In some confined black space. His feet scraped on a metal floor, and the swift ring of the sound told him that walls were near. He stumbled forward, and his hands came upon a barrier of cold metal.

Was this the Euthanasia Clinic—and the thought drove a cold blade of panic into him—where another victim of the Basilisk had been found murdered? Was death waiting for him, in this thick darkness, now? What was *that*?

He crouched and spun. Intently he listened, but there was no sound beyond the prompt echo. His eyes strained vainly into the blackness. His hand swept instinctively toward the holster under his cloak. And then he remembered, with a sinking sickness in his heart, that the girl had disarmed him.

Something brushed his shoulder. He put up a defensive arm, and something tapped it again. He tried to quiet a pounding heart, and groped before him. His cold fingers caught a swinging pendant. He pulled at it, and a blue-white glare of atomic light blinded him.

For a moment he had to cover his eyes. And then, staring about, he blinked again in wonder. This was indeed a vault—just before him was the ponderous lock-mechanism of armored door that must have weighed two hundred tons—but in no crematorium.

For the long shelves that lined the branching narrow corridors were stacked with the heavy bags and rolls and packets that held the symbols of wealth, all neatly sorted into chips and scrip and coin and currency. And every bag and roll and packet bore the yellow crescent that was the New Moon's emblem. This, the dazed realization broke upon Chan, was the New Moon's treasure vault!

Then he noticed a curious thing. The scrip of the New Moon Syndicate, the chips used at play, and the bags of coin were all apparently intact—but upon the shelves labeled to contain Green Hall certificates, there were only stacks of rough clay bricks. The vault had been looted! What remained was almost worthless—all the real money was gone, with only mocking clay left in its place!

And his tall body went suddenly rigid and cold. For the vault would presently be opened—probably it had been locked, for safety, because of the Basilisk's promised raid. When it was opened, the Legion of Space and the New Moon police would find the man they thought they wanted—cornered.

In the silence of the vault, Chan began to wonder if the man who had put him there still watched him. His strained nerves could feel alert and hostile eyes upon him.

Imagination pictured the Basilisk laughing at him—a low thick chuckle, he thought of it, cold, diabolical, inhumanly gloating.

“Well, Mr. Basilisk?” He couldn’t stop his own wild, ragged voice from talking into the mocking silence. “What am I to do now? Sit down and cry? Tear my nails out scratching at the wall? Hang myself from the shelves? Or just let them find me?”

It was hard to keep from screaming. He paced up and down the metal floor, driven with a savage, futile energy. Apprehension painted a vague sinister presence, leering from beyond the shelves.

“Well, can you hear me?” he choked. “How does it feel to be a god, Basilisk? To watch every man in the System? To follow all who try to escape your power, wherever they go? To take what you want? And slay whom you will?”

He shook his fist, against the bare metal wall.

“It may feel pretty great—to your twisted brain— whoever you are. But you won’t last forever! For some poor devil will get you—somebody that you’ve mocked and tortured and battered until all that keeps him alive is a little voice that says *kill him, kill him, kill him!*”

“Somebody, Basilisk, like me.”

Then it happened that his aimless pacing brought him to the scrap of paper on the floor and it happened that his wildly staring eyes glimpsed the scrawled symbols on it. With a wondering exclamation, he snatched it up, smoothed it with his fingers, studied it anxiously.

A small oblong sheet, torn across one end. Scratched upon it, in hasty pencil marks, were three heliocentric space-time positions, followed by a series of numbers in which Chan could see neither relation nor meaning.

The first position designated was that of the New Moon, he recognized—the position it had occupied at the moment of that midnight on which the Basilisk had taken the little gambler, Davian.

The second position—and the thing that had first caught Chan’s eye—was a point located in the constellation Draco, at a distance of some ten billions of miles from the Sun. That was the location of the unknown object Chan had discovered when he fled northward from the Legion fleet, the object to which he had been planning

to escape when the pursuit of the Basilisk drove him to turn and fight.

The third position was also in the Dragon—but at a heliocentric elevation which Chan quickly interpreted into the amazing distance of eighty light-years.

After a few moments of study, Chan Derron slipped the crumpled scrap very hastily into the pocket of his tunic, and fervently hoped that the Basilisk wasn't looking—after all, he told himself, a presumably human brain must be limited in its power of attention.

The millions of tons of that object in space had been an utter mystery. This bit of paper seemed good evidence that it was connected with the operations of the Basilisk. And the discovery opened the faintest possible chance—

His fists were clenched.

"If I can get out," he muttered, "out of here and out of the New Moon and back to the *Phantom Atom*—if she's still safe where I left her—if I can get aboard her, and escape the Legion fleet, and get out to that object—"

His voice fell to a soundless whisper.

"If I can do all that, Mr. Basilisk—look out!"

Great shoulders square again, he strode to the lock. Its bolts and levers were uncovered for him to see—bright metal bars weighing many tons. But they were yet secure. His desperate strength and frantic eyes could discover no way to move them.

"If Giles Habibula were here—" he muttered.

Wistfully he recalled the fabulous exploits of the old Legionnaire in picking the locks of the Medusae and opening the guarded vaults of the Cometeers. Habibula, doubtless, with all this mechanism open before him, could have opened the door at once.

But Chan Derron was completely baffled.

He was standing back, panting, sweat-drenched from useless effort—when something clicked, concealed motors hummed, and the great bolts began to slide slowly back as if of their own accord.

It would be the men of Gaspar Hannas, of course, opening the vault. Chan Derron's hand flashed automatically to his armpit, to find only the empty holster of his blaster and the straps that still held the compact unit of the geopellor to his body.

Weaponless, he could only wait, watching the appalling-

ly deliberate well-oiled movement of the bolts. In the geopellor, ironically, lay power to carry him across a hundred million miles of space, but it was useless now. At last the bolts were withdrawn, and the ponderous disk of the door swung slowly open.

"Hasten, you fools!" a great harsh voice was booming. "I must see if all is safe." That must be Gaspar Hannas himself, driven wild with a well-founded fear of his treasure. "If the Basilisk can do all the things he has done, these locks are worthless."

"And there he is!" It was a triumphant shout, from a half-glimpsed man in the yellow of the New Moon's police. "Trapped!"

The violet, blinding tongue of a proton jet whipped through the widening opening. And the voice of Gaspar Hannas bellowed:

"Forward, men! We've got him! He's worth half a million—remember—dead or alive! And the woman—if she's with him—half a million more!"

Chan Derron had stepped swiftly aside, at the first flash of the ray. He waited, listening. There must be a score of men without, he knew from the little sounds of feet and breath and weapons, and they were alertly advancing. He snatched the swinging cord and snapped off the lights in the vault.

"Come out, Basilisk!" boomed the tremendous voice of Gaspar Hannas. "With empty hands! Or we'll come in and get you!"

Crouching in the darkness, Chan called a desperate last appeal:

"I'm not the Basilisk, Hannas." His voice stuck and quivered. "I'm Chan Derron. More a victim than anyone. If you'll listen to me, Hannas—"

"Forward, men!" thundered Hannas. "He admits he's Derron, and we've caught him in the vault! Burn him up!"

The door was swinging wider. Out of the darkness, Chan watched the men creeping forward. Narrowed eyes fearfully searching, proton guns uneasily ready.

He gulped and tried to still the shuddering dread in him.

"You are afraid of me," he called. "Every one of you. I can see the sweat of fear on all your faces. I can see fear

crawling in your eyes. Well, you had better be afraid. But it is the Basilisk you ought to fear, and not the man his monstrous tricks have loaded down with suspicion. I, too, am hunting the Basilisk. And now I have some information. I can help you—"

The great voice of Hannas cut him off:

"You've got too much information, Derron! But it is going to die with you. *Get him, men!*"

And the men in yellow slipped forward again.

Chan Derron caught his breath, and snatched one of the mocking clay bricks off the racks. And his fingers gripped the little black control spindle of the geopellor, at the end of the cable that ran down his sleeve.

"If you can!" he shouted. "But you won't get your treasure, Mr. Hannas! Your vault is stripped clean. Here's what the Basilisk left!"

He flung the little brick, so that it shattered against the face of the door. Fragments pelted the men beyond. Half a dozen blinding jets leapt, as nervous fingers contracted. One man, sobbing an oath of fear, dropped his weapon and ran—until an officer's swift beam cut him down.

"Empty?" came the stricken voice of Hannas. "Empty—"

This was the moment. Chan filled his lungs with breath—for the speed of the geopellor made breathing almost impossible. He squeezed and twisted the control handle. And the compact little unit on his shoulders lifted him. It flung him toward the wall of guns.

Bright proton guns flung up to stop him, but their deadly violet lances stabbed behind him. He was already driving bullet-like down one of the long corridors beneath the gaming halls.

"After him, you cowards—"

The great roaring voice of Gaspar Hannas was whisked away, upon the shrieking wind. But the rays could overtake him. Thin lines of fire cut straight to the armored wall ahead. One hissed very near, and ionized air brought Chan a stunning shock.

Teeth gritted, fighting the darkness in his reeling brain, he twisted the little spindle back and forth. The geopellor flung him from side to side, in a swift zigzag, with a savage straining force.

Greater danger awaited him at the long hall's end. Once he stopped to seek an exit, he would make a fair target

for the men behind—and the first bull's-eye worth half a million dollars.

He bent his twisting flight toward the floor, and blinked his streaming, wind-blinded eyes. And he saw a small door swing open ahead. A huge man in white filled it completely, carrying a bag of potatoes.

Chan checked his velocity a little—but perilously little—and aimed his bullet flight for the fat cook's burden. He saw the man's eyes begin to stare and widen, and he set his own body for the impact.

The geodesic field shielded him somewhat, but it was still a dazing blow. The cook was hurled flat in the doorway. And Chan, beyond him, came into a kitchen bigger than he had ever dreamed of. Acres of stoves; endless white conveyor tables loaded with dishes and food. All but deserted, now, for the New Moon was being emptied, by fear of the Basilisk.

Beyond the kitchen, in the narrow quarters of the servants, he realized that he had lost his direction. Behind him was a tumult of fear and menace. Half those who glimpsed his flight screamed and fled or hid. But another half, made daring by the magic promise of that half-million, shouted to the pursuers behind, or snatched at weapons of their own.

But the geopellor was swifter than all the hue and cry. Chan dropped upon his feet, walked breathless around the turn of a corridor, and met a yellow-capped porter hastening with a bag.

"Which way," he gasped, "to the docks?"

"That way, sir." The man pointed. "To your left, beyond the pools. But I'm afraid, sir, you'll find the ships all booked—"

His mouth fell open as Chan lifted into the air and soared over his head.

"The Basilisk!" he began to scream. "This way! To the docks!"

The pursuit followed his voice. But Chan's plunging flight had already carried him into the "hanging pools" that were one of the New Moon's novel attractions—great spheres of water, each held aloft by a gravity-plate core of its own, each illuminated with colored light that turned it to a globe of changing fire.

The swimmers had fled. Chan threaded a swift way

among the spheres. He heard an alarm siren moaning behind him. And suddenly the gravity-circuits must have been cut off, for the shimmering spheres of water turned to plunging falls.

Already, however, the geopellor had flung him over the rail of a high balcony. He burst through a door beyond, and came into the vast space at the docks. The immense floor was crowded, now, with gay-clad thousands, swept into panic by fear of the Basilisk, fighting for a place on the out-bound ships.

Leaning for a moment against the balcony door, Chan caught his breath. He must have a space suit. There were space suits in the locker rooms beyond this frightened crowd, beside the great valve where he had entered the New Moon. He could fly across the mob, he thought, in seconds and with little risk. But sight of him flying would surely turn fear to stark panic. Many would doubtless be trampled and maimed.

After a second, he went down the steps on foot, and pressed into the fighting throng. That was the longer way. It meant the danger that the valve-crew would be warned against him. Yet he could not take the other way.

It took him endless minutes to push through fringes of the crowd. He heard the distant sob of sirens, and the thunder of annunciators beating against the voice of the mob. He knew the hunt was spreading, and was uneasily aware of his head towering above all those about him.

But he came at last to the little door marked *Employees Only*, and slipped through it into the locker rooms. Here was less confusion than he found anywhere—the workers in the great sign were used to danger. He hurried to the locker where he had left his armor, stripped off his borrowed clothing, flung himself into the space suit, and strode toward the great air lock.

The inner valve was open. A crew of silver-armored technicians were just marching out. Chan entered, as the last of them came through, and made an urgent gesture to the man at the controls. That man had already stiffened, however, listening.

"Warning!" a magnetic speaker was crackling. "Close all locks—until Derron is caught. This man is now attempting to escape from the New Moon. There is a half

million reward for him, dead or alive. Derron is six feet three, believed—”

Chan saw quick suspicion change to deadly certainty in the eyes of the valve-keeper. He heard the beginning of a shout and caught the glint of weapons. But the geopellor was already lifting him toward the lock. His bright-clad fist shattered the glass over the emergency lever—intended to be used only if the great valve was closing on a man's body. He pulled down the lever.

The gate before him flung open, as the one behind automatically clanged shut in the face of pursuit. A blast of air spewed him out. The geopellor stopped his spinning flight, and brought him up to the platform where he had landed. He found the wire marked Sector 17-B, snapped the belt of his suit to it, and squeezed the little spindle. The geopellor flung him out along the wire.

Five hundred miles to go. The great sign spread its web about him, silver wires shining bright against the dark of space. Great mirrors flashed against the sun; filters glowed red and blue and green. He glimpsed the gibbous Earth, huge and mistily brilliant, so near that he felt he could almost touch the ragged white patch that was a cyclonic storm over Europe.

Five hundred miles—but he pushed the geopellor to a reckless pace, for a warning must be flashing out, he knew, over the wires about him. In four minutes—no more—he had released himself from the pilot wire, beside the silver ball of the control house.

His searching eyes found the *Phantom Atom*. The tiny ship was safe, still hidden behind the great foil mirror. The geopellor carried him to its valve and he flung himself inside.

The first intimation of disaster came when he saw that the prisoner he had left there, space armor welded to the housing, was gone. His heart stood still. Was this some new trick of the Basilisk? He opened the inner valve, and came face to face with a man waiting for him in the corridor.

A very short fat man, with protruding middle and bald spherical head and wrinkled yellow skin. The same man—no mistaking him!—whom Jay Kalam had sent to pick his pockets in the Diamond Room. The intruder was blinking ominously, with pale small eyes. His fat hands held a thick

cane pointing at Chan's body—and a deadly little black orifice was visible in the ferrule that tipped it.

"Come on in, Mr. Basilisk!" he wheezed triumphantly. "And match your mortal wits against Giles Habibula!"

13 THE HUNDREDTH MAN

HOPE CAME to the Legion with the first ultrawave message from Giles Habibula. Uncharacteristically laconic, it ran: *Aboard Derron's ship. Bound for mysterious object near Thuban in Draco. For life's sake, follow!*

And the Legion followed. Jay Kalam put the mighty *Inflexible* at the head of Hal Samdu's fleet of ten geodesic cruisers. At full power they reached northward, toward Alpha Draconis—which once had been the pole star of Earth. Toward what destination?

Every officer in the fleet was trying to answer that question. Every electronic telescope and mass detector was driven to the utmost of its power searching for any mysterious object. By the time they were one day out from the New Moon, part of the answer had been discovered.

Jay Kalam, tired and pale from the long strain of the chase, restlessly pacing the deep-piled rugs of his sound-proofed and ray-armored chambers in the heart of the *Inflexible*, paused at the signal from his communicator, and lifted the little black disk to his ear.

"We've found it, Commander!" came an excited voice from the bridge. "Forty-four minutes of arc from Alpha Draconis. It's still invisible—albedo must be very low. But the mass detectors indicate an object of nearly twenty million tons.

"A puzzling thing, Commander. This object, whatever it is, must be a newcomer to the System. We estimate the distance from the sun at a little less than ten billion miles.

Any object of that size would surely have been discovered by the Legion's survey expedition, five years ago—if it had been there then!"

Jay Kalam put the communicator to his lips.

"Can you identify the object?"

"Not yet," came the reply. "Until we can pick it up on the screens, we won't know whether it's just a rock—or something else."

"Keep tele-periscopes focused on the spot," Jay Kalam ordered. "And use every instrument to search space ahead of us, until we pick up Derron's ship. Keep communications standing by for another message from Giles Habibula, and the vortex gun ready for action."

Shift and changing shift, the gun crew stood ready about the ponderous weapon. In every observatory on every racing ship, men searched the dark void amid the stars of the Dragon ahead. And the communications men waited for further word from Giles Habibula.

But the weary Commander of the Legion, sleeplessly pacing the silent empty luxury of his apartments upon the flagship, restlessly combing his white forelock back with anxious thin hands, received other messages. They came by visiwave from the System behind—for the hard-driven fleet was already beyond the range of ultrawave communication. Their import was all of alarm.

The first message came from the captain in charge of the plain-clothes men who had been detailed to shadow the three suspects on the New Moon—Emo Brelekko and John Comaine and Gaspar Hannas. All three had vanished.

"John Comaine mysteriously disappeared from his laboratory, with two of our men on duty outside the only door," the report stated. "Gaspar Hannas had locked himself in his empty treasure vault. His scream for aid was heard by communicator. When associates opened the vault, he was gone. Emo Brelekko was removed from the floor of the Diamond Room, as the little gambler Davian had been—and in his place, before the few appalled spectators left on the New Moon to see it, was dropped a decaying human skeleton which has been identified as that of a female android."

That made little sense to Jay Kalam. He pondered the implications of it, and then dispatched a message to the

captain, asking for further information. The reply, relayed from Rocky Mountain Base, informed him that this officer had now also vanished.

Krrr! Krrr! Krrr!

The penetrating beat of his emergency signal announced the next message, and he heard the ragged voice of a distraught Legion Intelligence officer reading a note from Lars Eccard, Chairman of the Green Hall Council. All sixty members of the Council had been threatened with abduction, by the Basilisk. No ransom was demanded, and no escape was offered—

“Chairman Eccard’s dictation was interrupted at that point,” the shaken voice continued. “Staff members rushed into his chambers and found him gone. Reliable reports from subordinate officers already confirm rumors that every member of the Council has disappeared.”

The whole Green Hall—kidnapped! Staggered by that blow, Jay Kalam slumped heavily behind his desk. Those sixty men and women had formed the supreme government of the System. The chosen representatives of the local planetary governments, of capital and labor, of the various professions and sciences—they had all been snatched away.

“Why?” The tired red eyes of the Commander stared across his great empty desk, at the black bunkhead. “Why take them?”

With an uncanny promptness that startled him, the beat of his emergency signal answered. What he heard, when he put the communicator to his ear, was a rasping whisper, distorted in transmission.

“I’ll tell you why, Commander,” it mocked him. “I took them because I want the System to know my power. I want every man on every planet to shudder and grow pale when he thinks of the Basilisk. I want men to look on me as they once regarded angry gods.

“For I have suffered injuries that must be avenged.

“To establish my new supremacy, I am taking one hundred men and women from the System. They have been the leaders of the foolish attempt to destroy me, and therefore I can deal with them without compunction. I shall use them without remorse for the text of a lesson to mankind. One, out of the hundred, will be allowed to

survive and return, to bring that lesson to the rest of mankind."

An unpleasant chuckle rasped from the instrument.

"One hundred, Commander!" croaked that thin, mad voice. "You already know the most of them. Aladoree, the keeper of the peace. John Star. Bob Star, and his wife and their child. A few more of your most conspicuous Legionnaires. Two dozen private individuals—among them three men from the New Moon, Hannas and Comaine and Brelekko. The sixty members of the Green Hall Council—to let them consider all they have done to the Purples."

The humming whisper gave way again to that sardonic chuckle, Jay Kalam's hand tensed and trembled on the little black disk, and his aching body was cold with sudden sweat.

"The total now is ninety-nine," that husky rasping ran on. "I need one more to complete my hundred. Knowing the other ninety-nine, Commander Kalam, I need not tell you who the other is to be."

With that, the humming whisper ceased. Jay Kalam dropped the Communicator. His swift hand snatched the blaster from his belt; he spun to search the empty room—knowing all the time that such precautions were futile.

Nothing happened, however, in the long moment that he held his breath. He made himself holster the weapon again, and groped for the communicator to call Rocky Mountain Base, now a billion miles behind and more, through the visiwave relay.

"Did you pick up that message?" he asked hoarsely. "Is triangulation possible?"

And back across that void, that light would have taken many hours to bridge, the voice of the operator came instantly, consternation not hidden by its humming distortion.

"We heard it, Commander. But triangulation was impossible—because the message was transmitted from our own station! We haven't yet discovered how our transmitter circuits picked it up. But guard yourself, Commander Kalam. You got the threat against yourself?"

"I did," Jay Kalam said. "If I am kidnapped, Hal Samdu will take my place and the Legion will carry on."

He dialed off, called Hal Samdu on the *Bellatrix*, and

told that veteran spaceman of these disastrous new developments.

"Draw up beside the *Inflexible*, Hal," he said, "and come aboard. You will take command if I become the hundredth man."

"Aye, Jay." The rumble of Hal Samdu came thinned and furred through the communicator. "But what of Giles—have you heard anything?"

"Not yet," Jay Kalam told him.

"I'm afraid for Giles, Jay." The deep voice seemed hoarse with alarm. "It's true he's an old man, now, and not so clever as he used to be. This Derron is powerful and desperate—and it's a whole day, now, since we heard anything."

Jay Kalam lowered his communicator, with a helpless shrug—and instantly the throb of the emergency signal bade him take it up again. He touched the dial, and put the little black disk to his ear.

"Jay! Do you hear me, Jay?" It was the long-awaited voice of Giles Habibula, thinned, muffled with the hum of the instrument, and hoarse with some desperate anxiety.

"I do, Giles," he said into the little disk. "What is it?"

"Turn back, Jay," came the faint, wheezing voice. "For life's sake, turn your fleet back to the System. Call off your bloodhounds of space, and leave us be."

"Turn back?" cried Jay Kalam. "Why?"

"Ah, Jay, there's been a monstrous error. This is not the Basilisk I've caught. My companion is but an honest, luckless man. And your chase is a fearful blunder, Jay. It is drawing you far out into space, and leaving the System defenseless.

"In Earth's name, Jay, I beg you to turn back."

"Giles!" the Commander shouted. "If you're speaking under torture—"

A dead click told him that the other instrument had been dialed off. He was trying to call back when the softer note of the ship's signal rang. He heard the excited voice of the executive officer.

"We've got it, Commander! Derron's ship. Dead ahead, toward that object in Draco. Only forty tons—which is why it took us so long to pick it up. But it has power enough, apparently, to hold its lead. We have the range. What is your order?"

Jay Kalam's hand tightened on the communicator. A cold wind seemed to blow around him, blowing away the ship, and blowing away the years. He saw Giles Habibula, a stout little man, strutting, grinning, as he had been when they were privates together. He knew Habibula was on the ship ahead. But the rushing of that wind became the rusty whisper of the Basilisk, jeering at him. No man, not even a friend, could be weighed against his duty to the Legion.

"Do you hear me, Commander?" the executive officer was insisting. "What is your order?"

Jay Kalam slowly closed his eyes, and opened them again. His lean hand made a slow salute. Low and forced, his voice said:

"Fire at once with the vortex gun. Destroy the vessel ahead."

Samdu's battleship, the long *Bellatrix*, was slipping in beside the mighty flagship when the first vortex was fired. Watching through the ports of an air lock, the Admiral-General saw the great blinding knot of atomic disruption spinning out ahead, flaming wider as its expanding fields of instability consumed all the matter in its reach.

"Well, Mr. Derron," the gigantic spaceman muttered with a grim satisfaction, "or Mr. Basilisk—now let's see you get away!"

Hard-driven geodynes were pushing the two colossal ships through space—or, more accurately, around it—at effective speeds far beyond the velocity of light. But they came together so gently that their crews could feel no shock. Air valves were joined and sealed. And Hal Samdu stalked impatiently aboard the great flagship.

"Quick!" he boomed to the officers who received him. "Take me to Commander Kalam at once."

But, when swift elevators and moving cat-walks had brought them to the hidden door behind the chartroom, the Commander of the Legion failed to answer their signal.

The alarmed executive officer came to unlock the armored door. Hal Samdu stalked ahead into the soft-lit luxurious apartments of Jay Kalam. Silence met him, and emptiness. The Commander of the Legion was gone.

"Poor old Jay," rumbled Hal Samdu. "The hundredth man!"

He turned abruptly upon the officers about him.

"Derron's ship is still in range? Then fire again with the vortex gun. Keep firing till you get it."

14 MAN AND 14 ANDROID

FACING GILES HABIBULA in the narrow space within the valve of the *Phantom Atom*, Chan Derron caught his breath. Still he was weaponless—and the black tiny hole in the tip of the old man's level cane looked at him like a deadly eye.

"Habibula?" his startled voice echoed. "Not the great Giles Habibula?"

Chan was weaponless—but the heavy little pack of the geopellor was still strapped to his shoulders, its control spindle still gripped in his hand. It could make a living projectile of his body. His hand began to close.

"Wait, lad!"

The old man lowered the menacing cane. His fishy eyes rolled fearfully and his wheezing voice was hoarse with a desperate appeal.

"For life's sake, lad, forget your mortal tricks. There's no need for you to crush old Giles Habibula to a bloody pulp with your blessed geopellor. For he's no enemy, lad. Ah, no! He comes to you as a precious friend!"

Chan Derron studied the old man with a grim suspicion. And then he saw, behind Giles Habibula, the money stacked on the deck. Thick packets of new Green Hall certificates, bound into great bales and piled high against the bulkheads. The wrapper on every packet was printed with a yellow crescent. Here was the treasure of Gaspar Hannas, taken from the New Moon's vaults!

His hand jerked tense on the little black spindle.

"You aren't—" he gasped hoarsely. "You aren't the Basilisk?"

Giles Habibula quivered. The seamed moon of his face

turned slightly green. He caught a croaking, asthmatic breath.

"No, lad!" he gulped. "In life's name—no! I'm just a poor old soldier. Ah, but a hunted fugitive, lad. A friendless deserter from the Legion."

"Deserter, eh?" The dark-stained eyes of Chan Derron narrowed. "If you really are the famous Giles Habibula, why should you desert? And what are you doing here?"

Giles Habibula blinked his colorless eyes.

"Thank you, lad," his thin voice quavered. "Ah, so, lad, from the bottom of my failing old heart, I thank you for calling me famous. For the Legion has forgotten me, lad."

He wiped his eyes with the back of a fat hand.

"Once old Giles Habibula was the hero of the Legion," he sighed. "Aye, of the whole precious System. For his noble courage, lad, and his blazing genius, have twice saved the very life of mankind—once from the hateful Medusae, and again from the frightful Cometeers. And what reward has he got, lad?"

He choked and sobbed and gasped for breath.

"A beggar's reward, lad. Old Giles is forgotten. His precious medals tarnish in a box. The few miserable dollars they gave him are all drunk up. A lonely, hopeless old soldier, dying on the ungrateful charity of those who had been friends—ah, lad, but life was mortal black—until he heard of your exploits!"

A brighter look came over his yellow face.

"Ah, so, lad!" he cried. "You're the sort that old Giles was, in the days when he was young. A bold man, aye! Reckless and dashing. Not caring whether he drove to sunward of the law, or to spaceward. Taking his wine and his gold and his love wherever he found them! Ah, lad, old Giles has come to you, to beg you to help him find his own lost youth."

The hand of Chan Derron tightened again on the spindle.

"Don't lad!" gasped Giles Habibula. "Don't—for life's sake. It's known to all the Legion that you're the Basilisk. Ah, so, and that's a thing of which you should be precious proud—to stand alone against the law of all the planets, and mock the Legion of Space."

Chan Derron shook his head, protestingly.

"But I'm not the Basilisk," his voice broke hoarsely. "I'm just his victim. He has planted a hundred bits of evidence, to pin suspicion on me. Look at this money taken from the vaults of Hannas."

Giles Habibula nodded, and his yellow face broke into a happy smile.

"Ah, so lad!" he wheezed. "Look at it—millions and millions of dollars. Enough to keep a man in wine and women and luxury for a whole lifetime. Or two men, when the life of one is already run to the end. Shall we take off with our loot? Ah, it will be like the old days, lad—living in flight from the Legion?"

The eyes of Chan Derron narrowed to an accusing stare.

"You admit you were an outlaw in the old days," he muttered. "You're famous for your way with locks. And you have learned all the scientific tricks of the Medusae and the Cometeers. I believe *you* are the Basilisk, Giles Habibula."

"Life, no lad!" The old man turned pale. "Don't think that—"

"If you aren't," rapped Chan Derron, "tell me one thing: how did you find the *Phantom Atom*, when all the Legion failed?"

"Easy, lad," wheezed Giles Habibula. "Among the keys I lifted from Dr. Charles Derrel in the Diamond Room, was one stamped: *Controlhouse 17-B-285*. One question told me that the mirror that motor turns was out of order. That's how I knew where to meet you. But surely, lad, you don't think—"

Soberly, Chan Derron shook his head.

"I believe you're hunting the Basilisk," he said. "So am I. And I've a clue—which is more than I believe the Legion has—besides those the Basilisk has planted to pin his crimes on me. You may come with me, if you like."

The small leaden eyes blinked at him, blankly.

"I told you, lad, that I came to seek the Basilisk," Habibula wheezed at last. "If you are not the monster—and if you can take me to him—then I'll go with you."

Chan gestured briefly toward the compact living apartments aft.

"Make yourself at home," he said. "I am going forward. We have got to slip out of the sign, and elude the

fleet, and get to an object I have discovered near Thuban, in Draco. We've cathode plates enough to reach it, but not to return. I shall expect you to stand a watch, later."

"Ah, so, lad. You can depend on Giles Habibula."

Chan Derron went up into the pilot bay, and Giles Habibula waddled back into the galley. There, preparing an extravagant meal out of the slender stock of supplies he found, he made an immense deliberate clatter of pots and pans.

Presently his deft pudgy fingers tuned the visiwave relay hidden under his cloak. Keeping up the noise to cover his voice, he put the communicator disk to his lips and dispatched his first brief message to Commander Kalam:

"Aboard Derron's ship. Bound for mysterious object near Thuban in Draco. For life's sake, follow!"

He finished getting the meal, tasting copiously from every dish, and carried a loaded tray forward to the pilot bay. Chan Derron was towering in that tiny space, concentrated on instruments and controls. His great hand motioned Giles Habibula impatiently back.

"What's the trouble, lad?" the old man demanded.

"We've a race on." Chan Derron's intent eyes didn't look away from the controls. "Samdu's fleet picked us up. We'd outrun them if we had enough margin of fuel. As it is—I don't know. But leave me alone."

Giles Habibula shrugged philosophically, and carried the tray back to the galley. Deliberately, he demolished its contents, belched and yawned, and looked hopefully about the shelves.

"A mortal pity," he sighed, "that the Basilisk didn't use his fearful magic to pick us up a few bottles of wine. If he'll let me join him—I know a few good, well-guarded cellars—aye, vintages five centuries old—that his instrument might reach."

He pried himself upright again with the cane, labored aft, and tumbled into one of the tiny staterooms. Soon a series of softer sounds rose against the keen hum of the hard-driven geodynes: whistle and flutter and sob and moan, whistle and flutter and sob and moan—the snore of Giles Habibula.

When the regularity of those new sounds had become well established, another person slipped out of the rear-most of the four tiny cabins. A woman. The quick grace

of her tall slim body spoke of unusual strength. Platinum-colored hair framed a face of surpassing loveliness. Alertly watchful, her clear eyes were violet.

Moving with no sound audible above the hastening song of the geodynes and the snoring of Giles Habibula, she went swiftly forward. One slender hand clung near a singular jewel, like a great white snow-crystal, that hung from her throat. And the other, with a practiced and familiar grip, held a proton blaster of the newest Legion design.

She came to the little opening in the bulkhead behind the pilot bay, and stood watching Chan Derron, with the ready weapon leveled at his heart. His broad back was toward her, his whole big body was tense. He seemed absorbed in his task. His great hands moved deftly over the controls as he fought to drag from power cells and geodynes the last possible quantum of energy.

For a long time she watched him.

Once a telltale flashed suddenly. Chan Derron started. His big hands moved convulsively, and the steady musical note of the geodynes rose higher in the scale.

"In tomorrow's name!" she heard him mutter. "For one more ton of cathode plates—"

An unwilling little glisten had come into her eyes. Her blond head flung angrily. She caught her breath, and lifted the blaster. He would never even know.

But the Basilisk ought to know. All his crime had earned a long, long taste of the bitterness of death. She let the blaster sink again and watched. Telltales and detectors told her that the fleet was in pursuit. Set up on the keyboard of the calculator, she could read the destination of the *Phantom Atom*—a point in Draco, ten billion miles from the sun. And every taut movement of Chan Derron reminded her that this was a desperate race.

What was located at the point? And why the haste to reach it? Her pressure on the blaster's release would destroy all hope of answering those questions. That was the only reason, the girl told herself, that she must wait. But she turned suddenly, and went swiftly and soundlessly back down the corridor, toward the cabin where she had been concealed.

The whistle and flutter and sob and moan of Giles Habibula's snoring had never faltered. But, the instant af-

ter the girl had passed his cabin door, it ceased abruptly, and a wheezing voice softly advised:

"Stop, lass, right where you stand."

The girl spun very swiftly, the proton gun leaping up in her hands. She found Giles Habibula standing out in the corridor. His thick cane was leveled at her body, and her own weapon dropped from the look in his slate-colored eyes.

"Ah, thank you, lass," he sighed. "It would be a shameful pity to destroy a thing as lovely as you are. And I beg you not to force my hand. For I know you, lass. Old Giles could never forget the mortal beauty of Luroa."

Something swift and cold and deadly flashed in the violet eyes. The blaster jerked again in the girl's strong hand. But it was met by an instant motion of the cane. Her reply was a smile—so lovely that the old man blinked and gasped.

"And I know you," her smooth voice said. "You are Giles Habibula. I don't think any other man could have caught me as you did."

The yellow face beamed at her.

"Ah, so, I am Giles Habibula. Aye, and forty years ago you would have heard my name—or a dozen of my names—in the underworlds of every planet. For Giles Habibula, in the old days, was as great an operator—as bold and clever and successful—as you have been in yours, Luroa.

The girl still smiled her dazzling and inscrutable smile.

"But now it seems that the two of us," wheezed Giles Habibula, "are after another outlaw as great as we have been—greater, aye, unless we prove otherwise by catching him."

His flat leaden eyes blinked at her.

"Shall we join forces, lass?" he asked. "Until we have destroyed the Basilisk." His round yellow head jerked aft, toward Chan Derron in the pilot bay. "With my own precious genius," he said, "and with the deadly cunning and the fearful strength and the mortal beauty that Eldo Arrynu gave to you—ah, no, lass, with all of them we cannot fail."

He peered at her, anxiously.

"If you will join me, lass—man and android, against the Basilisk!"

For an instant the girl's white loveliness had seemed frozen, so that the wonder of her smile seemed a hollow, painted thing. But then her face abruptly softened. She slipped the blaster into a holster that her furs concealed, and held out a strong slender hand to Giles Habibula.

"I'm with you, Giles," she said, "until the Basilisk is dead." And the old Legionnaire wondered at a difference in her voice. Somehow it seemed naive, bewildered, troubled—somehow like a child's. "Come, Giles," she said, and beckoned toward the cabin where she had hidden. "There's something I must tell you."

15 THE DREADFUL ROCK

THE ROCK, black and naked, broke a lonely sea. The sea had a muddy, green-black color, cut with long strips of floating yellow-red weed. Its surface had an oily, glistening smoothness. The sky above it was a smoky, greenish blue. And the luminary that rose very slowly in it, baking the rock under merciless rays, seemed larger than the sun. It presented an enormous crimson disk, pocked with spots of darkness. The infra-red predominated in its radiation, so that its dull light brought a sweltering heat.

Upon the summit of the rock, an uneven granite bench not fifty yards in length, were crowded one hundred men and women. Their bodies were slowly cooking under the unendurable rays of that slowly rising sun. They were parched with thirst, for the ocean about them was an undrinkable brine. And they all were coughing, strangling, weeping, gasping with respiratory distress, for the green in the air was free chlorine.

They were the hundred the Basilisk had taken.

The last arrival, Jay Kalam, remembered hearing a

sudden, queerly penetrating purr, as he stood in his chamber aboard the *Inflexible*. A resistless force dragged him into a frightful chasm of airless cold. But even before the breath could go out of him, light came back—the dull sinister radiation of this dying star. The feral purr receded, and he found himself sprawling on this barren rock.

Chlorine burned his lungs. A savage gravitation dragged at his body. Heat struck him with a driving, blistering force. And he was sick with an utter hopelessness of despair.

“Commander Kalam!” choked a voice. “You?”

It was Lars Eccard, the abducted chairman of the Green Hall Council, red-eyed and gasping, who aided him to his feet. He peered with smarting eyes about the bare summit of the rock, and saw many that he knew—even bent as they were with continual coughing and masked inadequately against the toxic gas with scraps of dampened rags tied over their nostrils.

He saw Bob Star and a few other Legionnaires who had been taken, standing guard with their blasters on the highest points of the rock. And beyond them, wheeling and soaring and diving in the poison yellow-green haze that hung upon the poison sea, he glimpsed a dozen living originals of the monstrous robot that had appeared in the Diamond Room of the New Moon.

“They have attacked many times, Commander,” rasped Lars Eccard, beside him. “Thus far we have always beaten them off, but all the weapons are nearly dead.”

“I have my own blaster.”

Jay Kalam touched his weapon, but the lean old statesman shook his head.

“It will help, Commander.” He paused to cough and sob for breath. “But not for long. For the tide is rising. Already, since dawn, it has come up a hundred feet. Another hundred will cover the rock. And there are things in the water more deadly than those in the sky.”

Jay Kalam climbed a little higher on the rock, with Lars Eccard stumbling behind him. All the haggard, white-masked faces he saw were familiar to him, for these were the hundred foremost citizens of the System.

A woman lay on a little shelf of stone. Improvised bandages covered her arms and shoulders. A small golden-

haired girl knelt beside her, sobbing. Her bandaged hand patted the child's head.

"That is Robert Star's wife," said Lars Eccard. "One of the winged monsters snatched her up. She was almost beyond the cliffs, before Bob killed it. It dropped her, and fell into the sea. The things that dragged it under the water were terrible indeed."

A fit of coughing seized Jay Kalam. It left him breathless, trembling, blinded. His lungs were on fire. Lars Eccard tore a scrap off his tunic, and gave it to him.

"Wet this, Commander," he said. "Tie it around your face. Water absorbs chlorine."

On a higher ledge, they came upon a dozen men and women kneeling in a circle. All wore the rude masks, and one or another of them was always coughing. But they seemed to ignore the flesh-corroding death they breathed, and the black-winged death that wheeled and screamed above them, the crimson death of heat that beat down from the immense and lazy sun, and the manifold and hidden death beneath the acid, monster-infested sea that rose inexorably about the rock. Each had before him a little heap of pebbles, and their red half-blinded eyes were upon a pair of dancing dice.

Lars Eccard looked down at them and shrugged.

"If it helps them to forget—"

Gaspar Hannas was the banker at that game. His broad face, beneath its yellow-stained mask, showed a slow and senseless smile. And the same eagerness moved his great white hands to draw in the pebbles he won, as if they had been diamond chips on the tables of his own New Moon.

John Comaine, the big blond engineer, did not play. He squatted across from Hannas. His long square face had a wooden impassive look, and his glassy protruding eyes were fixed upon his old employer with what seemed a well-suppressed hostility. Beside him was the queer, box-like instrument he had set up on the New Moon to detect the mysterious agency of the Basilisk.

Emo Brelekkko was rolling the dice. A white handkerchief covered half his face, but otherwise he seemed unchanged since the Diamond Room. His gaudy garments looked immaculate. The rays of the low red sun splintered

from his jewels. His thin yellow hands manipulated the cubes with a deft and incredible skill.

For all that old skill, however, he rolled and lost. The winner, whose thin nervous hands snatched eagerly for the pebbles, was a little gray wisp of a man whose stooped and tattered figure seemed vaguely familiar. He set the play down in a little black book, and then tapped swiftly at the keys of a compact, silent little calculating machine. And suddenly Jay Kalam knew him. He was Abel Davian, the little gambler the Basilisk had taken from the New Moon's Diamond Room.

The yellow-stamped money bag, that must still hold the twenty million dollars of his fatal winnings, lay disregarded on the rock beside him. But he pushed out a handful of black pebbles, and took the dice from Brelekko. Perspiration rolled from his shrunken skin, as he shook the cubes, and threw. He lost, and bent again with a worried frown to his calculator.

"Strange animals, men," muttered Lars Eccard.

Beyond in a shallow rocky cup that John Star guarded, they discovered his wife, Aladoree. She was kneeling, her proud slight body shaken ever and again with paroxysms of dreadful coughing. Her quick hands were busy with some odd little instrument on the ledge before her, improvised from stray bits of wood and metal. She looked up, and saw Jay Kalam. A weary little greeting smiled above her mask, but he saw the death of a hope in her eyes.

"We had expected to see you, Jay," came John Star's hoarse voice. "But on the *Inflexible*."

Jay Kalam looked down at the crude simplicity of the half-completed instrument. This harmless-seeming toy, he knew, was the supreme weapon of mankind, capable of sweeping any known target out of existence. He breathed the symbol of its power:

"AKKA?"

The coughing woman who was the keeper of it shook her head.

"The instrument isn't finished," she whispered. "The parts for it that I was wearing, disguised as jewels, have been taken from me. We haven't found materials enough. I need wire for the coil."

Jay Kalam fumbled for the small black disk of his

ultrawave communicator. "Perhaps the parts of this will help."

"Perhaps." The haggard woman took it from him. "But even if the instrument is completed, I don't see how it can serve us. For the Basilisk's identity, and the seat of his strange power, are still unknown. We don't even know where we are."

"But we can guess," Jay Kalam told her. "We made a fairly conclusive identification of the star from which the Basilisk's peculiar robot came. From the abundance of free chlorine here, and the appearance of the sun above—it is pretty obviously type K9e—I believe that this is the same star. That means that our own sun ought to be eighty light-years southward. When night comes, so that we can see the constellations and the Milky Way—"

"When night comes," John Star broke in huskily, "we won't be here. The tide floods this rock."

"In that case—"

Jay Kalam choked and coughed. It was a long time before he could catch his strangling breath, and see again. He looked soberly, then, at the tortured man and the wan-faced woman before him. They were waiting, very grave.

"In that case," he whispered again, "I see but one thing that we can do. A very desperate thing. But it offers the only hope there is."

"Jay—" John Star gulped. "You don't mean—"

The grim dark eyes of the Commander met the patient, luminous gray ones of the keeper.

"If you can complete the instrument," he told her quietly, "I think you must use it immediately to destroy this sun, this planet, everything in this stellar system. Even ourselves."

The woman's fine head nodded gravely.

"I'll do that," she said. Her quick hands were turning the little disk of the communicator. "And the parts of this," she told him, "will supply everything I need."

"Wait," croaked John Star. "First—couldn't we use it to report our position and our plight? There's still the Legion—"

The Commander shook his head.

"This is just an ultrawave unit," he said. "With no visiwave relay, it would take eighty years for our call to

reach the System, and eighty years for the answer to come back—and there's no receiver anywhere sensitive enough to pick up the signals. Even the visiwave relay, that filled a whole room on the *Inflexible*, had a maximum theoretical range of less than half a light-year.

"No, John. I think our only hope—"

Krrr! Krrr! Krrr!

The tiny, piercing beat of the emergency signal checked him. It came from the instrument he had handed Aladoree. Wonderingly, she gave it back. What he heard, when he put it to his ear, was the muted and distorted whisper of the Basilisk.

"My dear Commander," it said, "I am forced to interfere with your reckless sacrificial scheme. For quick annihilation from the keeper's weapon is not what I had planned for ninety-nine of you. I prefer to let you live long enough to pay for all the insults and injuries that have been heaped upon me. I want to give you time to realize that the person who suffered so long as the smallest and the most scorned of men is now the greatest—the Basilisk. And when you know the truth, when you have made adequate atonement, I want to watch you perish in the manner I shall choose.

"As for the hundredth man," that gloating whisper continued, "his death by AKKA would spoil my victory. For I intend to return him alive to the System, to tell mankind of my sweet revenge. You may assure your companions—if you wish to revive their hopes—that one of them is destined to survive."

The whisper ceased. Jay Kalam dropped the little instrument, and stared about the bare black rock. He saw the little circle of kneeling men and women, still intent upon their game of futile chance. He saw Bob Star's wife, who had been Kay Nymidee, rising weakly to take their sobbing little child into her arms. He saw Bob Star himself, a lean lonely figure at the end of the rock, standing guard against the monstrous winged things that soared and dived upon the wind beyond.

"I wonder—" He choked and coughed and gasped for breath. "I wonder if the Basilisk isn't somewhere near, with his base and whatever equipment he uses. Because we got his voice by ultrawave, without any relay."

The choked little gasp from Aladoree brought his eyes

back to her haunted, stricken face. Her slender arm was pointing, trembling. And Jay Kalam saw that the half-completed instrument of AKKA was gone from the bench of rock before her. In its place was a little black serpent, crudely shaped of clay.

16 THE GEOFRACTOR

“BUT I AM not Luroa.”

The violet-eyed girl had closed the door of the tiny cabin upon the racing *Phantom Atom*, and now the keen endless whine of the hard-driven geodynes came but faintly to her and Giles Habibula.

“Eh, lass?” The old man blinked his colorless eyes. “But you are!”

Perched earnestly on the edge of the narrow bunk in front of him, for his mass overran the only chair, the girl flung back the lustrous mass of her platinum hair, and peered gravely back into the old soldier’s face.

“I’m no android, Giles Habibula,” she insisted. “I’m as human as you are. I’m Stella Eleroid. I’m the daughter of Dr. Max Eleroid—who was murdered by the Basilisk.”

A cold light flashed in her violet eyes, and her white face was hardened with a grimness of purpose that seemed to freeze its beauty into marble.

“When I knew the Legion had failed,” her cold, low voice ran on, “I set out to track down this killer and to recover the geofractor—that was his last and greatest invention, the thing that Derron killed him for.”

“Geofractor?” echoed Giles Habibula. “What in life’s name is that?” He lurched ponderously forward, his small eyes squinting into her face. “But you’re Luroa, lass,” he insisted. “I saw your picture on the posters. There’s a difference in your eyes and your hair, and I’ll grant you to be a gorgeous actress—but you’ll never fool old Giles.”

“I can explain.”

With an impatient gesture, the girl caught his massive shoulder. The old man looked a long time into the white, taut beauty of her face, and at last all the doubt melted from his eyes as he smiled.

"You see, Giles," she said, "my father and Dr. Arrynu were boyhood friends. They roomed together at Ekarhenium. Each had a vast respect for the abilities of the other. My father used to say that if Arrynu had chosen to live within the law, he could have been the greatest biologist or the greatest artist in the System. Sometimes, during his long exile, Arrynu paid secret visits to the earth, and my father always entertained him. I think he hoped until the end to persuade Arrynu to give up his illicit researches and turn his gifts to something better."

She paused for an instant, biting her full lip.

"I had admired him, since I was a girl," she continued more slowly. "And on his last clandestine visit, he—well, discovered me. He had always ignored me before, but this time I was older. Seventeen. He began making violent love to me. He was a vigorous and passionate man. The romance of his outlaw life had always intrigued me. He told me about the luxuries and the beauties of the uncharted asteroid where he had his secret stronghold, and begged me to go back with him.

"And I would have gone. I was young enough—insane enough. I thought I loved him." Her gray eyes looked beyond Giles Habibula, and for a moment she was silent. "I've sometimes wished I had gone. In spite of everything he did, Eldo was the greatest man I've known—except, perhaps, my father.

"But I told my father, the day we were to leave. He was terribly upset. He began telling me things I had only guessed before, about the unpleasant side of Arrynu's character—the illegal researches, the manufacture of outlawed drugs, the ring of criminals Arrynu had gathered and dominated.

"In spite of all that, I was still young enough and mad enough to go, until my father went on to tell me about the androids—the synthetic things like Stephen Orco, but most of them female, that Arrynu had made and sold. Lovely but soulless criminal slaves, that usually robbed and murdered their pleasure-seeking purchasers and then returned to Arrynu to be sold to another victim.

"That convinced me. I refused to see Arrynu again. My father talked to him, just once more. I don't know what was said, but that was the end of their odd friendship. Arrynu returned to his hidden planetoid. I know now what he did there."

An old brooding horror darkened the eyes of the girl.

"He made the thing he called Luroa. Her body had the superhuman strength of the androids. Her brain had the same inhuman, pitiless criminal cunning he had given Stephen Orco. But she was modeled after me. From photographs and his own memory, he created a likeness almost exact."

"Ah," breathed Giles Habibula. "Ah, so. But lass, how does it come that you have been playing the role of that mortal android?"

"Arrynu kept Luroa with him," the girl said, "until the Cometeers guided by that monster he had made himself, fell upon his little secret world. Arrynu was killed. But Luroa escaped. Daring and brilliant and ruthless, she assumed the leadership of her maker's interplanetary gang. Her exploits soon got the Legion on her trail. It was then that she conceived her most diabolical scheme."

The eyes of the girl were almost black, and she paused to shudder. Her hand groped for the great white jewel at her throat, as if it had been a precious talisman.

"Luroa knew she had been made in my likeness. She planned to steal my identity. She was going to abduct me, from the laboratory where I was trying to carry on my father's work. She was going to kill my brain with drugs, and let the members of her gang deliver me to the Legion and collect her own reward. And she would step into my shoes."

"Ah, a fearful plot!" Giles Habibula leaned forward anxiously. "And what happened?"

"My father had warned me of such a possibility," the girl said gravely. "After his death, suspecting that she had been responsible, I made certain preparations. When Luroa came, I was ready. It was not she who won, but I."

Giles Habibula surged to his feet and pulled her unceremoniously to him and set a very enthusiastic kiss upon her lips.

"Good for you, lass!" he cried. "So you beat the an-

droid at her own mortal game? But why didn't you report the matter to the Legion? And claim your just reward?"

The girl's face grew very sober again.

"It might have been hard to prove that I was not Luroa. Besides, that same day I learned that my father's murderer had escaped from the Devil's Rock." Her voice was still and cold. "And the theft of a document from the laboratory a few days later proved that he was using my father's geofractor. I knew that the Legion had failed—and must continue to fail, against that terrible invention.

"But Luroa, I thought, might not fail. I became Luroa."

"A well-played part," applauded Giles Habibula. "But, lass, tell me about this stolen invention."

The girl sat down again on the edge of the bunk. Her platinum head inclined a moment, listening to the fighting whine of the geodynes. Her slender hand unconsciously touched the ready butt of her proton blaster, and then the great white crystal at her throat.

"Don't worry, lass," Giles Habibula urged her. "I gave our position and course to Commander Kalam and the fleet. Derron will have no time to look for stowaways. But this mortal invention?"

"You know," she told him deliberately, "that my father was a geodesic engineer."

"Ah so, the greatest," wheezed Giles Habibula. "His refinements made the old-type geodynes seem primitive as ox-carts. He invented the geopellor, that Derron is so ready with."

"Derron's good with stolen discoveries." Her white hands clenched, and slowly relaxed again. "But the geofractor," she said, "is based upon a principle totally new—affording a complete, controlled refraction of geodesic lines.

"The instrument utilizes achronic force-fields. My father independently discovered the same new branch of geodesy of which Commander Kalam's expedition got some inkling from the science of the Cometeers."

"Ah, so," Giles Habibula nodded. "Kay Nymidee used something of that sort to escape from the comet."

"But the geofractor, as my father perfected it," the girl said, "had a power and a refinement of control that the Cometeers apparently never approached. Its achronic

fields are able to rotate the world lines of any two objects within a range of several hundred light-years."

"Aye, lass." Giles Habibula smiled as if he understood. "But in other words—?"

"The geofractor projects two refractor fields," the girl told him. "Each unit is able to deflect the geodesic lines of any object out of the continuum, and wrap them back again at any point within its range. Which means," she smiled, "that the object, in effect, is snatched out of our four dimensional universe, and instantly set back again at the other point."

"There are two coupled units," she explained, "timed to perfect synchronism, so that each creates a perfect vacuum to receive the object transmitted by the other. That prevents the atomic cataclysms that might result from forcing two objects into the same space at the same time."

"That explains why the Basilisk—" she caught her breath, "why Derron has such a way of putting clay snakes and bricks and robots in the place of the things he takes. It balances the transmitter circuits, and saves power."

Giles Habibula exhaled a long, amazed breath.

"So that's the geofractor!" he wheezed. "Ah, a fearful thing!"

"So Derron has made it," the girl whispered bitterly. "But my father intended it for purposes of peaceful communication. He dreamed of a timeless interplanetary express service. He even hoped to make wide stellar exploration possible, so that human colonists could spread across the galaxy."

"Yet he realized the supreme danger of his discovery. I doubt that he would ever have finished it at all, but for the bitter straits of mankind in the cometary war. He completed it only as a weapon of last resort—and he provided a shield against it."

"Eh?" Giles Habibula stared at her. "A shield?"

The girl touched her white, six-pointed jewel.

"This contains a tiny, atom-powered achronic field-coil," she told him. "It is adjusted to create a spherical barrier zone, that the search and refractor fields of the geofractor cannot penetrate."

"It is all that has defended me, thus far, from Derron's stolen power. And he has tried more than once to take it

from me—as when he sent that robot to the New Moon to attack me—though he bungled, that time, by killing his own monster too soon.”

Giles Habibula blinked and squinted at her.

“Now, lass,” he queried, “now that we know all this—what shall we do about it? Derron is driving out with us toward some unknown object in Draco, and the fleet is pressing mortal close behind us.”

“That object,” said Stella Eleroid, “must be the geofractor.”

“Eh!” Giles Habibula started. “But that was a small thing, Jay Kalam said. He said one man could carry it.”

“The model was, that Derron took,” the girl agreed. “It would have had power enough to carry one man—and itself—away from the island where my father was testing it—the only wonder is that Derron didn’t escape with it then, himself, instead of attempting his stupid pretence of innocence.

“But it had far too little power for these recent feats. A huge new machine must have been constructed—probably it was built on a planet of another star, possibly with the labor of such robots as the one sent to the New Moon. The thief has had four years, remember, and the model itself solved all problems of transportation.”

“But, lass—” Giles Habibula shook his head, doubtfully. “If Derron was in the New Moon, and this evil machine ten billions of miles away, then how could he have been the Basilisk?”

“Remote control,” said Stella Eleroid. “The device was perfected by my father. Something small enough for a man to carry in one hand, but powerful enough to operate the geofractor from almost any distance, with tubular fields of achronic force. Since those same fields can be adjusted to pick up energy, as easily as to transmit it, they can be used for observation as well as control, with no time-lag, and no pickup equipment required.”

She saw Giles Habibula’s puzzled scowl.

“That means Derron can operate the geofractor from almost anywhere,” she said. “He’s loaded now with the remote-control apparatus—I felt the hidden wires in his sleeve.” Her white face tightened. “There on the New Moon, he must have felt like a god traveling incognito—able to spy on anybody in the system with no danger of

detection, and ready with the geofractor to snatch away everybody who dared oppose his power-madness. Or almost everybody."

Nervously, she touched the white jewel again.

"Then, lass, shall we just wait and keep you hidden?" Giles Habibula urged uneasily. "Until Derron brings us to his fearful machine—"

Crash!

Something splintered the cabin door behind them. Slivers flew around them, and Chan Derron's wide shouldered bulk was framed in the ragged opening. One hand clutched the control spindle of his geopellor, and the other leveled the bright needle of a proton blaster.

The girl's hand darted for her weapon. But Chan's fingers tightened on the spindle, and his big body came toward her with the fleetness of a shadow. The nose of his blaster caught hers, and flung it against the bulkhead. A simultaneous kick sent Giles Habibula's thick cane spinning.

The geopellor lifted Chan back to the shattered doorway.

"Some spare blasters in the chest," he gasped. "And I'm not quite deaf."

His weapon covered them while he caught his breath.

His narrowed eyes swept the white, defiant beauty of the girl, and he smiled grimly.

"Listen," he said softly. "Miss Stella Eleroid—I'm glad you're not Luroa! And Giles Habibula—I thought you had been a loyal Legionnaire too long to desert! Listen—" His weapon gestured emphatically. "I heard all you said. And now we are going to be three together against the Basilisk. For I am going to convince you that I didn't murder Dr. Eleroid."

A little shudder swept the girl's taut body. The savage hate in her eyes drove Chan a step backward.

"Think so?" her voice whipped at him. "I don't!"

"Ah, lass—wait!" The small eyes of Giles Habibula rolled at her apprehensively. "We'll listen."

"What you said about the geofractor," he told the trembling, defiant girl, "explains the circumstances of your father's murder."

"Then tell me how it happened," she challenged him coldly. "You ought to know!"

"I had that armored room ready, when your father and another man landed with the working model they were to test," he said quietly. "They went inside and locked the door. I stood guard outside. Admiral-General Samdu, not an hour later, found the door unlocked—that fact is what convicted me. He found Dr. Eleroid's body, and another, but the working model was gone.

"The body of the assistant was already stiff in *rigor mortis*. That was a point they failed to explain, in the case against me. They simply disregarded it." Chan Derron's jaw set grimly. "But *rigor mortis* never begins in less than two or three hours after death. The other body found in that room with Dr. Eleroid had been dead probably ten or twelve hours."

His somber eyes went back to the girl's intent white face.

"You have explained how it must have happened," he told her. "The murderer had already killed your father's assistant. He had hidden the body, and taken the assistant's place. It was the murderer who went down into that room with your father. Don't you think that is possible?"

The platinum head of Stella Eleroid nodded very slowly, as if unwillingly. Her violet eyes, still very dark, remained fixed on Chan Derron's face with an intensity almost hypnotic.

"It is possible," she whispered reluctantly. "Because my father suffered from an extreme myopia—he couldn't recognize anyone ten feet from him. And that day he must have been completely absorbed in his experiment." She nodded again. "But go on."

"The murderer—the real Basilisk—is obviously a very clever man," Chan continued. "We know he had already been spying on your father. He must have planned the thing very carefully. His risk was great—but taken for a tremendous stake.

"Once in that locked room, he watched your father test and demonstrate the invention. And then, when he had learned all he had to know, he killed the inventor. He used the geofractor to bring the stiffened body of the actual assistant from wherever he had hidden it. He used it again to take the blaster out of my belt. He drove the bayonet into your father's body, and unlocked the door, and finally

removed himself and the working model—leaving everything arranged to convict me of the crime.”

He searched the girl’s fixed white face.

“You believe me,” he whispered hoarsely. “Don’t you, Stella?”

“I—I don’t know.” She shook her head. “I want to—but who is the Basilisk?”

“Ah, that’s the mortal question!” Giles Habibula gasped. “Perhaps you speak the truth, Captain Derron—and if you do, this criminal has done you a fearful wrong indeed. But there’s still a monstrous mass of evidence against you.”

“Won’t you trust me?” Chan begged hopelessly. “Just until we reach the geofractor. I think it will tell us who our enemy really is.”

“My orders are to bring you back,” the old soldier said bleakly. “And the fleet is already close behind us. But, if you’re willing to surrender, I’ll take your case to Commander Kalam—”

Chan Derron’s face set grimly.

“I’ll not surrender,” he said. “I know the fleet is close behind. And we haven’t cathode plates to keep up full speed—they may soon be in range, with the vortex gun. But I’m going on to the geofractor. If you won’t help—”

His weapon gestured ominously. A dull green gleam flashed from a finger of the hand that held it, and Giles Habibula blinked.

“Eh, lad!” he gasped. “Your ring—where’d you get that ring?”

“It was my mother’s,” Chan Derron said. “She had the stone reset for me.”

“Let me see it.” The old man held out a trembling hand. “It’s Venusian malichite? Carved into a die? The spots all threes and fours?” He scanned Chan’s big body with an odd intentness. “Tell me, lad—who was your mother? Where did you get this stone?”

“The jewel belonged to my grandmother.” Chan stared at him blankly. “She was a Venusian singer. Her name was Ethyra Coran!”

“Ethyra Coran!”

The eyes of Giles Habibula were suddenly brimming with tears. His big body heaved out of the chair. He

pushed Chan's blaster unceremoniously aside, and flung his arms about him.

"What's this?"

"Don't you see?" wheezed Giles Habibula. "Your mother was my own precious daughter. You're my own blood, Chan Derron. The grandson of Giles Habibula!"

"Then—" Chan freed himself, stared into the beaming yellow face. "Then—will you help me?"

"Ah, so!" the old man cried. "And gladly! For no grandson of Giles Habibula could be the Basilisk."

With a grave and silent question in them, the eyes of Chan Derron looked at the girl. For a long moment, her level violet eyes met his, dark with another question. At last she nodded slowly.

"We'll give you a chance, Chan Derron," she said. "If you can find the Basilisk."

17 THE FINAL GAMBLE

THE PURSUING fleet crept up behind, in spite of Giles Habibula's frantic appeals to the Commander. The first shot from the vortex gun came after the *Phantom Atom*: a vast expanding field of atomic instability that burned strange with deadly radiations and sucked at the fugitive ship with a ruthless attraction.

"Let me tune your geodynes!" gasped Giles Habibula, as the tiny vessel fought that consuming maelstrom. "I've been an engine man for fifty precious years, and I can coax the generators to more than they can do."

And, indeed, when his deft hands had returned her geodynes, the tiny vessel began to draw ahead again. The second whirling field of atomic disruption groped after them with weaker fingers; the third flamed and died far behind. And the *Phantom Atom* was many hours ahead of the fleet, when they came to the geofractor.

Chan Derron's brain was staggered by that machine's

immensity, and baffled by its strangeness. Against the star-shot dark of space hung two great spheres of blacker blackness. Three colossal rings, set all at right angles, bound each of them; and between them, connecting them, was a smaller cylinder of the same dully gleaming metal.

"It looks a little bit like a twenty-million ton peanut," he muttered. "But I never saw anything so black as those great globes!"

"They are not anything," said Stella Eleroid. "They are simply holes in the continuum of our universe. That blackness is the darkness of a lightless hyperspace.

"It is through those holes that the geodesics are refracted," she said. "They are held open by the achronic field coils in the rings about them. There are four rings about each globe of force—the three that you see, and a fourth that has been rotated into hyperspace.

"Except for size—miles, to feet—this machine is almost identical with my father's model. The controls, no doubt, and the atomic power tubes that activate the field coils, are in the central cylindrical structure."

"Eh?" murmured Giles Habibula. "And we may find the Basilisk there?"

"We may," the girl said. "But I think not. The remote-control system would make it needless for him to remain here. But doubtless the machine is safeguarded. We may meet some of his robots."

"But that mortal power?" The eyes of Giles Habibula rolled fearfully. "The force that snatches men away—"

"It can't reach us." The girl touched her white jewel again. "So long as this device is intact, and we keep close together. But if we separate—or it is lost—"

"Ah, lass, we'll cling to you!" cried Giles Habibula. "And defend it well!"

Circling the dark mass of the geofractor, that hung in space like an elongated planetoid, they found an entrance valve in the wall of the enormous cylinder between the two black spheres. No weapon, nor any sign of alarm, met their approach. Magnetic anchors held the *Phantom Atom* beside the valve, and the three emerged, clinging close together, in white space armor.

A massive and intricate combination lock stopped them at the outer valve.

"Ah, here is a barrier that could stop all the Legion," muttered Giles Habibula. His fingers, in their flexible metal gloves, began spinning the dials. He set his helmet against the heavy door, to listen. "All the Legion!" he wheezed again. "But not the precious dying genius of old Giles Habibula."

The colossal armored door slid deliberately aside, and they came into the great chamber of the valve. Another lock, at the inner gate, yielded as readily, and they emerged into the mysterious interior of the machine.

Chan's first impression was of staggering immensity. A dull violet light, from endless banks of gigantic power tubes, gleamed dimly upon the square masses of huge transformers, black cables writhing like incredible serpents, and the maze of titanic girders that supported all the mechanism.

His armored hand gripped his blaster, but no movement met them. No living thing was visible. There was no sound save that from the generators and transformers—a humming so mighty and deep that it became a roar.

Already, with a swift certainty of purpose, Stella Eleroid was leading the way along a narrow cat-walk, out through that web of unknown energies. Giles Habibula opened another locked door, and they entered a long dim-lit chamber that was obviously a control-room. Illuminated dials and gauges shone in endless rows, signal lights flashed, signal bells rang, automatic switches made an endless muffled clicking.

Eerily, this room was also empty. Sweeping it with the muzzle of his blaster, Chan Derron shuddered. This mass of untended mechanism was somehow uncanny, as if it had been itself alive.

"The Basilisk is not here," said Stella Eleroid. "I hardly expected him to be. But I believe I can operate the geofractor—I was my father's assistant, until he decided the job was too dangerous for me. We can disconnect the remote control, and use the search fields to look for him."

"Good," Chan said. "I think I know where to look. Try the vicinity of the red star Ulnar XIV, about eighty light-years north. Here are the heliocentric co-ordinates of the position."

He gave her the scrap of paper he had found in Han-

nas' vault. She turned to the long maze of untended controls. She held hurried little conferences with Giles Habibula, as the old man went to work beside her, his fat hands as familiarly skillful, Chan thought, as if they had built everything they touched.

Gripping his blaster, peering this way and that, Chan kept an anxious watch. It began to seem to him that the humming emptiness of this space was more terrible than a horde of the Basilisk's robots would have been—until he heard a familiar feral purr, and saw green-winged horror flapping at the farther end of the long room.

This time he knew that the central crimson eye was a vulnerable point. His white ray flashed. The monster fell, sprawling weirdly over a bank of dials, before it could lift the Legion-type blaster in its own green tentacles.

"Don't worry," Chan called to Giles and the girl. "I got it!"

But the violet eyes of Stella Eleroid were startled and grave.

"We had the remote control disconnected half an hour ago," she told him. "The arrival of that monster means that the Basilisk has another geofractor in operation—somewhere!" She paused to shudder. "He may send us something else!"

Chan Derron resumed his apprehensive watch.

"We've found it, Chan!" came the girl's eager voice an hour later. Her eyes were fixed upon a tiny, shielded screen, in a little oblong control-box. "The place where the geofractors must have been built. It's on a great planet that circles the red star. In the middle of a high plateau, there's a clearing in the jungle. Mines. Furnace stacks. Metal roofs of factories. The foundation, miles long, where the geofractors must have been built. A sort of robot-city—I see thousands of the winged robots, wheeling about. Some of them fighting, I think, with their real-life originals at the edge of the jungle. The Basilisk must have begun by building robots, and setting them to build others—"

"But the Basilisk, himself?" broke in the anxious nasal wheeze of Giles Habibula. "Where's the mortal Basilisk?"

Stella Eleroid shook her platinum head—and Chan wondered briefly which was real: the blond curls and

violet eyes of Vanya Eloyan, or the red-mahogany hair and grey-green eyes he had learned to know from the posters of the android Luroa?

"There are no human beings in sight," she said. "Only those robots."

"Keep searching, lass!" gasped Giles Habibula. "The criminal must be somewhere. And all those people he took away."

Chan Derron stood his endless watch. The girl moved delicate controls and watched a screen inside that hooded box.

"Here!" she whispered at last. "A spot that must be ten thousand miles from that city of robots, in the middle of a reddish ocean. There was a shadow that the search field could hardly pierce—a barrier field, I suppose, set up by some device like my own."

She touched the white jewel.

"But I've broken through it—the device is not quite so perfect as my father would have made it. I can see a tiny rock, crowded with people fighting—"

Her voice died away. She bent closer, shaking her head as if with pity.

"People?" Chan whispered sharply. "Who?"

"I can't see," she whispered. "All their faces are masked—maybe against some gas, because they're all coughing. A ragged, pitiful lot. The water seems to be rising, and they are most of them fighting for higher places on the rock. Creatures like that robot are flying over them, and great black armored monsters are leaping out of the rising sea."

Giles Habibula was blinking intently over her shoulder.

"Ah, so!" he breathed. "The luckless victims of the Basilisk. There's Kay, the poor lass—all bandaged. Her child—and Bob Star!" His thin voice became a sort of wail. "And there's the keeper—ill. Unconscious, it looks. And John Star lifting her to a higher place. Ah, frightful death is hovering near them all."

He caught a sobbing breath.

"Aye, and now I see those three scoundrels from the New Moon. Hannas and Brelekko and John Comaine. They are playing some dice game—all but Comaine. And the little gambler, Abel Davian, is with them—still with

his book and his mortal calculator. Playing their blessed lives away, for pebbles, while wicked death creeps down upon them!"

His quivering fingers caught the girl's arm.

"You must set them back on Earth," he gasped. "And quickly—before they all perish!"

But she shook her head.

"I can't do it," she said helplessly. "That barrier field is almost as good as mine. It takes all the power we have to drive a search field through it. We can't get through with a refractor field—not to pick up even one of them."

Chan Derron was beside her, breathless.

"Then, Stella," he demanded, "can you set me on the rock?"

"No," she told him. "That's as impossible as lifting them away. But why?"

His dark-stained eyes were narrowed and savage.

"I think the Basilisk is there on the rock—hiding inside that barrier field and watching his victims die," he said grimly. "I'm going after him. If you can't set me on the rock, drop me as near it as you can."

"Into that dreadful sea." Her eyes were dark with concern. "Chan, you'll be killed!"

"Thanks, Stella." He grinned at her, very briefly. "But I think the Basilisk is one of those people on the rock—and I have one clue to his identity. I'm going to test it—if there's time enough. Won't you help?"

"I'll help." A brief light shone in her eyes, and was extinguished with dread. "Go to the other end of the room. Beyond the range of my barrier field. And—" her voice caught. "Goodbye, Chan!"

He was already striding away.

"Aye, farewell," Giles Habibula called after him. "My grandson!"

At the other end of the long, dusky control room, Chan Derron paused and raised his hand. The girl looked at him for a moment, and then turned very suddenly to the little box beside her.

A savage, penetrating vibration throbbed through all Chan's body. The girl and old Habibula and the strange room were all whipped away. He was flung through frigid blackness, into a world of yellow-green mist.

Green-winged horror flapped and screamed beside him.

He fell through the haze, toward the dark flat sea where larger creatures plunged now and again above the oily surface. The geopellor could have checked him, but still he dived, because he thought the Basilisk might be watching from the rock.

A dark armored shape rushed at him, beneath the surface. The bolt from his blaster made a volcano of steam. He drove on through it, and reached the rock, and climbed upon that with greenish slime dripping from his silver armor.

The highest peak of land now stood not five feet above the tide, which still lapped visibly upward. Those left on the rock were fewer than a hundred now; soon there would be none at all.

He knew most of the masked, gasping, heat-parched human things clinging to the rock, but they paid him little heed. Many were too far gone to care, but one wild creature challenged him, with a blaster, unsteadily leveled, as he tugged to open the face plate of his helmet.

"The Basilisk!" A calm restraint still ruled that rasping voice, and he recognized the Commander of the Legion. "He's come to mock us!" Jay Kalam cried. "Kill him."

That feeble cry went unheard, however, and the blaster, exhausted with firing at the winged things above, flickered harmlessly and died.

"The wrong man, Commander," Chan whispered swiftly. "I'm not the Basilisk—but I do have evidence that he's hiding here among you. Will you let me look for him?"

The chlorine-reddened eyes still seemed sane.

"If we've been wrong—" Jay Kalam choked and coughed and nodded weakly. "Go ahead, Derron. Whatever you find, we've little more to lose."

"Guard the keeper." Chan thrust his own blaster into the Commander's startled hands. "I think the Basilisk is here—but I want to make a test."

Stripping off the metal gloves of his space armor, he flung them down on the rock and gathered up a handful of small black pebbles. He strode on to the level ledge, scarcely a foot above the water now, where Hannas and Brelekko and little Abel Davian and a few other masked, strangling men and women still knelt about their futile game, while John Comaine looked on with an expression of stolid hostility from beside his mysterious black box.

He paused a moment to peer at that box. The remote-control device that operated the geopellor was surely something no larger. He wished for an instant that he had kept the blaster—but still he had the test to make. He dropped on his knees, beside gaunt Brelekko, and heaped the pebbles before him.

"I've come to join your game," he said.

The yellow, bright-ringed claw of Brelekko shook the dice and rolled them. He said nothing at all. But Gaspar Hannas, smiling behind his bandages that mindless smile that was the only one upon the rock, gasped hoarsely:

"Welcome, stranger. Though our game must soon be over—for all but one of us. That's the real gamble, now. Because the Basilisk has promised, Commander Kalam says, that one of us is to be returned alive to the System."

"One of you." Chan nodded bleakly. "But that's no gamble, because it lacks the element of chance. The man to be saved is the Basilisk himself."

"Huh!" Gaspar Hannas gulped and stared and shook his head. "He couldn't be here—"

"There's evidence that he is," Chan said. "I suppose cowardice has helped to bring him to this least expected hiding place, here among his hopeless victims; and I imagine, too, that he is getting a sadistic satisfaction out of watching them die." He paused to look sharply at the broad face of Hannas, but its white idiocy still was unchanged. "Let's play," he said. "And please ask Dr. Comaine to join us."

Hannas made a gasping grunt at John Comaine. The big engineer nodded sullenly. Stiffly awkward, and moving with a visible reluctance, he left his instrument and came to kneel in the circle.

Chan took the dice from the talons of Brelekko, and rolled a seven. Raking in the pebbles he had won, he brushed the fingers of Hannas and Brelekko. He lost, and put the dice in the hand of tattered little Abel Davian—and watched that lean gray hand with narrowed eyes.

The ragged little gambler was tapping the keys of his silent calculator again, when Chan saw the angry red welts lifting on his fingers. Chan was leaning to peer at the calculator, when muted screams, from throats burned raw with chlorine, drew his eyes upward.

The sullen sun stood now at the zenith, and against its dull-red face he saw the black shape of the geofractor—or the stand-by machine, this must be; the one that had been used to send that attacking robot into the other. The black shadow of it was spreading swiftly across that sinister disk.

It was falling!

Cold with fear, he understood this desperate last gambit of the Basilisk. The criminal had shielded this rock against the refractor fields. The barrier must be maintained—against Stella Eleroid, at the controls of the other geofractor. But, even if the stand-by machine couldn't reach through the barrier, it would still fall through.

Swiftly, it grew in the sky. Watching it, listening to the gasps and sobs of all those who waited hopelessly for its millions of tons of metal to crush them into that acid sea, Chan failed for a moment to hear the deep sudden purring in the air around him.

When he did hear it, and knew that the barrier had been lifted, he moved very quickly. His great hand snatched the little calculating machine out of Abel Davian's swelling fingers. He smashed it against the ledge, seized a rock, and crushed the fragments to scrap and dust.

"Why, sir?" The little gambler blinked bewilderedly at him through thick lenses. "What are you doing?"

"Conducting an allergy test," Chan rapped at him.

"I don't understand you, sir!"

Chan glanced up at the stupendous shape of the falling geofractor and around him at the silent exiles crouching on the rock. They awaited its impact, he thought, almost with gratitude.

"We've probably three minutes." He grinned bleakly at Abel Davian. "And you ought to be interested in this test—since you are the one who showed a positive reaction."

"I— what do you mean sir?"

"Four years ago," Chan Derron told him, "when I helped Dr. Eleroid's pseudo-assistant carry his working model of the geofractor down into that armored room where he was killed, the man contrived to keep me from seeing his face—he muffled himself against the cold, and made me walk in front, and kept leaning over the box. However, it happened that my hand touched his. I saw

rapid red swellings rising upon his fingers, and I noticed that he sneezed."

Chan's darkened eyes stabbed at the cringing gray man.

"When I learned a little while ago how the crime was carried out, I happened to remember that you began to sneeze as you came toward me in the Diamond Room on the New Moon, just before you vanished—and I had wondered already how it came that you had the audacity to win on that particular night. All that was enough to suggest the possible utility of your portable calculator."

Rigid, pale, Abel Davian stood feebly shaking his head.

"I contrived to touch your hands, just now," Chan's harsh voice raced on. "And I observe again the symptoms of an extreme allergy sensitive to my body. That is a rare but proven phenomenon—the proteids of one human body acting as allergens to another. Its very rarity made the identification quite positive—even before I had confirmed it by proving that your calculating machine was the portable remote-control box through which you operated the geofractors, Mr. Basilisk."

Ashen, palsied, the little man was cowering back from him. His hunted eyes flashed up at the enormous bulk of the falling geofractor, swelling ever more swiftly in the greenish sky. They came back to Chan, magnified by the thick lenses, lurid with a triumphant hatred.

"What if I am the Basilisk?" his shrill voice whined defiantly. "I'm still the winner—because I've had my revenge, and none of you can escape. If we had three minutes—now I think we've less than two."

"Perhaps it doesn't matter." Nodding almost abstractedly, Chan turned from that colossal falling mechanism and the silent people waiting for it. "But still there's something I'd like to know." He scowled at the trembling gambler. "Why should you want revenge—upon so many of us?"

"Because my people were Purples." Savagery twisted Davian's thin gray face. "My mother's family had once been favorites of the emperors. I believe my real father was Eric the Pretender. It was the Green Hall that crushed the empire, and drove us into exile." His narrow shoulders stiffened with a supercilious pride. "But for all

of you—the Legion and the Council and the keeper of the peace, I should have been a prince of the Purple Hall.”

“I see.” Chan Derron glanced sadly at the limp, unconscious form of the keeper of the peace and John Star standing guard beside her—and his breath caught.

“But that isn’t all you’ve done,” Davian’s bitter voice ran on. “I’ve been trying all my life to recover something of the wealth and honor that was rightly mine—and all of you have always crushed me back again, into hunger and rags and shame.”

“Eh?” Chan looked at him sharply. “How’s that?”

“I studied science,” rasped the little man. “I took the name of Enos Clagg, because you all had come to hate my father’s—”

“Enos Clagg?” Chan nodded in recognition. “And you built illegal robots!”

“Military robots,” Davian whispered huskily. “I hoped to restore the empire with them. But we were betrayed to the Green Hall. The Legion tracked me down. I served three years on Ebron—dreaming of ways to settle the score.”

Scarcely listening to him, Chan had looked back at that enormous falling machine. Now its black mass filled half the sky. A fantastic greenish twilight was falling fast upon the rock. A chlorine-poisoned wind stirred suddenly.

“After I was pardoned from Ebron,” Davian’s bitter voice rushed on, “I saw that I must be more subtle. I came to Earth, with a little money my mother had saved, and took the name I wear. I met a girl, and fell in love, and married her. She wanted me to forget my plans, and for a little while I almost did.”

His savage eyes flashed at Gaspar Hannas.

“Until we visited his gambling ship,” he said. “I had studied the mathematics of probability in my cell on Ebron. I was hoping to win back the lost wealth of the Purples. But Hannas robbed me. Hannas and Brelekko and Comaine!” His cracked voice lifted wildly. “They’ve robbed me again and again, every time I scraped up money to go back—and laughed at me because they said I was habitual. That’s why they’re here—to watch me win one game!”

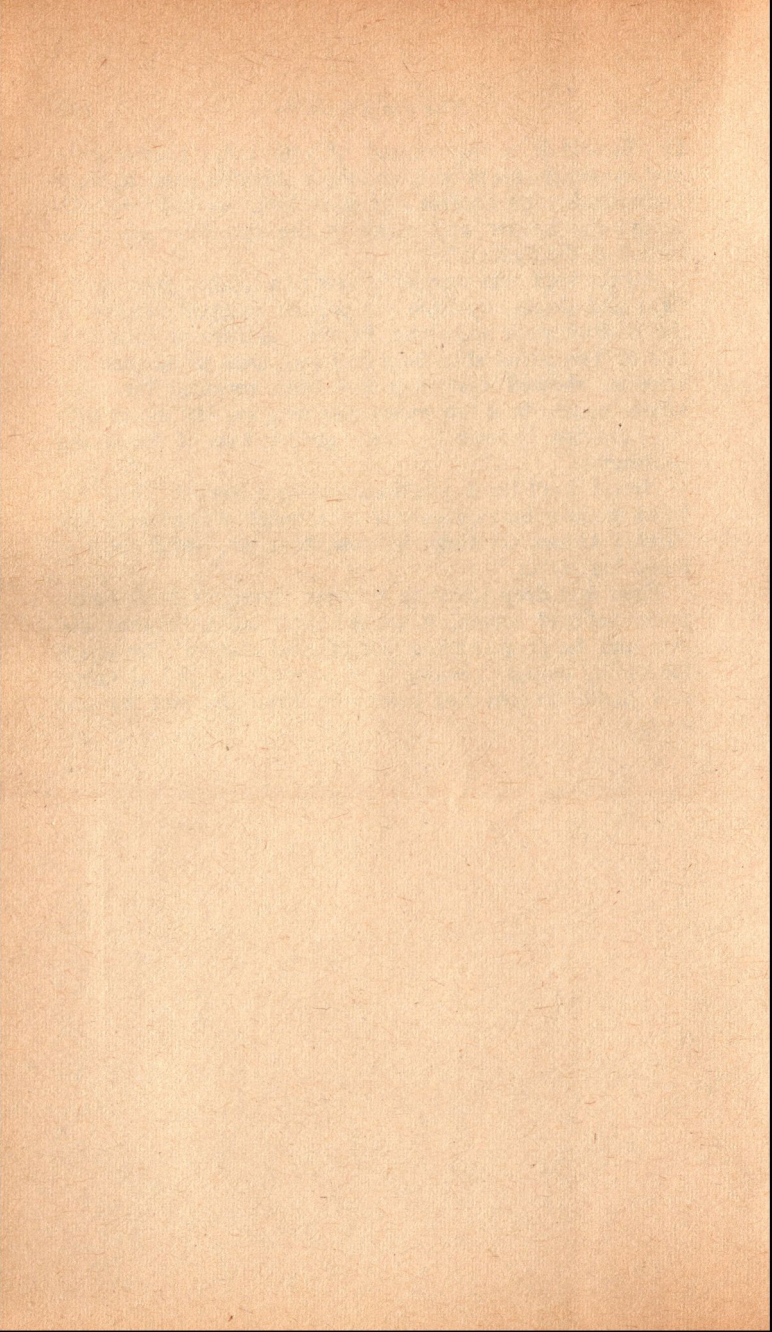
“But you have lost.” Chan’s voice was lifted, above a sudden deep vibration in the air. “Because the daughter of

Dr. Eleroid is at the controls of your other geofractor—and evidently this rock is no longer shielded from it, since I smashed your control box. Just look around you! Already, the keeper and many of the rest have been returned to the System.”

All the rock was trembling now to a mighty purring. By twos and threes, by little groups, the haggard victims of the Basilisk were vanishing. Familiar articles of furniture, bits of Terrestrial shrubbery and sod, used to balance the circuits, showed that they had been replaced on some kinder planet. In a few moments Chan was left alone with Abel Davian, beneath the many million tons of the falling geofractor.

“But I don’t think you’ll escape, Mr. Basilisk.” His big hand made a hurried gesture of farewell. “Because Stella Eleroid knows certainly, by now, that you—and not I—killed her father.”

Then that deep vibration quivered through Chan’s body. Some pellucid screen, it seemed, had fallen between his eyes and the gray stricken face of Abel Davian. The green thickening twilight became a total darkness. And he knew that Stella Eleroid had lifted him from the peril of the rock.



NOWHERE NEAR

1 THE MAN WHO LIKED MACHINES

NOWHERE NEAR was the name of a point in space. Five black light-years from our Legion base at the closest star, sixty more from old Earth, it was marked by the laser beacon and little else. A relief ship came once a year—when it could get through the anomaly.

The last Legion ship had not got through, and half our personnel were overdue for rotation. Odd types, they had volunteered because they had expected to enjoy loneliness and mystery and danger. Most of them had found long ago that they did not.

Our supplies came late, on a private craft chartered for the emergency. A paintless but powerful geodesic flyer, the *Erewhon* looked like a scarred veteran of less legal missions. Her captain was a squat, shambling man, hard of eye and close of mouth—the sort of civilian likely to need refuge in the hazardous fringes of Nowhere.

Instead of the men and women we needed to relieve our weary crews, she brought only two passengers—an old soldier and a girl. A queer story and a queerer riddle came with them. The story—all I could learn of it—was told to me by Captain Scabbard when he came aboard the station with a sealed pouch of orders from our sector base.

The old soldier and the girl, as he told the story, had boarded the chartered flyer in some haste, along with their odd cargo, just before it lifted.

Trouble came with them.

His spacemen were not the finest sort, Captain Scabbard admitted. They were not used to discipline, and he suspected that some of them were relieving the hazardous tedium of the long voyage to Nowhere with smuggled drugs. They baited the old soldier and tried to make love to the girl.

They were used to free companions, the captain said, and they couldn't understand such a girl. Her proud aloofness just inflamed them. Even the ship's mate joined the game. On the mate's watch, they got the soldier drunk, locked him in his stateroom and attacked the girl in her room.

Captain Scabbard was still confused about the ending of the story. The girl had disabled two of her attackers, with some unexpected trick or weapon. Angered, the others became uglier than ever. She screamed for the soldier.

Less drunk than he had seemed, the soldier picked the lock and came out to join the fight. Though he had been disarmed, he and the girl fought five able spacemen. Two had finally fled. The other three, Captain Scabbard believed, had been killed.

"But we couldn't find the bodies." His eyes flickered uneasily back toward the lock, where his passengers were waiting to come aboard the station. "I ain't makin' no formal charges. They ain't makin' none. The soldier told me to just forget the incident. But the mate and two more are gone, and we couldn't find the bodies."

He shivered apprehensively.

"Maybe you never stopped to think how hard it is to get rid of a dead body in a stateroom on a sealed space flyer. It ain't just hard—it's impossible! In my time around Nowhere I've seen a lot of funny things, but I ain't never seen nothing to match that soldier and his girl!"

That's part of what made the story queer.

I thanked Captain Scabbard and told him that I would interview his passengers before I let them come aboard the station. He grew angry. He was afraid of them, I soon realized. He wanted to get them off his ship, but I stood firm.

We had troubles enough already. Nowhere Near had an ugly name in the Legion, for good cause. Duty there was both dull and dangerous.

A third of our thirty-man crew was normally rotated each year, but the last relief complement had been aboard that lost ship. An unwise search had cost us twelve more lives. The station commander, cracking under the strain, had committed a strange suicide by steering a rescue rocket into the heart of the space called Nowhere.

His death had left me the acting commander, although

my actual promotion had only now arrived in Captain Scabbard's green-sealed pouch. I was still very young, very conscious of my peculiar duty. With only sixteen men and two free companions, I was standing guard against a danger that none of us understood.

Old enough to be cynical, most of the men under me had a bitter feeling that Nowhere Near was a forgotten stepchild of the Legion. They had been cruelly jolted when they learned that the *Erewhon* had brought us no replacements for the missing men or relief for those who had already served long beyond their normal tour of duty. I was prepared for trouble—but not asking for it.

"You are under charter to the Legion," I reminded Captain Scabbard. "That means your port and flying orders come from me. This is no place for tourists, and I don't want the sort of problem you have just reported. Your passengers will have to convince me that they have some legitimate business here."

Grumbling sullenly, he agreed to let me interview them in the station lock. When he sent them to meet me there, the first thing I saw was the old soldier's shocking sloppiness. Out of uniform, he wore a flaming yellow civilian sweater and shapeless old fatigue pants, one leg tucked inside his oversize spaceboots and the other dropping outside. He was short and thick and flabby—scarcely fit for his heroic role in Captain Scabbard's tale. Yet he came waddling through the great steel valves as confidently as if he had come to take command of the station.

The nurse followed him, immaculate in white. A glowing, bronze-eyed, athletic girl, she looked too young and fresh and lovely to be so far from the stars men had mastered. A gasp of admiration came from the lock sergeant behind me. My own pulse was quickening—until I saw her ring.

The ring was a heavy platinum band set with an odd black stone. An unpleasant gem, the dull black stone was carved into a grinning skull with hot ruby eyes that glowed like live coals. That ugly death's-head struck me with a puzzling shock of evil, because it seemed to deny her clean, strong vitality.

"Captain Ulnar?" Neglecting to salute, the old soldier stopped to stare at me with eyes like flat wet pebbles. "Captain Lars Ulnar? You want to talk to us?"

"If you want to come aboard the station."

"Why else do you think we've come forty trillion miles on Scabbard's miserable bucket of rust?" His round face was baby-smooth and baby-soft, and it reddened now like an angry infant's. "We were expecting a warmer welcome. My name's Habibula. Corporal Giles Habibula."

His bald pink head nodded toward the girl.

"Nurse Lilith Adams. We're here as guests of the blessed Legion. You have orders to supply us rations and quarters in the station."

"I've received no such orders."

"Our visit was arranged through Legion channels." His indignant voice was nasal and high, oddly irritating. "Orders to expect us were sent you a year ago."

"The ship last year was lost."

"We're well aware of that." He grimaced pinkly. "We've been sweating for a miserable month at your sector headquarters, waiting for a brass-capped fool to arrange our passage on the *Erewhon*. We were warned that our papers had been on that unlucky ship. We had duplicates sent you more recently, in care of Commander Star."

"Commander Star?"

"Ken Star, commander of the Legion survey ship *Quasar Quest*." Indignation buzzed in his high nasal voice. "He'd taken off before we got to sector base. He must have left our papers here."

"Commander Star has not been here." My first astonishment was changing to irritated disbelief. "Not for years, anyhow. I've seen his name in the station records. He was the first commanding officer, years before I got here. I've never seen him."

"Life's precious sake!" The old man's mud-colored eyes rolled apprehensively toward the silent girl. "I'm afraid poor Ken has blundered into mortal trouble." He lurched forward as if he meant to pass me. "Well, Captain, it looks as if you'll have to take my precious word about those orders."

"Hold it, soldier!"

The riddle was growing queerer. No Legion survey ship had been expected at the station. The old soldier's tale of lost orders was a bit too pat. He looked too clever. Besides, with his improper uniform and his failure to

salute and his irritating insolence, he had ruffled my sense of military fitness.

"If you are a soldier!" I stepped in front of him. "Have you ever been taught Legion courtesy and discipline?"

"Mortal well, Captain." He stopped, but still did not salute. "For most of a mortal century, I've been offering Legion courtesy to officers who deserved it. I've gladly saluted Commander Kalam and Admiral-General Samdu and the great John Star. But I'm not saluting you."

He blinked shrewdly at me, as if daring me to react.

"Giles!" The girl spoke for the first time. Her low voice was lovely as her face, gentle in cool reproof. "Don't be a fool!"

"I mean no disrespect, sir," the old man wheezed. "If you had read those orders, you would know that I am honorably discharged. We are here as special guests of the Legion—as civilians."

"Nowhere Near has several missions." Now more annoyed than puzzled, I spoke stiffly. "Our first mission is simply to warn shipping away from a dangerous and mysterious anomaly in space. Our second is to observe and report every fact we can discover about the nature and the cause of that anomaly. We have no facilities to entertain civilian guests."

"Captain Ulnar—please!" The girl stepped forward urgently. "I'm sure Commander Star will arrive with our orders soon. At least you must let us wait for him."

I hesitated, because she troubled me. She belonged somewhere else, I thought—perhaps in some fortress like the Purple Hall, along with old masters and old ivory and all the proud creations of man's great past. She looked too thrillingly alive, certainly, for this deadly exile at the brink of Nowhere.

"You'll have to answer some questions," I said. "Captain Scabbard gave me a very brief account of an incident on the *Erewhon*. He says the two of you killed three able spacemen. He couldn't learn how you disposed of the bodies."

Old Habibula's stone-colored eyes squinted blankly out of his pink baby-face. The girl stiffened slightly, lovely and lean and grave, her eyes darkening.

"What happened?" I demanded. "What happened to those three men?"

"Three pirates!" gasped old Habibula. "They got what they mortal well deserved."

"That may be," I agreed. "But I am responsible for the safety of this station. I want to know exactly how they got it. Nurse Adams, what have you to say?"

"A dreadful experience." Her head lifted proudly in her stiff white cap. Her tawny eyes met mine—alert, searching, somehow tragic. "I can't talk about it."

The desperation in her voice touched my heart—but I was young enough to feel that my new duty at Nowhere Near required the same kind of desperation. I looked at old Habibula to recover my severity.

"You'd better talk about it," I said, "if you want to come aboard."

Neither spoke.

"Then I suppose that ends our interview."

I turned to leave them in the lock.

"Wait!" old Habibula whined angrily behind me. "We've got our rights, even as mortal civilians. The Green Hall guarantees our democratic freedoms. You can't make us say anything you might take to be incriminating."

"True enough." I paused at the inner valve. "But I can't afford to let strangers with incriminating secrets inside Nowhere Near."

"Strangers?" His gasp was almost a sob. "Captain, don't you know the history of the precious Legion? Have you never heard of poor old Giles Habibula, who fought in the war against the wicked Medusae, and fought against the invisible Cometeers, and fought against the fearful human monster who called himself the Basalisk?"

"What if I do?" Reviewing dusty memories of history lectures back at the Legion academy on old Earth, I made a rapid calculation. "Don't try to tell me you are that Giles Habibula. He'd be dead of old age by now."

"I am—almost!" he gasped. "Life knows I'm mortal old—and waging a war to save my precious life!" Sadly, he shook his pink and hairless baby-head. "Perhaps it's true there's an evil stain across my past. I must confess that I once picked locks for a living. But all that has been atoned for—a million times atoned for, to the living glory of the Legion, with my precious sweat and blood and brains."

He stopped to catch a sobbing breath, his dull-colored eyes squinting at me cunningly.

"When Ken Star arrives, he'll tell you who we are," he whined. "Ken Star will vouch that we are not the miserable criminals you seem to take us for."

"Please—C-Captain!"

The girl's voice had an anxious little catch. When I looked at her, her young loveliness became an aching throb in my throat and wild magic in my imagination.

"Commander Star's—our friend." She hesitated oddly. "I know he'll soon be here to assure you that we aren't criminals of any sort—that we do have legitimate business here."

Her bronze eyes were wide and warm, bright as if with tears.

"Captain, you can't send us back to Scabbard and his gangster crew." The quiver in her voice dissolved my resolution. "At least you've got to let Giles tell you why we're here. You've just got to, Captain!"

Frowning to conceal unsoldierly feelings, I came slowly back to them. The riddles around them had begun to tease my curiosity. I knew that old Habibula was deliberately baiting me, but I couldn't guess why. I was still convinced I didn't want them on the station, yet the girl had lit a glowing coal of longing in me.

"All right." I swung as coldly as I could to old Habibula. "Why are you here?"

"Because I like machines."

2 NORTH OF NOWHERE

THE OLD SOLDIER moved toward me across the lock. His rolling, cautious gait, in the low G-force here near the axis of the spinning station, convinced me that he was at least a veteran spaceman. His pale eyes measured the shining steel valves, caressed the

red-painted pumps, read the winking lights of the lock monitor.

"What machines!" His nasal voice lifted happily. "What divine machines." He gave the girl a pink baby-grin. "Look at 'em, Lil! Such machines are food and precious drink to me."

I too admired fine machines. I had spent three years polishing and tuning and loving the great space machine that was the station. For a moment I wanted to like Giles Habibula.

"Very well." I tried to be gruff. "But this is no mechanical museum. If you have any honest reason for visiting Nowhere Near, what is it?"

"We're conducting an experiment." His flat, shallow eyes flickered evasively from me to the girl. "A mortal important experiment! Though I told you I'm retired, the Legion has asked another desperate service of me. The Legion medics have made me a miserable human guinea pig, for a research that's likely to end in my death."

"Now we're getting somewhere." I thought I saw a glimmer of light. "What is that research?"

"You know I'm old." His baby-head shook sadly. "Dreadful death is crowding close upon me—a poor reward for all the hardship and danger I've endured to help defend the precious human race. But still I've not forgot the spirit of the Legion. I've volunteered to give my few last years to this rare and desperate experiment."

"Yes?"

"Lilith Adams is my very special nurse." He gave her a fond pink smile. "I'm her guinea pig for a new serum the Legion medics have invented. The hazards are unknown, for the serum has never been tested. I fear the research will end in my death."

Hunching his thick shoulders in the flame-yellow sweater, he shivered.

"That's why I've come to Nowhere Near," he wheezed. "To sweat out these fearful final years among the machines I love. Perhaps to perish here—a precious human sacrifice for the glory of the Legion and the welfare of mankind."

"What's the serum for?"

"Age!" he gasped. "It's supposed to immunize me to what the medics call the cumulative biochemicals of se-

nescence. We've come to wait here till we discover whether it works. If it does, the medics promise I'll be immortal. But it's a frightful gamble!"

"So you want to live forever?"

"I'll do my best, sir." He shot a murky glance at me. "I'm a veteran of the Legion, and I've not forgot our magnificent tradition. I've come to devote myself to this desperate experiment, to the brink of death itself—even if it takes a thousand mortal years!"

I stood for a moment just admiring his bluff.

Cool and tall and curiously sure in her clean white garb, Lilith Adams looked gravely at him and seriously back at me. I was almost smiling, but her lean and lovely face showed no hint of amusement.

"I'm afraid you've picked an unfortunate spot for this kind of research," I told them. "No miracle serum is likely to protect either one of you against the hazards of Nowhere. I'll respect your orders, of course—if Commander Star does bring any orders about you before the *Erewhon* leaves. But surely you can see that Nowhere Near is no old folks' home. There's not a man of us here who wouldn't give a month's pay for half an hour of sun and wind and sea and sky, back on Earth. Why can't you test your serum there?"

Stubbornly, the old man shook his pink and hairless head.

"I've seen too much of Earth." His pale eyes fluttered uneasily. "I've seen too many human beings—too mortal much of their yelling and crowding and fretting and scheming and lying and killing and stinking. That's why we've come to Nowhere Near."

"There are new planets enough," I argued patiently, "if you really don't like Earth. Virgin worlds, where you can really get back to nature. Seas that men have never sailed, plains that men have never plowed, creatures never hunted, mountains never climbed. When Nowhere gets on my nerves, I like to dream of those new worlds—"

"I've seen new planets." The old man blinked. "I've met raw nature, on the fearful world of the Runaway Star. Monsters in the sea and monsters in the jungle and monsters in the air—dreadful death in every breath we took!"

He gave me a pink, solemn scowl.

"I'm looking for my lost youth. If I do find it here, with Lilith's precious aid, I'll owe all my thanks to the computers that designed her new serum and the automated factories that made it. I'll owe no thanks to nature—natural death would have killed me years ago!"

Shuddering massively, he paused to gasp for air.

"I don't like nature and I don't trust people." His clay-colored eyes shifted belligerently. "Look at the wicked natural mystery you call Nowhere. Look at Captain Scabbard and his brutal crew. Nature and men—fearful nature and monstrous men!"

"Give me machines—like your great station here.

"Machines I understand. Take nature. This natural space called Nowhere—so I gather from the miserable men who infest the fringes of it—is a dreadful riddle that the best brains in the Legion have failed to unlock, after endless years of trying. Take men. I've seen how even the precious innocence of Lilith Adams can awaken unsuspected evil in the worst or best of men. You take nature and men. I'll take machines!"

He dropped his smooth baby-hand on the sleek black case of the lock monitor, with an air of familiar affection.

"Machines I know and trust. I can see how they work and fix 'em when they don't. Machines I love, because they exist to work for men. Left to herself, nature always kills us—unless our wicked fellow men are quicker to the death. But I think machines can save my poor old life, with Lil's precious serum."

Staring at the two of them, I had to shake my head. The riddle was growing queerer. Though I had been amused by old Habibula's agile loquacity, I couldn't decide what to believe of his story. The pink glow of his skin and the vigor of his fight on the *Erewhon* seemed to argue for a real rejuvenation.

Yet he seemed too cunning, too bold, too eloquent. I couldn't believe that any normal man would hate his natural world as heartily as he claimed to, or love machines as much. Certainly I couldn't believe that any sane veteran of the Legion would willingly retire to Nowhere Near.

Lilith Adams was ever more perplexing.

Though nurses are often beautiful and sometimes vir-

ginal, I had never met a nurse—or any girl at all—who looked quite so breathtaking, or seemed so aloofly untouched and untouchable, or who possessed her quiet air of absolute command. I couldn't help thinking that she was far more wonderful than any possible machine. Yet, like Captain Scabbard, I was somehow afraid of her.

I looked at old Habibula.

"If you don't like nature, why've you come here to the edge of Nowhere—which is probably the greatest natural peril in the universe?"

"Because I trust machines," he droned solemnly. "If some mortal peril does come out of Nowhere, nature will be no blessed help to us. Men cannot defend us. Our precious machines will be our only friends. I know no better machine than this whole station is, made to keep us snug and cozy here in space, trillions of miles from mobs and weather and dirt—"

The lock phone purred. The watch officer was calling me. Captain Scabbard had finished his unloading—except for the two passengers and their baggage. Anxious to get away from Nowhere, he wanted his flight orders. One of our free companions and three men I couldn't spare had asked to leave on the *Erewhon*. The magnetometers showed a dangerous new magnetic flux around a rock near the center of Nowhere. A dozen other problems called for my attention, and I had to end the interview.

"Sorry."

When I saw the quiet desperation that tightened the girl's perfect face and darkened her tawny eyes, I felt a stab of genuine regret, but I tried to keep my voice crisply firm.

"My job's to keep the station safe," I said. "You've failed to explain what happened to those spacemen on the *Erewhon*. You've failed to give me any believable reason for being here. You've failed to show me any official permission. I can't allow you aboard."

Old Habibula turned crimson, wheezing and sputtering incoherently. The girl straightened, looking straight at me. Her eyes had a terrible directness.

"Captain Ulnar," she asked abruptly, "why are you here?"

I didn't want to tell her. I knew I didn't have to tell her. Yet somehow her searching eyes required the truth.

"The reason—the reason is my name." Stumbling awkwardly, I confessed that painful fact. "Lars Ulnar is the wrong name for advancement in the Legion. Ulnar was a great name once—made great by many generations of space pioneers—but it has been disgraced by evil men. I volunteered for Nowhere Near because I had to prove that I was better than my name."

Her probing eyes were merciless.

"So you are kin to Commander Ken Star?"

"Distantly." Puzzled, I met her desperate eyes. "He is John Star's younger son. John Star was John Ulnar, before the Green Hall rewarded his heroism with a better name. But I've never met Commander Star—and I've no reason to expect him here."

"For life's precious sakel" bellowed old Habibula. "We just told you he's on his way."

I ignored that insolent outburst.

"My own people come from another branch of the family tree," I told the girl. "We've had our small part in the conquest of space, but we were never great. Never traitors, either. We never shared the glory of the Purple Hall, but we can't escape its shame."

For another cruel moment, her darkened eyes studied me.

"Perhaps you can," she whispered. "I hope you can."

I waited for another moment, hoping she would show me some genuine reason to let them stay. I thought she was going to speak, but she only caught her breath and turned away. I left them in the lock, the old man whimpering like a punished animal.

Captain Scabbard looked ugly when I told him that he had to keep his passengers, but he didn't wait to argue long. Our instruments showed a violent new disturbance raging out in the anomaly. If he feared the old soldier and the girl, he was more afraid of Nowhere.

I had to let the disenchanted free companion go with him. Her enlistment had expired, and I failed to persuade her to stay. A pert brunette named Gay Kawai, she had been the life of the station, but now, since I had seen Lilith Adams, she was suddenly old and fat and commonplace.

With regret, I refused leave to the three men who had asked to go with her. Their Legion enlistments had anoth-

er year to run, and I had no replacements for them. Along with half a dozen other silent, bitter men, they attended Gay Kawai to the valves. Their morale, I saw, was going to be a problem.

Captain Scabbard took his flight orders, muttering that he hoped never to see me again. The valves *thunked* against their seals. The *Erewhon* was gone, with the soldier and the girl.

At first I was almost grateful for that new activity out in the anomaly, because it gave Gay Kawai's unhappy friends something else to think about. By the end of the next shift, however, we had too much to think about. The magnetometers were running wild. The drift meters showed erratic but intense gravitic fields. The stars beyond Nowhere were visibly reddened and dimmed.

At the first peak of the disturbance, our laser search gear picked up two uncharted objects. One appeared north of Nowhere. At a range of half a million miles, it was jaggedly angular, three miles long. From mass and color and magnetic effects, we identified it as an iron asteroid.

The other object gave us more trouble, because the anomaly was affecting all our instruments. We first detected a jet of ionized gas, then a tiny solid nucleus moving in our general direction. When the gas flared again, turning it directly toward the station, I knew that it had to be some piloted craft.

We tried to signal, with radio and ultrawave and laser-phone, but no answer came back through the roaring forces of the anomaly. The station was armed—as we had need to be, against such men as Captain Scabbard. We manned the proton guns and fired a warning bolt.

The reply was a flickering, reddened laser beam.

"Calling Nowhere Near." The words waivered faintly through interference and distortion. "Corporal Habib . . . Nurse Lilith Adams . . . sweet life's sake, don't fire on us! . . . in escape capsule . . . from Scabbard's mortal *Erewhon*. . . . Now you'll have to take us in!"

3 *ON THE BRINK* 3 *OF ANOMALY*

WE HELD our fire and signalled the escape capsule to the north docks. When it was sealed station-side, the lock sergeant made it fast, talked through an open hatch, and reported by intercom to me.

"It's the same windy old soldier, sir. With the same lady nurse. Acting queer as ever, sir. They won't come off the capsule. They won't let me inspect it. They won't even talk to me. They ask to speak to you."

Old Habibula gave me an innocent baby-grin when he saw me in the dock chamber. He scrambled out of the capsule, puffing and wheezing even in the low-G field, and came rolling to meet me.

"Impudent puppy!" His hairless head bobbed toward the lock sergeant. "My cargo's my own blessed business. I won't have such insolent meddlers filching it away. I don't trust people!"

"Giles means most people." Lilith Adams spoke quietly from the capsule. "But we've come back to place our faith in you, Captain Ulnar."

"Have you decided to tell me what happened to Captain Scabbard's mate and those two spacemen?"

She looked down through the hatch at me, her bronze eyes as cool and aloof as the luminous Clouds of Magellan. When I turned to old Habibula, his brick-colored eyes blinked evasively. Neither said a word.

"You have no rights here—not even as spacemen in distress." I didn't try to hide my exasperation. "Perhaps I can't leave you out to die in Nowhere, but I'll have to hold you in the station brig." I tried to scowl at the girl. "Unless you care to tell me why you're here."

"For life's sweet sake!" The old man reddened with a hurt surprise. "Lil's too young and proud and fine for any

wicked brig, and something in me never loved confinement—that's why I learned my precious art with locks!"

His flint-colored eyes squinted at me shrewdly.

"If you want to be a mortal military bureaucrat, I guess we'll have to tell you why we've come back. I think the blessed truth will make you grant that we do have legitimate business at Nowhere Near."

"I'm listening."

"We left here as unwelcome guests on Scabbard's ugly tub, thanks to your peculiar sense of your duty to the Legion." His nasal whine lifted resentfully. "Scabbard's crew of hairy cavemen were all cursing Nowhere—whatever that is. The geodynes were stalled and half the instruments were dead. We were still on rocket astroagation, eight hours out, when we picked up a laserphone signal."

"You did?" Glancing up at the girl, I found her eyes upon me, darkly intense, yet queerly serene. "Laserphones don't function well in the anomaly."

"A call from Commander Ken Star—we told you he was coming!" His dun-colored eyes rolled triumphantly at me. "When you hear about that call, you'll let us in your precious station. You'll thank us for coming back, and keep us safe while you send help to Ken."

"We'll see," I said. "Let's hear about the call."

"I don't trust people," old Habibula wheezed. "That's why I took a mortal risk to bug Scabbard's cabin and the laser room, so that I could eavesdrop on the ship's phone. That's how I heard the signal."

His slaty eyes rolled at me.

"The call came on the distress channel," he panted. "Faint and fading, but the laserman pieced it together. Commander Star was on the laserphone himself. Said he was headed here on the *Quasar Quest*—just like we told you."

He paused to puff, squinting as if judging my reaction.

"But the survey ship's in trouble," he wheezed again. "Caught in the spreading anomaly. Space-drive out. Rockets dead. Drifting into Nowhere. Commander Star was calling for help, but he got none from Scabbard."

Old Habibula must have seen my unbelief, because his smooth moon face grew pinker.

"We're telling you the blessed truth." His hollow voice lifted belligerently. "Scabbard was scared—maybe he ain't as tough as he looks. He'd been drinking, but he took the laserphone. He replied that we were already too near Nowhere. Our own geodynes were stalled. We had no rocket fuel to spare. He said he'd report the call, if we got back to sector base. But he refused to render aid."

Old Habibula stiffened defiantly.

"That's why we left his stinking ship. I conferred with Lil. We knew you'd want to help Commander Star, and now we've come to bring his distress message to you."

His dust-colored eyes blinked alertly at me.

"Ain't that enough to satisfy you?" he whined impatiently. "Now will you let us inside your precious station?"

"Not yet." I stood frowning doubtfully. "Why did Scabbard let you leave his ship?"

"He didn't." Old Habibula grinned. "He'd got too drunk to care. I told you I've a certain craft with locks, and Lil can be persuasive. We gathered up our cargo, and commandeered the escape capsule, and left Scabbard sleeping." He drew a rasping breath. "Now you've got to let us in—and send help to poor Ken Star!"

"If all this is just a hoax, it's a pretty clumsy one," I exploded. "A liar ought to do better. I don't know what to believe—but in any case we have no ships or men left to waste on rescue attempts."

"Please, Captain Ulnar." The girl spoke from the capsule, her vibrant voice urgent, yet queerly serene. "If you do hope to escape the shame of the Purple Hall, we have brought your chance. You must take us in!"

I stood for a second looking at her. Spotless in white, bronze eyes intensely dark, she looked aloof and cool and alluring. At any other place, at any other time, she might have stirred me. On Nowhere Near, however, with that anomaly growing around us, I couldn't afford to let her become anything more than another baffling factor in a problem that promised no solution.

"I'll take you in," I told her. "But I'll have to make a search for weapons or any kind of contraband. Get out of the capsule."

"You'll find no weapons," old Habibula huffed. "Nor contraband, neither." His muddy eyes rolled toward the

lock sergeant behind me. "Like I told that insolent pup, my cargo is my own blessed business."

"Quiet, Giles!" the girl called softly.

Sullenly quiet, old Habibula held up his hands while I prodded his flaming sweater and his sagging pants. The hard lump in his right pocket turned out to be a leather-padded blackjack. The left pocket gave up a ring of keys, a rusted nail, a twist of steel wire, a worn pair of brass knuckles, but nothing more deadly.

When I looked at the girl, she jumped from the capsule. Flying like a white bird in the low-G field, she alighted on the deck and turned before me, lean arms lifted, waiting to be searched. Light flashed white on her platinum ring, glowed cold on that small black skull.

Somehow I could not touch her, but I saw no unnatural bulge. Leaving the sergeant to guard them, I scrambled into the capsule. Old Habibula's plaintive whine came after me.

"When you reach my precious cargo, remember our desperate experiment. Remember Lilith's precious serum. Remember all the years we'll need, to prove I really am immortal. We have come supplied."

Stooping in the narrow capsule, I inspected his cargo. I had been prepared for the loot of some crime as fantastic as his tale of immortality. I was prepared for smuggled weapons—perhaps for a plot to seize the station for a base of Scabbard's pirates. I was even prepared to find medical equipment and supplies for a legitimate longevity experiment.

What I found was caviar and wine.

"A mortal small reward for all my desperate years of service with the Legion," his plaintive wail followed me. "But don't you doubt it's real! The best black caviar, packed in permachill for interstellar shipment all the way from Earth—every can cost a fearful fortune. Selected wines from old Earth—the choicest vintages of the last hundred years. Don't you damage it, in some fool search for stolen jewels or nuclear devices!"

That odd cargo, more than old Habibula's unlikely tale of that distress message from the *Quasar Quest*, more than the remote and lovely desperation of the girl herself, made up my mind. Though few retired corporals are pensioned

off on caviar and wine, those heavy crates fitted no pattern of danger to the station that I could perceive.

"I'm accepting you as guests, not as prisoners," I told them. "But only on a temporary basis. Your status depends on how you behave, and on the truth of what you've told me, and on what else happens out in Nowhere."

"Thank you, Lars Ulnar!" The girl's quiet voice brought a lump to my throat. "You'll be glad you trusted us."

I gave them quarters out in the full-G ring, programmed the station computer to issue their rations and supplies, and asked the lock sergeant to look after their cargo. By that time Ketzler, the watch officer, was buzzing me.

The anomaly was still spreading around us, he reported. The disturbance at its heart had never been more violent. The intense magnetic flux had wrecked our best magnetometer. Reports of increasing gravitic drift were disturbing the men.

Ketzler was beardless and solemn, even younger than I. A loyal junior officer, he had been patiently in training for the time when our rotation plan would let him take my place, but now this crisis began to erode his half-learned authority. Even on the intercom, I could hear the tremor in his voice.

"I'm afraid—afraid of trouble with the men, sir. Especially those old hands whose leave we had to deny. I've heard some ugly talk."

"I know they're bitter," I admitted. "But I'm not afraid of them."

I spent the rest of the watch checking instrument readings and doing what I could to bolster moral. After all, I told Ketzler, there wasn't much the men could gain by mutiny. The *Erewhon* was gone. Our emergency craft, though mutineers might seize them, were none of them fit for the long voyage out to any inhabited planet. Even though the station was drifting toward Nowhere, we were all safer inside than out.

Haunted by old Habibula's tale about that call from Commander Star, I had the duty crew probe the region north of Nowhere with every available instrument. They picked up nothing, yet I knew the search was inconclusive.

The raging interference was violent enough to drown any possible laser or radio signal.

Because I had to present a confident appearance, as much as for any other reason, I called Lilith Adams to ask her and old Habibula to meet me in the mess hall for dinner.

"Delighted!" Her cool voice was oddly calm, yet oddly tense. "Captain, could you show us the station, too? And tell us more about the anomaly and this new disturbance? We've heard some alarming rumors."

The truth would be more alarming than the rumors, but I didn't tell her that. I did agree to take them around the station before dinner—for at least two reasons. I wanted to show the crew an air of duty-as-usual. I wanted more clues to the riddle of our uninvited guests. Perhaps I also wanted to please the girl.

Methodically building an image of steadfast calm, I took time for a shower and a shave before I went to pick up our guests. Brushing the dust off my best uniform, I caught myself whistling with anticipation.

On the way to meet them, I stopped at the control center. The desperate tension there almost cracked my image of sure authority. Ketzler was still on duty with the new watch, though he should have been in bed.

The center was a big, drum-shaped room, buried at the heart of the ice asteroid. It spun slowly on its own axis, so that the rim of the drum was an endless floor. One round end was a projection screen for our electronic telescopes; the other held the electronic chart where the computer integrated all the instrument readings to make a visible map of Nowhere.

I found Ketzler sitting rigid at the computer console, staring up at the shifting glow of the chart. It showed an ugly black-bellied creature, crouching at the center of a great web of shining lines that reached up and down all the way to the curving floor.

The black belly of the creature was the heart of the anomaly, the region where all our instruments failed. Its spreading purple legs were the charted zones of anomalous gravitic force. The bright lines of the web were lines of magnetic force—already spread far beyond the tiny, bright green circle that marked the position of Nowhere Near.

Ketzler jumped when I touched his shoulder.

"How's it going?" I ignored his nervous response. "Think it's peaking out?"

"Not yet, sir." His glasses were pushed crooked on his haggard face, and they magnified his bloodshot eyes. "It's the worst it has ever been—and still getting wilder. The gravitic drift has got me worried, sir."

He pushed a button that lit a curving row of bright yellow dots on the chart. The dots were numbered. Each one showed a charted past position of Nowhere Near. They marked the trail the drifting station had followed, always closer to that creature's belly.

"It's sucking us right in." He looked at me cross-eyed through the sweat-smeared glasses. "Even with our position-rockets going full thrust. We can't control the drift, sir."

"We've done all we can," I assured him. "If something does happen, I'll be at dinner—"

Uneasily, he licked his dry lips.

"Before you go, sir, we've a couple of things to report. That new iron asteroid we picked up north of Nowhere—it's gone again!"

He pointed to a red dot on the chart.

"Another thing, sir—before you go to dinner." I heard a dull echo of reproach in his hollow voice. "The laser monitors have just picked up what seems to be a distress signal from that same direction. No intelligible message, but we got what I think is part of the name of a ship. I think it was something *Quest*."

4 THE ENEMY MACHINE

IN SPITE of such disquieting developments, I tried to carry an air of hearty confidence. Of course the anomaly was dangerous, I reminded Ketzler. Its dangers were our business at Nowhere Near, and we were attending to them.

However tired or frightened or resentful, the duty crews were still at work. Our undamaged instruments were still following what went on. The computer was still plotting. The position rockets were fighting at full thrust to keep us out of Nowhere.

We could do no more.

Even if Habibula's unlikely tale was true, even if the *Quasar Quest* was fighting for her life against the half-known forces in the anomaly, there was no help we could give. Our lean resources were fully committed. If the cosmic menace of the anomaly had been ignored or underestimated, if our needs had been neglected, the errors had not been ours. We could not correct them now.

Even to myself, I dared not admit that we were near a very desperate extremity. Shrugging off Ketzler's anxious question, I advised him to get some rest and went on to keep my date with Lilith Adams and Giles Habibula.

She had changed her severe white uniform for something blue and sheer, though she still wore that ugly, red-eyed skull. Even at full-G, her motion had the flowing grace of flight. She smiled and took my hand. Her touch lit rockets in me.

"Captain Ulnar, you are very kind."

Her warm voice gave me a giddy feeling that the terrible disturbance of the anomaly had already swallowed me. She was walking at my side, alluring in that translucent blue, yet somehow out of reach. Excitingly near and

real, she was yet somehow wrapped in that untouchable aloofness that I could not understand.

"Giles has gone on to the mess hall for a snack before our tour," she said. "Can we pick him up there?"

A pang of jealous speculation stabbed me. If their queer tale was even partly true, if old Habibula was actually recovering his lost youth, it struck me that such a girl as Lilith Adams might be a more important part of the experiment than all his precious wine and caviar.

We found him in the mess hall. Still appallingly unmilitary in the same blazing yellow sweater and the same shapeless fatigue pants, he was sitting at a table with our one remaining free companion, a plump redhead named Gina Lorth. They had split a bottle of his wine. He was acting younger than his age and as free as the companion.

"Ready, Giles?"

Showing no concern about the companion, Lilith had spoken in that cool tone of unconscious but absolute command that told me she was far more than nurse or playmate. Giles Habibula lurched to his feet, almost upsetting the startled redhead. Suddenly he was sober. His awed respect assured me that Lilith's unknown role in this affair was something more than to prove his recovered youth.

"For sweet life's sake!" he wheezed. "Don't shock me so."

"Come along, Giles. Captain Ulnar is going to show us over the station."

With a sad glance at the wine left in the bottle, he gave it to Gina and came puffing after us.

"Lil's precious serum!" His flat, bright, rock-colored eyes squinted at me craftily. "It's giving back my youth, but at a fearful cost. Gnawing hunger and desperate thirst—and a yen I haven't felt for fifty mortal years!"

I showed them Nowhere Near.

The station was a lean doughnut of inflated plastic and steel, just thick enough for rooms on both sides of a two-level corridor. It ringed a thousand-foot hall of interstellar ice—frozen water and methane and ammonia—that would have been a comet if it had ever drifted close enough to a star.

That spinning doughnut made the rim of a half-mile

wheel. The spokes were plastic tubes that held power lines and supply ducts and elevator shafts. The hubs were thick cylinders that projected from the poles of the ice asteroid. An inner slice of each cylinder, spinning slower than the spokes, was pierced for the valves that let ships enter the air docks. The outside end of each hub, driven with a counter-spin that kept it at null-G, held its telescopes and laser dome motionless with respect to the stars.

Old Habibula appeared to enjoy the tour. His affection for machines seemed genuine. He lingered fondly about the atomic power plant shielded deep in the ice. He wanted to see the biosynthetic batteries that recycled our water and restored our air and produced the most of our food. He admired our intricate research gear. Somewhat to my surprise, he even seemed to understand it.

"One question, Captain," he wheezed at me. "You're showing us a lot of lovely machines, modern as tomorrow. What I can't quite see is the prehistoric design of the station itself. Why this spinning ring with its clumsy imitation of gravity, when you could have used gravitic inductors?"

"Because of the anomaly," I told him. "Space is different here—nobody knows precisely how or why. Gravitic and electric and optical devices don't work well—you know what happened to the space-drive on Scabbard's ship."

His earth-colored eyes blinked apprehensively.

"What is this mortal anomaly?"

"A spot in space where the common laws of nature don't quite fit," I said. "If you want the history of it—"

"Let that wait till dinner, Giles," Lilith put in gently. "I'd like to see the station first."

She still puzzled me. Though she didn't claim to love machines, she seemed at home with them. Her quiet question showed a keen brain, I thought, and a surprising technological background.

We were just entering the observation dome at the north hub of the station, where the night of space came into the station itself, drowning the faint red glow of the instrument lights in icy midnight.

We were in zero-G there, and I handed old Habibula and the girl little hand-jets. Both knew how to use them. Leaving Habibula admiring the gloomy forest of bulky

instruments bolted to the inside wall, Lilith soared easily away toward the vast invisible curve of the transite dome that looked out toward Nowhere.

"Captain Ulnar," she called. "Come with me."

Soft and clear, her voice held that odd tone of sure command. Surprised at myself, I followed her silently. She had paused above the looming instruments, trim and small and perplexing against the vaster riddle of the anomaly.

For a few moments she drifted there, looking out at the dust and mist of stars and the universal dark. Looking past her toward galactic north, I could see where a few stars were slightly blurred and reddened. Even that took a practised eye. The fearful shape of Nowhere revealed itself only to our special instruments. Yet something gave me a sudden queer feeling that she knew more about it than I did.

"Tell me something, Captain." She turned quickly to me, her face grave and lovely in the cold starlight. "What is the atomic composition of this dome?"

When I told her that it was a transite casting, it turned out she knew not only what transite was made of—she knew that the process of manufacture had been changed three times since that remarkable synthetic was first invented. She began to ask for precise technical specifications: date of manufacture, isotope analysis, index of refraction, density and curvature and thickness.

Though such questions seemed trivial to me, her manner was deadly serious. Young then, I still had an excellent head for numbers. I had prepared myself carefully for the duties of that first command, and I was able to tell her promptly what she wanted to know.

"Thank you, Captain." Her lean, pleased smile set my head to spinning like the station. "Now we'd like to hear all about Nowhere."

As the hand-jets carried us in retreat from Nowhere and the star-frosted spatial night, back to the faint red glow of the instruments and the drifting bulk of old Habibula, I felt more than ever troubled by the riddle of our visitors. Though I was finding new facts, they fitted no pattern that I could understand.

"We've heard rumors about this anomaly," Lilith was saying. "It seems to be a dreadful thing—"

"I ain't afraid of it," old Habibula puffed. "Not since

I've seen all these fine machines. You can trust my judgment. I've a sense for danger, that has cost me mortal dear. And I ain't afraid of Nowhere."

We were on our way back to the ring. Leaving the fan-jets in the rack, we caught D-grips on a moving cable. It lifted us through a cavernous hollow. It swung us above the dim-lit tanks and tangled pipes of the catalytic plant that converted the frozen gases of the asteroid into fuel for nuclear rockets and drinking water for us. It carried us flying above the massive metal bulge of the control drum, toward the main elevator.

"Far and away, I'm the oldest veteran of the Legion," old Habibula boasted. "In the bad old times, I've seen wicked perils that would blind your blessed eyes. I fought the mortal Medusae and the evil Cometeers and the monstrous Basilisk. But precious peace has come to the human system now. My trusty sense of danger finds no feel of peril here. I'll put my faith in these machines—"

The penetrating whine of my lapel intercom interrupted him.

"Captain Ulnar!" Hoarse excitement rasped in Ketzler's voice. "We've just got another fragmentary call from that ship in distress. The *Quasar Quest*. Commander Ken Star. And listen to this, sir!"

Old Habibula and Lilith were flying ahead of me, clinging to the D-grips. When Ketzler paused, I heard the girl catch her breath, heard the old soldier's wailing exclamation.

"They're under attack, sir!" Raw fear rasped in Ketzler's voice. "Something has followed them out of the anomaly. Some kind of enemy machine. A hundred times as big as the ship. Star says he's disabled. He says the thing is gaining on him.

"The last few words were interrupted, sir. But I interpret them to mean that Star has been forced to abandon ship." Ketzler's voice lifted toward the jagged brink of panic. "I thought you'd want to know at once, sir. What shall we do, sir?

"What shall we do?"

5 THE IMPOSSIBLE ROCKS

FOR A MOMENT I was busy with Ketzler. My first impulse was to reprimand him for that indiscreet intercom broadcast, which surely would damage station morale. Considering his extreme agitation, however, I let that wait.

"Perhaps the message is a hoax." I spoke with more conviction than I felt. "In any case, our duty is to carry on. Keep monitoring everything. Keep our guns manned. Keep me informed."

"Yes, sir." His voice sounded very lonely. "We'll carry on, sir."

Lilith Adams was flying upward two yards ahead of me through that shadowy space inside the ice asteroid. She swung on the D-grip to look back. Dimly lit from below, her face seemed gaunt and lovely and hurt.

"Captain Ulnar, you've got to do something." Her low voice was queerly, coldly calm. "We've got to help Commander Star."

"We're doing all we can," I told her. "After all, the station is not a battleship. We can't run away. With only two obsolete proton guns, we can't put up much of a fight. With all communication out, we can't even call for aid."

"If Commander Star is really under attack from an enemy machine—"

A quavering wail came from old Habibula. His hands had slipped off the D-grip. Jerking convulsively in the flame-colored sweater, his body went sailing away through that dim cavern, whirling like a living satellite toward the far silver sphere of a rocket-fuel tank.

"Help him, Captain." The girl's voice tightened with concern. "He isn't used to enemy machines."

I triggered my hand-jet to overhaul him and tow him

back to the cable. His pink skin had faded white, and I could feel his body trembling. He clutched the D-grip frantically.

"Don't speak of such machines!" His voice was a shrill, shallow piping. "But never think that I'm afraid. I've met and conquered dangers far more deadly than any space anomaly. It's simply—simply—simply—"

Clinging to the D-grip, he panted and shook.

"It's simply that I'm weak with mortal hunger and a thirst that won't let go! I'm the hapless guinea pig, remember, for this desperate immortality experiment. Lilith's precious serum has been turning back the years, but it gives me a fearful appetite."

"We're on our way to dinner now."

From the cable stage, the elevator lifted us out to the full-G ring. We found the mess hall dark and empty, but old Habibula observed with a sick, pink grin that its faithful machines were ready to serve us. Greedily, he punched the computer for three full meals. While he was busy, Lilith beckoned me aside.

"Captain—" Her hushed voice was gravely hesitant. "Aren't we interfering with more important duty? At a time like this, shouldn't you be in direct command?"

I couldn't tell her that she and old Habibula presented a problem as strange and dangerous as the anomaly itself.

"Perhaps you don't realize just how desperate this crisis is," I told her carefully. "One wrong move could touch off panic. As things stand, the men are still on duty. Ketzler is a fine young officer. He needs a chance to prove himself."

Her tawny eyes looked hard at me.

"Good enough, I guess." She moved toward the table where Habibula sat waiting for his food. "If you're really free, tell us about the anomaly." Her face seemed oddly urgent. "Every fact you can!"

"The first pioneers got here about thirty years ago," I said. "They found this snowball and a little swarm of stranger rocks. Iron masses two or three miles across—a harder alloy than the nickel-iron of common meteors, and richly veined with more valuable metals."

"I've read reports about them." Leaning over the little table, golden lights playing in her reddish hair, Lilith was listening as intently as if those queer asteroids were some-

how as supremely important to her as they had become to me. "How many are there?"

"That's part of the puzzle," I told her. "Even the number is anomalous. The Legion survey ship that made the first chart found five iron asteroids and three snowballs like this one. When the miners got here, four years later, they found only two snowballs, but six iron asteroids."

"So the survey team had made a mistake?"

"Not likely. The miners had simply found the anomaly. They didn't stay to watch it. The iron alloys were too tough for their drills—and then something happened to a loaded ore barge."

Giles Habibula started.

"What's that?" His mud-colored eyes rolled toward me. "What happened to the blessed barge?"

"That's part of the problem. It was a powerless ship, launched from one of those rocks with its load of metal and a miner's family aboard. It sent back a queer laser-phone message—something about the stars turning red. It never got to port, and no trace was found."

"Mortal me—"

His gasping voice was interrupted by the arrival of three steaming cups of algae broth and three hot brown yeastcakes. He fell to eating, as eagerly as if the machines had served his own costly caviar.

"Captain, please go on." Lilith was oddly intense. "About the number of these asteroids—"

"Five more years had passed before another colony of miners settled here," I said. "They found only one ice asteroid—the one we're on. But, at the time of their arrival, they charted nine iron asteroids."

Giles Habibula peered anxiously up at me, and hungrily back at his food.

"These miners had brought improved atomic drills. They carved into those hard alloys and some of them struck rich pockets of platinum and gold. Space traders came. Even the men on this ice asteroid made fortunes selling water and rocket fuel and synthetic food. They built the original station. A roaring little metropolis—while it lasted."

Giles Habibula had stopped eating. He sat staring at me, a sick pallor on his round baby-face and a gray glaze dulling his rust-colored eyes.

"So?" Lilith whispered quickly. "And—?"

"They were building an industrial complex on Lode-stone—as they called the largest iron asteroid. A barge terminal. A big atomic smelter. Shops for building and repairing mining machinery. A laserphone center for the whole swarm of rocks.

"Then something happened."

"Whup?" Old Habibula spoke thickly around the un-chewed yeastcake in his mouth, spraying crumbs. "Gulp?"

"The laser beams were broken. All communication with the asteroid was cut off. An oxygen tanker had been dropping to land at the smelter. Its crew reported that the asteroid had reddened, flickered, and disappeared."

Old Habibula moved convulsively, overturning a bowl of broth. It flooded the end of the table and dripped on his knees.

"That ended the mining," I said. "Half the people and most of the wealth of the colony had been lost. The survivors scattered. Even this ice asteroid was abandoned, until the Legion came. Commander Ken Star set up the beacon—"

"I know Ken Star." A pink, slow smile warmed old Habibula's round baby-face. "John's younger son—I recall how he used to bring me toys to mend, long ago, when I was on guard duty at John's great place on Phobos. My poor flesh freezes when I think of Ken out in the fearful anomaly now, fighting that enemy machine.

"I love Ken Star—"

"Captain, please go on," Lilith's anxious voice broke in. "Tell us every fact you can about the anomaly."

"Reports of the disappearing rocks got back to the Legion," I said. "Ken Star came out with a survey ship to investigate them. A new iron asteroid popped out of Nowhere just ahead of him. He landed on it, and found the wreck of that missing ore barge."

Old Habibula had been mopping at the spilled broth with a fiber napkin. He froze again, his small eyes watching me with the flat bright blankness of two wet pebbles.

"In life's name!" he gasped. "Where had the blessed ore boat been?"

"Nobody knows. Ken Star landed on the asteroid—his report is in the station files, but it doesn't solve any

mysteries. He found the bodies of the missing family, emaciated and frozen hard as iron. He found a diary the miner's wife had started, but it makes no sense."

"What did she write?"

"Most of it is commonplace. It begins with a bit of family history—she must have had forebodings of death, and she wanted her children to know who they were. Her son had been crippled in a mining accident; she was trying to get him to a surgeon. There's a brief record of the flight—positions and velocities, tons of load, kilograms of water and food, tanks of oxygen full and used. The nonsense is in the last few entries.

"Something had put out the stars—"

Old Habibula gulped and neighed.

"What mortal horror could put out the stars?"

"The miner's wife didn't know. She was too busy trying to keep her family alive to write much more. But she writes that the barge is lost, drifting in the dark. She writes that they are searching the dark with the radar gear. She writes that they have picked up an object ahead. She writes that it's approaching them, on a collision course. They are trying to signal, but they get no reply.

"That's the end of the diary. The barge had no rockets of its own. In his comments in the files, Ken Star concludes that the object was that iron asteroid. The collision killed the woman and her family. But Star doesn't even guess where it happened—or what had put out the stars.

"His own geodesic space-drive failed, soon after he left the wrecked barge on that iron asteroid. His landing rockets got him back to this snowball. He named it Nowhere Near and stayed here to watch the rocks while his first officer took the damaged ship out to a point where he could signal for relief.

"When the relief ship came, Star went outside to get equipment for the beacons and the observatory. He found it hard to interest anybody—these odd rocks were less than specks of dust in the whole universe, and people had other problems to solve.

"He had to use his friends in the Legion, but he got his equipment. The rock with the wrecked barge on it was gone again when he came back, but two others had appeared to take its place. He nudged this ice asteroid out

of the middle of the anomaly—though not far enough to make it very safe. He installed the beacons and stayed here another year to watch Nowhere, before he went on to something else.

"We've been here since—or the station has. This is my own fourth year. We keep the beacon burning. We chart those rocks as they come and go—there are nineteen, now. We monitor the instruments.

"That's the history of Nowhere Near."

Giles Habibula gulped the last bite of the last yeastcake, and blinked at me uneasily.

"What effects do your instruments show?"

"Optical," I said. "Magnetic. Gravitic. All connected with those rocks that come and go. Observing stars at certain angles through the anomaly, we find their images blurred and spectral lines shifted toward the red. Whenever a rock appears or vanishes, our magnetometers record violent magnetic storms. The motions of the rocks themselves—and even of the station—show abnormal gravitic fields far more intense than their masses could create. The gravitic fields keep the swarm of rocks compact.

"But I can't explain any of those effects."

Old Habibula had drained the last drop of algae broth from the last of the bowls. He sat for a moment staring sadly at the greenish smear of spilled broth beyond his empty dishes.

"That's the dreadful shape of nature!" he wheezed abruptly. "That's why I like machines. I don't trust people, but mortal nature is by far the greater enemy. Worse than any faithless woman. Just when you think you know the rules, she amends 'em. Those who say nature's kind are deluded romantic fools. At the very blessed best, she simply doesn't care."

He licked the last brown crumb of yeastcake from the corner of his mouth.

"Living things are in the race against us, for food and space and power." Hopefully, he licked for another crumb. "The nearer they are to us, the crueller the conflict. Life knows our own dear kin are deadly enough. People might be worse than nature—if they possessed the wondrous mystery of that wicked anomaly.

"Anyhow, each of us is trapped between nature and mankind—pitiless nature and pitiless men!"

He shuddered fearfully.

"That's why I choose machines. Their mission is to serve us. They aren't in mortal competition with us for the precious prize of life, as our fellow beings are. They wear no cloak of wicked mystery, as nature does. They do what they are made to do, and that is that."

"Giles, you're dead wrong."

Lilith Adams had been sitting straight and alert at the little table, gazing down at that dull black death's-head on her finger. Her fine head was tilted slightly, and her lean white face wore a look of desperate intentness—almost I felt as if she were listening for Ken Star to call again from his strange battle in the wild heart of the anomaly.

"I love nature." She looked abruptly back at us, her bronze eyes darkly grave. "I love the seas and fields of Earth. I love the cratered dust of Mars and the methane glaciers of Titan. I love the endless wild infinity of space—even as it looks from Nowhere Near.

"I can't believe this anomaly is natural!"

"We've considered that it might be an artifact," I agreed. "But in twenty years of watching we've never found a clue to indicate any kind of cause for it, natural or not."

"I think you have a clue now," she said. "You have that enemy machine!"

"Mortal—mortal me!" Old Habibula croaked and sputtered. "Let's not speak of that fearful machine!"

"I think we must," Lilith said. "Not all machines were made by men. Or designed to help men. If enemy machines made this anomaly, I think they may be worse than men or nature either—"

We all started when my intercom whined.

"C-c-c-captain, sir!" Ketzler was stammering with tension and fatigue. "We've got another message from Commander Star, sir. S-s-s-s-something you should know. He says he is under a new attack from that enemy machine. The *Quasar Quest* is wrecked. He's attempting to abandon ship. I th-th-th-thought you'd want to know, sir."

"Thank you, Ketzler. Is Star still aboard?"

"I believe so, sir—though his signal was suddenly broken off. Most of his men had left the wreck in an escape capsule. Star and a few others stayed aboard to cover them. But their capsule was shot to pieces."

I heard him draw a ragged, rasping breath.

"Wh-wh-wh-what shall we do, sir?"

"Duty as usual," I told him. "Keep the station going."

He paused a long time, while I shared his agony.

"Y-y-y-y-y-yes, sir."

More faintly, a confusion of other lifted voices from the control drum came over the open intercom. Though the words were blurred, the tones were sharp with shock and consternation.

"A light, sir!" Ketzler's voice came shrill with excitement, his stammer gone. "A queer light in space! We can see that enemy machine!"

The terror of his words ringing in my brain, I stared at Lilith. Though the rest of us were on our feet by then, she sat rigid and pale, staring down at the dull black skull on her ring as if its glittering ruby eyes had somehow hypnotized her.

6 THE BUBBLE OF DARKNESS

OLD HABIBULA and Lilith came with me down to the north observatory. Though he was acting half paralyzed with fear, she appeared desperately eager to see that strange light and the enemy machine.

I let them come because the riddle of their visit was not yet solved. Perhaps I had sensed a connection I could not understand, between the problem they had brought to the station and the peril outside—between those asteroids vanishing from the dark heart of the anomaly and those able spacemen vanishing from Scabbard's geodesic flyer.

The men on duty in the zero-G dome seemed unnerved when they saw us flying in on the cable, almost as if they had taken us for mechanized invaders.

"Captain, you sort of startled me." The dome chief hushed a harsh, unnatural laugh. "There's the light—whatever it is!"

A gaunt and fearful ghost in the blood-colored glow from the instruments, he pointed a pale crimson arm at the transite dome. In a moment I found the light—it looked like a yellow star hung in the black pit of Nowhere.

"It's going out, sir," he added huskily. "Estimated magnitude two point three when we first observed it. Now about three point six. But still bright enough to show that—thing!"

The fan-jets lifted us into the greenish glow of the projection cell. We hung to the cold chrome rail at the back of the long narrow tube, watching the huge luminous screen that amplified the image from the electronic telescope.

Here that light was a tiny, bright-green disk. The rest of the screen was only a faintly greenish blankness, until the nervous dome chief adjusted the controls. Shadowy shapes flickered and dissolved, and suddenly we saw the enemy machine.

Old Habibula made a low, hollow moan. I felt Lilith start and stiffen. A numbing something tingled at the back of my neck.

The thing covered half of that enormous tube. We saw it in shades of glowing green, outlined by that fading star. I felt stunned by its size, utterly baffled by its shape.

"A machine!" Even now, Lilith's tight and breathless voice seemed curiously calm. "One men never made!"

"A fearful machine!" whispered old Habibula. "A monstrous machine. I'm not sure I like it!"

If its hugeness was dazing, its shape overwhelmed me. Parts projected out of it, but I could not call them masts or tentacles or towers—they fitted no familiar pattern. Their shadows, greenish black upon the screen, veiled whatever they projected from.

"If machines are designed to do things—" Though I was fighting for control, my voice came out hoarse and shaken. "What is this one for?"

"For nothing good," old Habibula whimpered. "You can see its makers mean us fearful evil!"

"How is that, Giles?" Lilith's voice was breathlessly intent. "What can you tell about it?"

"Too mortal much!" Clutching that cold rail, he shuddered apprehensively. "We can tell that it was built to

propel itself through space, even in this fearful anomaly. We can tell that it was built to attack and pursue other spacecraft. We can tell that its unknown weapons were too much for poor Ken Star's *Quasar Quest*. We can tell more, as we watch it work.

"For life's sweet sake—look at that!"

His voice sank into a shivering moan.

Watching the screen, we saw the machine dart closer to that dying star. We saw a long projection, neither arm nor crane nor cable, extend itself to seize the star. The star was covered, dimmed, extinguished. The whole screen went greenish-black.

"What happened?" Lilith whispered sharply. "Where did it go?"

"Space is mortal dark out here," old Habibula gasped. "With the nearest star thirty trillion miles away. Since the wicked thing put out the light, it's black as space itself. But at least we saw it work."

"What do you make of that, Giles?"

"Trouble!" he moaned. "Fearful trouble."

With nothing more to see, we left the dome. I escorted Lilith and Habibula back to the full-G ring, and then made a careful tour of the duty posts. I found the men dangerously restive.

The unknown light had been put out. The enemy machine had vanished from our instruments. No new message had come from Commander Star. Only the great electronic chart on the end of the control drum showed the anomaly still growing—that black-bellied creature fatter, its purple legs reaching farther, its bright magnetic web spreading around and beyond us.

Without the chart, the anomaly was still invisible—perhaps that was the most dreadful thing about it. Only our computed drift revealed the intense gravitic forces dragging us deeper into that deadly web in spite of the thrust of our rockets.

The whole station was hushed and breathless with a sense of unseen menace closing in, so intangibly strange that we could not shield ourselves against it. The strain of waiting—waiting for a shape of danger that we could not even imagine—was harder to endure even than the seen threat of that dark machine.

My next long watch had come and gone, when Com-

mander Star reached the station. He came in the smaller escape capsule from the *Quasar Quest*, with only two men of his crew. To avoid detection, they had drifted all the way with dead rockets, keeping radio and laser silence. We had no notice of their coming until their retro-rockets fired, fifteen minutes away.

I hurried down to meet Ken Star in the lock. He came out of the capsule with a sling for his right arm and a bandage around his head. His gray face was streaked with grime. Yet I thought he bore himself well.

One of his men had both legs broken, and the other was dying of what seemed to be radiation sickness. At the station hospital, he made the medics do all they could for the injured men before he let them touch him.

Though the medics tried to insist, he refused to go to bed. His wounds were superficial, and he insisted that he had slept in the capsule. Dressed in a uniform of Ketzler's, with clean sling and bandages, he let me take him up to eat in the mess hall.

A slight, quiet man, somewhat stooped, he looked more scholar than soldier. Though the medics had washed off the blood and dirt, his face was still seamed with fatigue. At first I had been vaguely disappointed to find that a son of the legendary John Star could be so small and frail and vulnerable, but I soon began to admire him.

"The rest of the crew left first," he was saying as we left the elevator. "They took the larger capsule, with my executive officer in charge. The three of us tried to keep our attacker entertained, while they got away."

He shook his head slightly, then froze himself, as if the movement hurt.

"That scheme failed," he said. "The capsule was knocked out with what must have been a micro-missile—a tiny projectile fired at a fantastic velocity."

He was limping a little, and he let me catch his arm to help him board the moving rim walk.

"The same sort of micro-missile made scrap metal of the *Quasar Quest*." His voice was harsh and tired and bitter. "We had no chance at all—the finest cruiser in the Legion would have had no better chance.

"Not against those missiles!

"We'd see a faint flash many thousand miles away. The shot would hit us instantly—so hard it excited gamma

radiation. I suppose those projectiles would be weighed in milligrams, but they are unbeatable. No possible shield could stop them. No possible ship could evade them.

"If you had seen that machine—"

"We did," I told him. "By the light of—something."

"That something was the *Quasar Quest*." His worn face twitched with pain. "We had just got out of the wreck when they hit it with something else. Nothing that we could detect. But the hulk turned incandescent. Perhaps they were sterilizing it, before they came to pick it up! Another unbeatable weapon!"

"Commander—" I had to stop and steady my own voice. "What is this invader?"

Sagging wearily in the borrowed uniform, his worn body shrugged.

"If you saw it, Captain, you know as much as I do."

At the mess hall, he got off the rim-strip with no help. Though we were early for dinner, we found old Habibula and Lilith already there. Habibula had an open tin of caviar and two bottles of his precious wine on the table before him. When the commander saw them, he stopped with a gasp.

"Lil! Giles!" He seemed delighted, yet somehow disturbed to see them. "I thought you'd be waiting for me, back at sector base."

They were gaping with the same astonishment.

"Ken Star!" old Habibula bellowed. "We thought you were dead in space, killed by that enemy machine!"

Flushed and lovely with pleasure, bronze eyes glowing, Lilith came running to throw her arms around him so vigorously that he flinched with pain. I felt a sharper pang of puzzled jealousy. A very remarkable nurse, I thought, to be on kissing terms with Bob Star's brother!

"Ken, we were afraid to wait," she told him. "There was no way of communication, to you or Nowhere Near. We didn't know what had happened. We got passage out here on a chartered ship—and finally persuaded Captain Ulnar to take us aboard."

She gave me a dazzling, half-malicious smile.

Old Habibula came lumbering after the girl. With a hearty warmth, he wrung Ken Star's hand—and then stepped back, his wine-colored eyes squinted fearfully.

"Where have you been?" he gasped. "What mortal peril have you uncovered, to chase you out of Nowhere—"

The shrill whine of my lapel intercom cut him off.

"Captain Ulnar!" Ketzler was on duty, his voice hoarse and breathless with alarm. "We've just observed something I think you ought to know about."

"What is that, Ketzler?"

"We don't know what it is." His voice rose uncertainly. "Something out in the middle of the anomaly. Nothing you can see, sir—except that it's blotting out the stars behind it. It looks like a bubble, sir. A bubble of darkness!"

"Thank you, Ketzler."

"Any—any orders, sir?"

"Watch it," I said. "Report any change."

"It's growing, sir. It's already more than one degree across. And—" His shaken voice hesitated, and rushed on suddenly. "You know we're drifting toward it, sir!"

"I know," I said. "Keep me informed."

"Yes, sir. I'll do that, sir."

The intercom clicked off.

Feeling more deeply shaken than I had wanted Ketzler and the station crew to know, I looked at Ken Star. He had limped across to the table and sunk into a chair. He sat staring up at Lilith, a gray pallor of dismay on his pinched and haggard face.

"I'm afraid I know what that bubble is," he whispered huskily. "I have a theory, anyhow—a theory that frightens me!"

He extended a bloodless, trembling hand to take the girl's.

"I'm glad you and Giles aren't still waiting back at sector base. I suspect that the Legion is going to need your special skills right here—soon and desperately!"

7 "OLDER THAN THE UNIVERSE"

FOUR OF US in the drab little mess hall, we gathered at the table. I leaned to punch the computer for our meals, but Ken Star shook his bandaged head.

"Later," he murmured huskily. "Let it wait."

Old Habibula, with a generosity unusual in him, punched for four glasses and shared a bottle of his wine. It was a pale dry vintage half a century old, but nobody commented on its bouquet—or even on the remarkable fact that the sunlight which passed old Earth on its vintage year had not yet reached Nowhere Near.

Lean and clear and lovely in her white, Lilith sat looking sometimes at Star and Habibula and me, sometimes at the dull black skull on her hand, and sometimes far away. Again I had the sense that she was listening, as if she feared to hear the coming of something dreadful from that bubble of featureless darkness that was growing out in Nowhere.

"Tell us, Ken!" old Habibula croaked. "What is this fearful theory that alarms you so?"

Star took an absent sip of wine. I saw the glass trembling in his frail hand. Settling carefully back into the chair, as if he had suffered more injuries than he reported to the medics, he spoke to Lilith, almost ignoring old Habibula and me.

"I'm tired." His voice was weak, but steady and clear. "Shaken up. But I'll try to give you the facts you're going to need, in some intelligible order. You know I've spent my life digging into the riddle of this anomaly. I led the first survey and helped set up this station. Most of the time since I've been at the big cosmological observatory on Contra-Saturn. That's where I worked out the theory."

He paused as if to rest.

"What's so mortal alarming in a theory?" old Habibula croaked. "Why did you have to send for us?"

"The theory led me to expect something like that enemy machine—some further display of an alien technology advanced far beyond our own. I was prepared for hostility—but I wasn't expecting it quite so soon."

Star's bandaged head shook painfully.

"Our purpose on this first flight of the *Quasar Quest* was only to make a preliminary test. I was not expecting you to follow me here, though now it's fortunate you did. I was intending to return to sector base to pick you up—if we found that your singular skills were needed."

I sat staring at old Habibula's rosy, hairless baby-head and Lilith's lean and desperate loveliness, wondering blankly what possible skills they might possess that would be of any use against the monstrous threat of Nowhere.

"To test the theory," Star went on, "we measured the age of those rocks in the anomaly—"

"How's that?" Old Habibula gave him a fishy stare. "How can you measure the age of a mortal rock?"

"In this case, by spectrographic analysis." Star's worn voice was carefully precise. "Because matter does age. New planetary matter—its elements created perhaps in an exploding supernova—does have a pretty specific atomic composition. It contains a rather definite proportion of the radioactive elements which decay with time."

"A dismal universe," muttered old Habibula. "Where matter itself grows old!"

"For the initial tests," Star went on, "we used the thorium series. The element thorium has a half-life somewhat more than thirteen billion years—which means that in thirteen billion years about half of any given sample of Thorium-232 will decay into the isotope, Lead-208."

Star paused, as if to recover voice and strength.

"Take wine, Ken!" old Habibula urged him. "It's like precious new blood in your veins." With a rare hospitality, he overflowed Star's scarcely tasted glass. "How old are the rocks?"

"Old..." Star's voice faded to a papery whisper. He waved away the wine, with a grateful nod at old Habibula. His haggard eyes darted a sharp glance at me. As if we didn't matter, he spoke again to Lilith. "Unbelievably old ..."

Nervously, old Habibula gulped his own wine.

Star straightened his bandaged head. He drew a long uneven breath, as if struggling to recover himself. Lilith reached quickly across the table to grasp his hand. For a few seconds he sat silent, smiling at her fondly. Then he spoke again more vigorously.

"Our known universe has an age that we can ascertain," he said. "Our native sun and its planets are about four billion years old. The oldest stars in our galaxy are only a billion years older. Computations show that the expansion of our universe began no more than six billion years ago. Nothing older exists anywhere—except these anomalous rocks!"

That slow smile gone, he sat staring bleakly at Lilith.

"Nobody wanted to believe our results," he said. "We repeated the thorium tests. We ran a control experiment with Uranium-238—which normally decays to another lead isotope, lead-207, after a half-life of four and a half billion years. Always our answers supported the disquieting theory that we had come to check."

His bloodshot eyes looked haunted.

"Our test results show that these anomalous asteroids now contain less than one percent of the original Uranium-238 and no more than twenty-five percent of the original Thorium-232. That means that the indicated age of these rocks is at least twenty-five billion years.

"They are four times older than our universe!"

Old Habibula's pink moon-face turned pale. He flinched back apprehensively, almost as if the age of those ancient rocks had been a contagious disease that he was afraid of catching from Star.

"Commander," I broke in, "may I ask one question?"

He inclined his bandaged head.

"I've been watching these rocks too, for several years," I said. "They seem peculiar in many ways. How do you know that they are a representative sample of the original matter—wherever they come from! Couldn't the thorium and uranium have been removed by some other process than age?"

"Thank you, Captain." He answered with a methodic, painful care. "I know these rocks are anomalous in other ways than age—in size and shape and composition. But I think we took account of every possible source of error.

What we measured was not the total amount of thorium or uranium, but the ratio of each to its own peculiar isotope of lead. What we analyzed was not just the various alloys of the asteroids themselves, but also collected samples of adhering surface dust."

As if he had forgotten me and my objection, he turned stiffly back to Lilith. His frail hand was clutching hers on the tabletop, as if in desperate anxiety.

"Even that dust is four times older than the oldest things known outside of the anomaly," he told her. "Even the dust speaks for the theory that brought me here."

Her lean face looked pale and taut as his.

"What is that theory, Ken?"

Pausing as if to organize his thoughts, he took an absent sip of old Habibula's wine.

"It developed from my work on Contra-Saturn," he said. "I was studying the objects once called quasars—the quasi-stellar objects which looked like stars but turned out to be exploding galaxies. The biggest bombs in the universe! A single quasar explosion has the force of one hundred million suns turned into raw energy."

"A fearful thing!" Old Habibula blinked his dull-colored eyes. "Such monstrous bombs make our best weapons seem like mortal foolish toys. I hope you don't expect Lil and me to face such wicked weapons as that!"

"I hope we can keep our battles on a somewhat smaller scale." Star grinned bleakly. "But the enemy is deadly enough."

"Ken, I don't understand." Lilith's eyes had darkened with dread. "What have exploding galaxies to do with the age of these anomalous rocks—or with that enemy machine?"

Moving stiffly in his chair, Star raised his hands to rub at his temples under the edge of that white bandage, as if to ease an ache in his head.

"One possible source exists for such an explosion." His voice was weaker and more weary, yet still painfully precise. "A hundred million supernovas, all touched off at once, would not be enough. The only possible source is a blowout of space itself."

Shivering, old Habibula gulped another glass of wine.

"You know mass curves space," Ken Star said. "When the curvature reaches what is called the Schwarzschild

radius, space is bent back until it meets itself. The closed space, with the mass that made it close, is separated from our space-time. But energy enough to explode a galaxy is left behind—the released energy is equal to half the product when the mass ejected is multiplied by the square of the velocity of light."

"Do you mean those rocks were thrown from another universe?"

"That might follow." Star nodded carefully, as if motion hurt his head. "My theory is a new view of the universe. It suggests that all of our own visible world of space and time has grown from the expansion of a Schwarzschild space that was ejected from an older space-time some six billion years ago. It suggests that we are witnessing the birth of a new space-time universe, each time we observe a galaxy exploding."

"Dear mortal me!" panted old Habibula. "The world I thought I lived in was big and giddy enough. I'm not sure I care for your improvement. If nature is that complex, I know I prefer machines—machines, that is, of human make!"

"This new cosmogony staggered me at first, but I'm afraid it has to be accepted." A strange awe glowed in Star's hollowed eyes. "If every exploding galaxy represents a new space-time universe budding out of our own, then the total universe must be truly infinite, not only in space and time but also in multiplicity!"

He glanced sharply at me, as if to answer a skeptical question I had not asked.

"Captain, I've spent years on the math," he said. "My analysis shows that each ejected space-time system will become unstable and expand again. The degenerate matter in its nuclear core will explode into dispersing fragments. Expansion will generate hydrogen atoms, which will ultimately gather into galactic clouds around the separating fragments. As these new galaxies mature, they will in turn contract and explode and so create new space-time universes. The cycles of creation never cease."

"A novel idea of the universe!" I sat staring at him. "I wasn't meaning to object—it's just too big to grasp at once."

"It makes me giddy." Lilith gave me a quick little smile. She turned back to Ken Star, her bronze eyes

darkly solemn. "But I still don't understand the anomaly."

"At first I thought it was simply the scar—the navel, if you like, of our universe. I suspected that our own space-time system had not been completely detached from the old mother world from which ours was born. I believed that those ancient rocks had somehow wandered through a wound in space that was not entirely healed."

"Would your math account for that, sir?" I asked. "Could such a rupture stay open for billions of years? Or would it be closed instantly?"

"Frankly, I don't know." Star paused to press his bandaged temples. "You must consider the fact that each subuniverse would have its own coordinate systems of space and time. Time here may be space there—so that our own six billion years might be only an instant in the older mother world those rocks came from."

"I hadn't thought of that."

"There are other factors, too," he added. "Besides the mass-effects predicted by the Einstein-Schwarzschild equations, there are magnetic and radiation effects that are harder to analyze—the same effects that you have been observing, here at Nowhere Near."

Lilith's darkened eyes were staring at the wall beyond Star, as if she saw something far off and dreadful.

"Ken, does your theory mean that the anomaly is natural?"

"At first I thought so—I desperately hoped so," he said. "Now I doubt that it is entirely natural. The theory implies that the anomaly should shrink, if it changes at all. I'm very much afraid that the expansion we are observing is an artificial effect."

Old Habibula had been about to pour himself another glass of wine. He set the bottle back with a clatter, blinking fearfully at Star.

"For sweet life's sake," he moaned, "what does that mean?"

"I'm afraid that the anomaly is a kind of gate that still connects us with our mother world," Star said huskily. "I still believe that it was natural in origin, but I'm afraid that it has been enlarged or opened by some application of intelligent technology."

"You mean—" Old Habibula stopped to shudder, clutching at his bottle as if it had been some talisman of

safety. "You mean that wicked machine—and that bubble of dreadful darkness—"

"I'm very much afraid that the machine is an invader." Star's voice was faint and bleak. "I'm afraid that the bubble is the visible aspect of the opening interspatial gate through which it came. I'm afraid we must face a hostile technology that has been evolving four times longer than our space-time universe—"

The mess hall door burst open. Ketzler came tottering in. His face was white beneath a long smear of blood. His right hand was clutched against his side, and blood oozed between his fingers.

"Mutiny, sir—" His voice was a bubbling sob, and bright blood trickled down his chin. "Most of the crew—even Gina Lorth. They've got—control drum—docks. I guess—guess they just couldn't take Nowhere—not any more!"

Swaying, he clutched at a table.

"Something—worse, sir!" His voice thickened and broke. "That black bubble—more fighting machines—I was just going to call you, when they hit me—"

He blinked and peered as if his sight were fading.

"Wha—what can we do, sir?"

He crumpled to the floor.

0 THE ABSOLUTE 0 —ZERO!

RESISTANCE TO the mutineers, such as it was, had ceased by the time Ketzler reached the mess hall. The leaders were the disgruntled veterans who had wanted to leave with Captain Scabbard. Their only real opposition, apparently, came from Ketzler and the lock sergeant, Vralik. Vralik died defending the locks.

The attack on Ketzler in the control center had been made only to cover the flight of the mutineers. By the time I reached the ice asteroid from the full-G ring, they

were gone. They had blown up our position rockets, wrecked the fire-control gear of our old proton guns, and looted the station safe. They smashed the pilot computer in one of our two emergency rockets, and took off in the other.

The outbreak must have been set off by news of the invaders, because it showed more panic than plan. The mutineers took too many persons aboard a rocket built for only twelve. They left crates of supplies and drums of reserve fuel stacked in the dock. They killed Vralik needlessly—a letter I found in his pocket showed that he had meant to join the plot.

Though I saw no hope for them, I couldn't help wishing them well. The name of Gina Lorth brought me a painful throb of regret. I had been fond of her once. We had come out to the station on the same relief ship, both very young, devoted to the Legion and eager for adventure. A native-born mutineer, even then Gina had what she called a thing against authority. The raw cadet, I had been a fellow rebel until my first promotion began to turn her against me. Sadly, I had watched time dim her bright vitality and the dark spell of Nowhere put out her daring gaiety.

I felt sorry Gina was gone.

Seven of us were left on Nowhere Near—seven counting Ketzler and the two injured men from the *Quasar Quest*. Cool and deft and still alluring, Lilith helped us care for Ketzler. She gave him efficient first aid. Later, in the station hospital, she dressed his wounds and administered a tiny jet-injection.

"A drop of Giles' serum," she said. "It cost the Legion five million. It ought to heal his wounds—and add a good ten years to his normal life."

Nothing had been damaged in the north observatory. I found Ken Star ahead of me there, a gaunt slight ghost moving unsteadily about the red loom and gleam of the electron telescope. No telescope was needed to tell me how fast that bubble of blackness had been growing. A neat round blot against the silver mist of stars, it was now fully two degrees across.

At first it seemed featureless, but a dull orange spark came against it as I looked, creeping toward its center. The orange point grew brighter, yellower, whiter. Sud-

denly the bubble changed—I suppose because of some optical or psychological effect.

No longer a bubble, it was suddenly a wide black funnel. That white star fell fast down its midnight pit, down into Nowhere. We dropped after it. Turning giddy with my sense of that wild and helpless fall, I clutched a hand-rail desperately.

“See that, Captain!”

Ken Star’s husky voice seemed at first to come from far away. I had to close my eyes and catch my breath before I could release my sweaty grasp on that cold rail and follow him to the electronic telescope.

“See that light?” he was calling. “That’s your mutineers. They’ve been shot to junk and caught in that sterilizing field—I saw the puff of gas when their fuel exploded. Now the wreck is trapped in a more intense gravitic field—”

Breathlessly, he interrupted himself.

“Here! Come take a look!”

I joined him in front of the green-glowing screen. That black circle filled half of it—still a monstrous funnel to my eyes, so dark and deep that I shrank away from it, dizzy and shivering. The wreckage of the rocket was a hot bright point, toppling down its bottomless throat. Now I found something else—four fainter points, spaced outside the circle.

“Those objects—”

“Can you get the ’scope on one of them, with a higher power?”

Breathing even and hard to still the tremor of my hands, I brought one of those four points to the center of the screen. I turned up the power. The point swelled. It became a greenish blur. Out of the blur emerged another invader machine, the dark twin of Ken Star’s attacker.

“Four invaders,” Star rasped. “Spaced in tetrahedral pattern around the bubble. Guarding that gateway—perhaps helping create it. I believe they have come from that more ancient space-time universe, to hold a bridge-head against us—”

“Huh!” My exclamation interrupted him. “It’s gone!”

The screen was blankly greenish-black again. Turning to the transite dome, I saw that the moving star was gone from that shadow-disk.

“The glowing wreck just went through the gate into—”

somewhere," Star said. "Without its light, we can't see the invaders. But they're still there."

"And Nowhere Near is still dropping toward them," I said. "That spot covered one degree when we first saw it, five hours ago. Now it covers two—which means we've come halfway. Without the position rockets, we're falling faster. I suppose we have three hours, maybe four."

As helpless as Ketzler, I stared at his gaunt face.

"Commander, what can we do?"

Jetting nearer, he loomed tall in the crimson gloom.

"We do have a weapon," he whispered at last. "Humanity's ultimate defense. A top secret thing—but you will have to know about it now. Because I think we may be forced to use it. Where is Lilith?"

"Still in the hospital," I said. "Doing what she can for those injured men."

I clung to a chrome rail in that zero-G space, still shaken from my giddiness. The riddle of the soldier and the girl spun crazily in my mind.

"Is she—?" I gasped. "Who is she?"

"My niece," he said. "Bob's youngest daughter. Her real name is Lilian Star—Lilith Adams is her own invention. She and her two sisters are keepers of the peace. Chosen guardians of the absolute weapon."

Awe struck me, cold as the black space beyond the transit dome.

"I guess that explains a queer detached aloofness I felt about her—a feeling that almost frightened me. So she isn't a nurse at all?"

"She is a nurse," Star told me. "She says she needs some humane interest, just to balance her power to destroy. She has done original medical work. She led the research team that developed the longevity serum she's testing on Giles Habibula."

Hot humiliation flashed over me.

"And I'm the one who turned them away," I breathed bitterly. "When they came with Scabbard, I wouldn't let them aboard—because I couldn't believe Habibula's tale about how he loved machines!"

"A cover story," Star said. "But Giles does have a feeling for machines."

"Why didn't they tell me? Scabbard's men could have murdered them!"

"They're both more competent than they look." Star grinned faintly in the dim red dark. "Their scheme to get aboard Nowhere Near worked well enough, without compromising anything."

"What is the weapon, sir?"

"Its code designation is the letters AKKA. That's about all you'll need to know about it."

Floating behind that cold chrome rail, I glanced out through the dome at the round black shadow growing in the core of Nowhere. Something alien as space breathed on my spine.

"Is it—good enough?"

"It's absolute—at least in ordinary space. Just the threat of it, three hundred years ago, was enough to overthrow the Ulnar Emperors and their Purple Hall. With one stroke, in the last century, it destroyed Earth's old satellite and the invading Medusae there. I don't know what will happen when it hits the anomaly."

He peered uneasily at the dome.

"Can you call Lilith from here?"

I tried to call, but the mutineers had evidently wrecked the intercom.

"Let's get her here," he said. "Though the Green Hall has forbidden any needless or premature use of her weapon, I think the time has come to set it up."

The station hospital spun in a half-G ring section, almost grazing the crust of the ice asteroid. Breathless with haste, I burst out of the elevator there. Old Habibula challenged me with a proton-pistol I hadn't known he carried.

"Sorry, Captain." His murky eyes searched me. "What do you want?"

"Commander Star wants Nurse Adams in the north dome," I blurted. "He says it's time to set her weapon up."

"So Ken has told you?" His pink baby-grin was warily friendly. "Now we can stop playing silly games. I've been telling Lil that we've been waiting too mortal long for those fearful invaders to make a gesture of friendship. Wait. I'll bring her."

He waddled into the hospital and returned with Lilith. She turned to smile back toward her patients.

"They're all sleeping," she whispered. "I think they'll recover—"

"If those monstrous machines give 'em time!" old Habibula panted. "Ken says it's time for us to strike. For life's sweet sake, don't waste time!"

Gravely unhurried, she waited for me to lead the way into the elevator. As we dropped, I turned to look at her. Her lean proud loveliness pounded in my veins and ached in my throat—yet now she was a goddess, moving to the seat of cosmic judgment, serenely untouchable.

"Please—please forgive me," I stammered. "For sending you away with Scabbard. I—I didn't know."

Her bronze eyes fell to me, aloofly amused.

"You were not to know."

"Couldn't you—couldn't you have trusted me?"

"I asked your name." The dance of light died in her eyes. "I learned you are Lars Ulnar. I remembered that twice keepers of the peace have been kidnapped by Ulnar traitors. I didn't want to be the third."

I said nothing, but she must have seen me flinch.

"Sorry, Lars." A softer smile warmed her gaunt face. "We trust you now."

We left the elevator at the cable stage. I clipped her D-grip to the moving cable and we soared toward the dome through the shadowy heart of the hollowed asteroid.

"Scabbard's mate and those two spacemen?" I twisted around to look at Lilith. She floated behind me, staring toward the dome as if she could already see our unknown antagonists waiting out in Nowhere. "Was it your secret weapon that—disposed of them?"

She nodded silently.

"And mortal well it did!" puffed old Habibula, flying behind her. "Lil's got a precious obligation to protect herself. Even now, when both her sisters share it, the duty of the keeper of the peace is a fearful thing for any being!"

In the dull red dusk of the zero-G dome, I found fan-jets for Lilith and old Habibula. She had stopped at the entrance, gazing at that black funnel in the heart of the anomaly, her face gaunt and grave and white. Ken Star came soaring toward us from the red-glinting mass of the electronic telescope.

"Are you quite certain, Ken?" Her solemn question greeted him. "It's an awful decision—the future of worlds at stake. Do you know that they are able and acting to destroy us? Are you sure that no truce is possible? Are you quite certain that they or we must die?"

"You can assure the Green Hall Council that we have made every effort," he answered huskily. "Our signals have got no reply—except unprovoked attacks from weapons we can't counter with anything short of AKKA."

"But radio and laserphones don't work reliably in the anomaly," she said. "How can you be sure that they knew we were trying to signal?"

"We can't." He caught a rasping breath. "But I believe we have shown forbearance enough. After all, we want to survive—"

An alarm bell interrupted him, chiming from the computer.

"Mortal me!" old Habibula puffed. "What's that?"

Glancing out at that bubble of darkness, I saw another dull spark creeping out across it, the way the mutineers had gone. We soared across to the electron telescope, and I got its image on the screen—a jagged irregular mass, its projecting points and edges glowing faintly though most of it was dark. I recognized its angular coffin-shape.

"It's one of those queer iron asteroids," I said. "The last one to appear. The electronic chart had showed it between us and the bubble. I suppose it has been sucked in ahead of us."

Clinging to the chrome rail, Ken Star spoke urgently to Lilith.

"It's giving light we need," he said. "We can see four of those fighting machines, spaced at the points of a tetrahedron around the bubble—which I think is the gate through which they came. I suggest you pick 'em off."

"Not yet." Moving with a confident skill in that null-G space, she turned to measure that dark blot through the dome again, with her own unfrightened eyes. "I'm not yet certain. The station is an obvious artifact. The fate of the mutineers shows that we are within range of their weapons. Yet they have not attacked us."

"Life's sake, Lil!" old Habibula gasped. "They're dragging us into that tunnel of wicked night—perhaps into

another universe! They've left us just a few precious hours. Isn't that attack enough? Can't you see that we're all in fearful danger?"

"You knew this job was risky, Giles." Her smile was a flash of kindly malice. "Yet you accepted it."

"To save my mortal life!" he wheezed. "Old age was killing me."

She turned to me.

"Captain, we'll try one more signal." Her air of absolute command made her again the goddess judging worlds. "Train the strongest laser beam you can on one of those machines. Transmit the simplest signals possible. Begin with the series of squares. One flash. Four. Nine. And so on.

"Monitor everything you can, for their reply."

"Lil, don't!" old Habibula gasped. "You're asking for a dreadful death!"

But her air of power left me no choice. In the increasing light of that asteroid falling into the bubble, I chose the machine that hung northward from it. I set all our search and reception gear to tracking, and trained the main laser beam. Using the computer for a manual key, I tapped one flash.

Watching the angular shadow of that invader, I saw a pale, greenish flicker. Then the screen went blank. The red instrument lights went out. That chrome rail shuddered under my hand. A dull reverberation boomed through Nowhere Near.

"Well, Lil?" old Habibula croaked faintly. "That's your answer!"

"Answer enough." Her voice was calm in the dark. "We have no choice."

That shot—a few milligrams of matter fired perhaps at one tenth the speed of light—had pierced the armored hollow of the ice asteroid and wrecked our main power plant. For a few seconds, Nowhere Near was dead. The only light was the cold blaze of the stars beyond the transite dome. The only sound was the far roar of our air escaping.

But then the emergency reactors came on. Automatic valves began to thud, sealing off that deadly rush of air. The instrument lights shone again. The green image of that terrible machine swam into the screen again.

"Hurry, Lil!" old Habibula was puffing. "They may fire again! What you promised me was precious immortality—not that I'd be shot like a trapped rat!"

"Quiet, Giles!" Ken Star whispered. "Don't bother her."

But Lilith seemed unaware of any of us. Working very deftly and quickly, she was assembling her weapon. The parts of it were oddly small and simple. She used a worn iron nail and a twist of wire that old Habibula produced, two or three pins from her hair, and her platinum ring—the red-eyed grin of that dull black skull gave me an unpleasant start, but now at last I thought I understood what it meant.

In a few seconds, the thing was done.

Holding it one steady hand, she pointed it toward that blot on the stars. She moved her thumb, pressing the end of a bent hairpin against that platinum band. The death's-head leered redly at me. Shivering, I turned from her to watch that iron asteroid, which was brighter now, a tiny yellow star. Waiting for I didn't know exactly what—perhaps for some spectacular explosion—I swung again to the electron telescope. The greenish shadow of the invader was brighter now, but otherwise unchanged.

A low, wordless moan came from old Habibula.

"It doesn't work—"

Lilith's voice was broken, quivering. Her aloof serenity had been shattered. That air of power was gone. She was sobbing like a hurt child.

"I—I don't—know why—"

9 *BACK DOOR TO NOWHERE*

COLD FEAR caught me. For one sick instant I thought the transite dome had somehow turned transparent to heat, draining off our warmth of life. In the ghastly glow of the instruments, old Habibula and Lilith and Ken Star were faint frozen ghosts, floating motionless around me.

Implacable hostility glared down through the dome. The natural universe, the mist and frost and dust of stars, was suddenly as dreadful as that unnatural midnight funnel in the anomaly. Hanging to the hard chrome rail, I shrank from the pitless, bottomless mystery of infinite space.

We were terribly alone.

"Oh!" Beside me, Lilith made a small, frightened gasp. "No—"

Working with both hands to aim and try her absurd little weapon, she had let herself drift away into that null-G space. Now, flailing out in a sudden unthinking panic, she snatched at the railing. She couldn't reach it.

With a gentle thrust of my fan-jet, I overtook her. Her hand quivered in mine. She stared at me as we flew back together, her eyes black and strange and stricken in that deathly light. She gave me a faint, pale smile.

"Thank you, Lars!" Her cold hand clung to me. "I need you now!"

For a moment we clutched the cold rail, staring at the green and monstrous image of that enemy machine. I still hoped somehow to see her weapon take effect, still feared some grim retaliation. But nothing changed that glowing shadow.

"They aren't even shooting back!" Lilith swung in the air to face Ken Star. "I can't understand it," she whispered bitterly. "Why did my weapon fail?"

"Because of the anomaly, I suppose." His voice was

dull and dry, broken with defeat. "Space is different there. The difference affects the transmission of light and radio and gravity. Perhaps it also affects your weapon."

"That might be." She nodded helplessly, her icy hand limp in mine. "AKKA works by producing a peculiar distortion of space, in which matter cannot exist. If the anomaly creates a conflicting distortion—"

Her voice trailed off into desolate silence. Moving like a stiff machine, she took her useless weapon apart and slipped the ring back on her finger. That ugly skull caught the red light, with a mocking wink of evil.

I felt her shiver.

We hung to the rail, watching that funnel of darkness swallowing the northward stars. Though I could not quite see it grow, at every glance it looked larger. The white point of the incandescent iron asteroid was drifting slowly but visibly toward the center of it, moving in the way we would go.

Old Habibula uttered a wordless, tragic moan.

"Giles, you know machines." Ken Star's sudden voice was strained, hoarse, somehow startling. "Tell us how to stop those machines."

"My precious life!" Old Habibula shuddered in the blood-red gloom. "Maybe I do know machines—I know these are wicked. I respect machines because they have a purpose I can understand. These have made their fearful purpose clear."

"Their unknown makers mean no mortal good for us!"

The girl's cold hand shuddered in mine.

"No hope!" she breathed huskily. "Nothing we can do—"

"Perhaps—I think there is!" A quick excitement caught me. "Commander—Commander Star!" I stopped to smooth my shaking voice. "I think there's something we can try. A pretty grim and hopeless thing—but better than waiting to follow that burning boulder into Nowhere!"

His haggard eyes peered through the red dusk at me.

"What's that, Ulnar?"

"I ran a computer analysis on the motions of those rocks," I said. "Months ago. The results didn't make much sense till just now. But now I think your theory explains them. I think I know a back door into—into Nowhere!"

Shifting his grip on the cold chrome, he hauled himself toward me.

"Let's hear about it!"

"We'd observed the way those rocks were moving," I said. "At the instant of appearance. At the instant of disappearance. I fed the data into the computer, to search for common elements. In the appearing rocks, I found none—they seem to come out with random directions and velocities. But the rocks that vanished had all been moving up a cone less than one degree across, at nearly the same velocity."

Lilith's hand squeezed mine, alive again.

"What I want to do is take a rocket up that cone," I said. "If your theory is correct, I think it might come through into the world beyond that bubble—without being sterilized! I think it might give us a chance for some sort of surprise attack on whatever is beyond. Not a good chance—but any is better than none!"

He hung gazing at me. His hollowed eyes caught the instrument lights, and his gaunt head looked shockingly like the skull on Lilith's ring. I had to turn away.

"I see no chance at all," his dull voice rasped. "Didn't the mutineers sabotage your spare emergency rocket?"

"I'll take the escape capsule that Lilith and Habibula got here in."

"What will keep the invaders from picking you off like they did the mutineers?"

"I'll maneuver behind the ice asteroid," I said. "Get up velocity and cut the rockets before I come out. I'll coast down the cone. With the rockets dead, they may not detect me."

"Or, again, they may!" He gave me a mirthless, red-eyed grin. "What weapons will you carry?"

"That's a problem," I said. "The mutineers wrecked our big proton-guns—which might be useless anyhow. The best chance I can think of is a couple of tons of cathode plates from the atomic power plant, with an improvised detonator—"

"To turn the capsule into a nuclear missile?" He nodded slowly in that blood-colored dusk. "You're willing to pilot such a missile—on such a desperate strike?"

"I'm going to try." I turned to the dome again, to study that fearful funnel swelling at the heart of the anomaly,

the captured asteroid burning brighter now and nearer the center. "We've no more than three hours to try anything."

"Lars!" Lilith's hand clung to mine. "Lars—"

I squeezed her hand, let her go.

"Come along, Habibula." I started out of the dome. "If you're so clever with machines, you can help me rig a detonator for those uranium plates—"

"Wait a moment, Ulnar!" Ken Star's lifted voice interrupted me. "I approve the general outline of your plan—just because it looks better than no plan at all. But I'm going to revise a few details."

"Yes, sir." I stopped obediently, hovering in the dark above the cherry-glinting instruments. "I welcome your suggestions, sir."

"I'm making two changes in your plan," Star said. "First, I'll pilot the capsule myself—"

"Sir!"

"Listen, Captain!" Ken Star barked sternly at me. "Remember your duty here. Nowhere Near may be a wreck, but it's still your command. You haven't been relieved—"

"Sir, you could relieve me—"

"I could, but I won't."

"But, sir, you aren't fit for such a desperate strike. You're already exhausted—"

"Lilith has given me a shot. Considering the nature of the mission, I'm more fit than you are for it. I've spent most of my life studying this anomaly. I welcome—gladly welcome the bare possibility that I may live to see it from the other side."

"Sir, it's—suicide!"

"It was your own idea, Captain—and I rank you in the Legion!" His low chuckle rippled through the gloom. "I'll pilot the capsule. And I'm making one other change in your plan."

"Yes, sir," I muttered. "What's that, sir?"

"I'm not sure that any homemade nuclear bomb would be very useful against the technology that opened that gate. I'm going to take a more flexible weapon. I'm going to take Giles Habibula—"

"*Wa-a-a-a-ah!*" Old Habibula's broken cry echoed dolefully from the transite dome. "I ain't no mortal weap-

on. I ain't even in the Legion now. I'm just a peace-loving veteran. I came to Nowhere Near to find immortal youth—not to die in a foreign universe!”

“Giles, I’ve heard you tell of your own exploits.” Ken Star grinned like that small black skull. “I’ll take your own word that you are more formidable than any machine—and I’ll hear no more about it. I want you aboard in fifteen minutes.”

“For life’s precious sake, I—I—” Old Habibula floated unsteadily, blinking his rust-colored eyes at Ken Star. “Yes, sir,” he wheezed. “I’ll be aboard.”

Lilith caught Ken Star’s arm.

“Shouldn’t I come?” she whispered. “Don’t you think there might be a different space beyond the anomaly, where my weapon might work again?”

His dull-eyed skull shook bleakly.

“Wait here,” he said. “We’ve yet to find a target on the other side, and we have no assurance that AKKA would function there. Your duty is to guard it faithfully.”

I heard the hurt gasp of her breath.

“I’ll guard it.” I caught a faint flash of red and black and platinum, as she glanced at her deadly ring. “I’ll guard it faithfully.”

Ken Star swung urgently to me.

“Captain, is the capsule ready?”

“It will be ready, sir,” I promised. “In fifteen minutes.”

The cable-way was closed now, since that shot from the invader had punctured the air-space we had dug out and sealed off inside the ice asteroid. We had to leave the dome through emergency tubes—and we found that the automatic valves had closed most of them.

Nowhere Near was badly crippled. That micro-missile had exploded against it like a tiny supernova. The blast had torn an enormous crater in the asteroid. The shock wave had shattered equipment everywhere. Debris had carried away half of the full-G ring. Hard radiation from the initial impact had poisoned one whole quadrant of the asteroid.

But we found the capsule intact. Two broken lines from the supply pumps had to be patched, but within that desperate quarter-hour it was filled with fuel and air and water, loaded with space rations, stocked with survival

gear. Old Habibula came rolling dolefully aboard, stumbling under a load of wine and caviar that would have buried him at full gravity.

Lilith came with Ken Star to the lock. Standing ready at the lock monitor, I watched their farewell. He kissed her briefly. She murmured something. He started into the lock and stopped to call back sharply:

"Guard your secret well. Trying to use it, we may have compromised it. Avoid capture."

"Trust me, Ken." The smile on her gaunt and bloodless face looked almost gay. "I won't fail!"

"Guard her, Captain," he snapped brusquely at me. "Keepers of the peace have been lost in the past. That must not happen again. The security of AKKA is your first duty now."

"Yes, sir." I gave him a quick salute. "I understand, sir."

Moving with a brisk and almost jaunty haste, as if he felt more eagerness than fear, he slid into the capsule and sealed the hatch. A pang of envy stabbed me as I thumbed the launching-cycle button.

"I wish—" Lilith whispered beside me. "I wish we were going."

I said nothing. They had at least a chance to find what was beyond the anomaly. I thought we had no chance at all—but I saw no need to speak of that. Silently, I caught Lilith's hand. It lay cold and lifeless in my grasp.

The inner valve thudded shut. The pumps roared briefly. The outer valve opened less than halfway—and stuck fast.

"Wait for me," I told Lilith. "I'll see what I can do."

I scrambled into an emergency suit and cycled through the man-lock. Inside the main chamber, I slid around the capsule and found room to slip through the jammed valve. Outside, I discovered that it had been fouled by a deflated plastic shaft—a spoke from the broken full-G wheel—blown across the lock.

Working in frantic haste, with emergency tools designed for smaller and more delicate tasks of repair, I slashed away the crumpled plastic tube. The embedded steel cables still fouled the valve. They were too tough for my cutter, almost too heavy for my torch. Precious minutes were gone before I could part them.

Then I found the valve still jammed, the servo-motor dead. Sweating in the suit, I toiled at the hand-wheel to widen the opening far enough so that I could guide the capsule past the knife-edge of the valve.

Outside, we found that we were screened from the invaders only by the flimsy wreckage of the full-G ring. With laserphone dark, for fear of another shot, I jammed my helmet against the capsule to carry sound and shouted a warning to Ken Star that the invaders could see his rockets here.

He let me push the capsule safely beyond the ice asteroid before he fired. That effort drained too much mass from my own pack. When he used his laserphone, in the shadow of the asteroid, to warn me to drive clear, my thrusters were too sluggish.

The roaring jets of the capsule caught me, flung me spinning back toward the station. Flying through the dark, thrusters dead, I caught a frightening glimpse of the anomaly.

The invading machines were still too far for me to see, but that terrible funnel of darkness had swallowed more of the reddened and distorted stars around it. The trapped iron asteroid was brighter now, closer to its black throat, still falling ahead of the station.

Though that giddy glimpse of Nowhere left me cold and shaken, the more normal space around me was deadly enough. Helpless to control my flight, I missed the gray starlit bulk of the ice asteroid. Flying past it, I had time to wonder whether the direction and velocity of my unplanned flight lay within the critical cone that would take me into Nowhere.

Then a whipping metal tentacle struck me savagely.

10 *ANOMALY IN TIME*

BRUISED AND DAZED, I seized that flailing tentacle. After one stunned instant, I knew what it was—a loose cable from the broken full-G wheel. Though half the ring had been blown away by that exploding micro-missile, wreckage of the rest still spun around the ice asteroid.

The cable twisted away, slipping in my gloves. I held on grimly, for I clung to life itself. Desperately, I kept my grip until my unguided flight was checked. Laboriously then, fighting the centrifugal force that was like inverted gravity, I started climbing toward the axle of the broken wheel.

That took a long time.

Though I had been able to stop that first terrifying slide not far beyond the half-G point, the suit itself, even with empty mass-tanks, was still as heavy as my body. The gloves gave me only a precarious grip on the whirling cable. I climbed and had to rest, climbed and had to rest.

For all my years in space, I could not escape a terrifying illusion. The asteroid seemed suspended overhead, a shadowy starlit bulk. The whirling cable seemed to hang straight down into an insane black pit. The stars themselves seemed to spin crazily around and around and around me, until I had to fight a giddy nausea.

Northward, the anomaly was near one stationary pole of that whirling universe. The black funnel of the guarded gateway was larger every time I looked, the yellow fleck of the trapped asteroid always brighter in its bottomless throat.

Somewhere southward, Ken Star was maneuvering the capsule under cover of the ice asteroid. Once or twice I saw the pale blue jet receding into starry distance. For a

time I lost it. Then I saw it coming back—a faint blue flare with the capsule itself a tiny black point at its heart.

It passed while I clung to that slippery cable. The blue flare winked out. A shadow flickered across the whirling stars, just below me. It went on, rockets dead, invisible.

Twisting anxiously on the cable, I looked after it into the anomaly. Dizzy and shivering, I watched the rim of the funnel for the flash of a weapon. I waited for the small new star that would be the capsule, sterilized.

The dark universe kept whirling around me. The funnel kept growing. The point of yellow-white light in its throat was suddenly gone as that remote asteroid went through, into Nowhere.

Nothing else happened.

Muscles knotted and quivering, I climbed up through a cruel agony of sick exhaustion. Though my strength was failing, that savage force decreased as I drew toward the axis of rotation. Without thrusters, I had to make a reckless leap from that broken wheel to the nearly stationary hub that held the locks.

I caught the edge of the collapsed plastic shaft that lay across the lock and hauled myself along it until at last I could drag myself through the fouled valve and fall inside the lock.

For a time I simply lay there, trembling with exhaustion, until I found strength and purpose to cycle myself through the man-lock and clamber out of the suit and look for Lilith. She was gone from the lock deck. Calling her name, I got no answer.

A dreadful stillness hung inside the ruined station. Listening desperately, I heard only the thudding blood in my own ears. Cold alarm clutched at me. Snatching a hand-jet, I soared wildly around the hub, hoarsely shouting her name.

Still she didn't answer, but a muffled sob drew me to the deck of the next lock, the one from which the mutineers had fled. I found her there, lying face down on a pile of space gear which the fugitives had left abandoned on the deck.

"Lilith!"

Whimpering and quivering, she didn't seem to hear. But

I saw a darting, furtive movement, caught a flash of black and red and platinum. For one dazed instant I thought she was trying her weapon on me. Then dreadful understanding stunned me.

"Lilith—don't!"

Scrambling for traction in the nearly null gravity of the slowly turning hub, I launched myself across the deck. I came down sprawling on her, caught her arm, twisted her hand away from her teeth.

Fighting back with tigerish fury, she nearly won. I was still reeling from my ordeal in space, and her Legion teachers had trained her well. Feinting, kicking, jabbing with a deadly expertness, she twisted her hand free. She got it nearly back to her lips. To stop her mouth, I kissed her.

"Lars?"

She spoke my name with an unbelieving gasp. Suddenly she was limp, sobbing in my arms. I snatched her hand again, stripped off the poison ring. Her teeth had not reached that ugly skull. Its red wink mocked me, deadly still.

"Lilith—" Panting for breath and strength and courage, I fought a wild impulse to throw the ring down the air duct. "It's just me! And the time hasn't come to—"

I couldn't say it.

"You were gone so long!" Wide and glazed and dark, her bronze eyes stared at me. "I thought you'd been lost in space. When I heard something moving, I was afraid—afraid it was an invader—come to capture me—"

She clung to me, shuddering and sobbing.

"Lars! Lars! I'm so terribly glad it's you!"

I kissed her again, this time not to stop her mouth.

After a while she laughed softly in my arms.

"Captain Ulnar, your first duty is the security of AKKA." Her breathless voice mocked Ken Star's brusque command. "I like the way you're attending to it. You've saved my life—and made me human again!"

I held her alive and wonderful in my arms.

"Never—destroy yourself!" The words even were so painful that I could scarcely whisper them. "The invaders will be taking care of that," I told her bleakly. "Too soon now—unless Ken Star and Giles do better than I expect."

"Don't speak of that!" she breathed. "Let's forget!"

We tried to forget. For a little time, we almost did forget. But the stillness of the station was a monstrous voice of warning, and our thudding hearts were tramping feet of terror. Imperative dread drove us back to the laser dome.

We were deep in the anomaly. That black funnel had covered half the northward stars. With the electron telescope I searched its long rim for the invading machines hanging there. I found nothing. They were nearer now, I knew, but we had no light to see them by. When they sterilized our asteroid, I thought bleakly, its glow would make them visible again, but not to us.

"Lars—it's the shot!"

Crouching back against me in the chill red gloom of that null-G space, Lilith pointed at the dome. Beyond it, against that vast and featureless pit of blackness, I saw a sudden pale blue flare.

"It's the sterilizing shot!"

"I don't—don't think so." An unbelieving relief took away my voice. "I think it's the retro-rockets of that capsule."

"Giles and Ken?" She hung peering at me, a pink and adorable ghost in that lifeless night. "Can they really be coming back?" She caught a sobbing breath. "Can you call them? Find out what they've found?"

"I'm afraid to risk a call," I said. "Any signal might draw another shot. But it is the capsule—in braking flight toward the station hub."

We were waiting in the hub when the capsule nudged its way back into the lock. The drive motor for the hull valve was still dead, but I stood ready to cycle through the man-lock and seal the valve by hand.

Air roared into the chamber. Shucking off the space suit, I stumbled around the capsule to help with the hatch. It stuck at first, groaned open rustily. A man's head thrust out—shrunk, white-bearded, old. Sunken eyes peered out at me, warily alert.

"Lars Ulnar?" Ken Star's voice was rasping at me, queerly thin, queerly aged, queerly unbelieving. "You are still waiting here?"

"Of course we are." I caught his parchment hand. "Let me help you, sir."

Queerly dwindled, queerly bent, he let me help him through the hatch. Old Habibula followed. Even he was thinner, though his skin still looked smooth and pink as Lilith's. His pebble-colored eyes rolled wildly at her and me.

"Lars!" His voice was a wheezy, unbelieving croak. "Lil! We're mortal glad to find you here—and still alive! When we saw the station not repaired we thought it must have been abandoned."

Squinting strangely at us, he shook his hairless head.

"Did they maroon you here?" he gasped. "Alone in this wicked wreck? Or did the relief ship never come? Have you been trapped out here all this mortal time?"

Leaning on Lilith's arm, as if he needed support even here where gravity was nearly null, Ken Star stood peering with those bright, sunken eyes at her and me.

"How long—" His old voice quavered and broke. "By your time, how long have we been away?"

"Two hours." I studied my watch. "Perhaps a little longer—"

"Two mortal hours!" old Habibula bleated unbelievingly. "You're joking with us—when we've suffered too much and toiled too long and endured too many mortal disasters to be met with silly jokes."

Flushed with indignation, he sobbed for his breath.

"We've just got back from beyond the anomaly. We've fought through perils that would freeze the precious brain in your skull. We've existed for desperate years on synthetic gruel and iron determination. We've set our precious wits against the grimmest riddles of a foreign universe."

He wheezed again, as if gasping for life itself.

"And now you greet us with a silly joke!"

"I don't understand—but it's no joke, Giles." I looked from him to the bent old man who had been Ken Star. "We've been watching the time, because we have so little left. The station is still falling into the anomaly. I don't think we have an hour left."

The old man nodded with a birdlike alertness. The bandage was gone that Ken Star had worn, but I saw the thin blue line of a zig-zag scar across his yellow parchment forehead—an old scar, healed long ago.

"Time is different where we've been," he said. "I hadn't

realized just how different—though my theory does explain it. With the shift in space-time coordinates, instants here can be ages there. Most of the time we had no better clocks than our own bodies, but since we left here we have experienced months of time—”

“Mortal years!” old Habibula wailed. “So long I can’t recall the precious taste of caviar or wine!”

“If you got through the anomaly—” Stark urgency caught my voice. “Did you find a defense? Did you find any way to stop the invaders?”

“We learned tremendous things!” The old man nodded solemnly. “What we learned points a way to safety—possibly even for us. But I’d expected that dark gateway to be closed long ago.”

Dread shadowed his haggard eyes.

“So long as it is open, we’re in desperate danger!” He caught my arm with a quick yellow claw. “Let’s get to the control center—fast. I want another look—if there is time! I’m afraid that we have been betrayed by that anomaly in time!”

II “THE MOTHER OF MACHINES!”

WE RETREATED to the control drum, shielded in the core of the ice asteroid. I helped Star from the cable stage into the slowly spinning rim—and stopped with a gasp of dismay when I saw the projected electronic chart on the round south wall.

That monstrous creature had devoured nearly all the chart. Its ragged purple legs reached down to us and up to the curve of the drum overhead. The bright green circle was deep inside its swollen belly.

“It looks—dreadful!” Lilith’s tense fingers clutched my arm. “What does it mean?”

“The computer integrates our instrument readings into that picture of the anomaly,” I told her. “The web’s the

magnetic field. The legs or gravitic vortices—like the one that caught us. The belly is the region where the anomalous effects are so intense we get no readings. That's where the invaders have opened their gateway—"

"Captain," Ken Star broke in sharply "let's try the telescope. Our flight was blind—it's more luck than astro-gation that got us back to Nowhere Near. I'd like to see what's going on behind us."

"We can try," I said. "But our radar and laser gear are dead now, and the telescope requires a source of light—"

"Try it." Urgency crackled in his thin old voice. "I think there'll be light."

One soaring bound carried me across the drum to the console that controlled the telescope. We all stood watching the north wall. The huge round screen was suddenly fringed with wavering points of light—the dimmed and shifting images of stars beyond the anomaly. All the center remained black, empty, ominous.

"There's the funnel, sir," I told Ken Star. "Without a light, we can't pick up the machines."

"Wait!" Ken Star was breathless with expectance. "There'll be light."

Light came. A thin pale feather floated from the rim of the funnel, flowed toward its center. Another streaked to meet it. Slow meteors grew, converging there.

"Debris their micro-missile blasted off this asteroid," Star said. "On the flight here we came through the cloud. It should give us light enough to locate those machines."

For a moment I stood numb. My imagination was too vivid. Those converging points and plumes were the stuff of our own asteroid, falling ahead of us into that unimaginable chasm. We were too close behind.

"Captain!" Star raised his voice. "Before the light is gone—"

Though my fingers were stiff and clumsy at the console, I found the greenish image of the invader stationed north of the anomaly. It was moving, drifting southward. As the light increased, we picked up three other faint greenish shadows, the other invaders, all converging in that black abyss.

"That object!" Star's voice lifted sharply. "Coming to meet them—can you get a better image?"

"Not without a better light."

With the low power we had to use in that poor light, those enormous fighting machines were tiny greenish flecks. At first I could see nothing else. Then I made out a vague blur emerging from the dark ahead of them. In the glow of a new plume of fire, it was suddenly clear.

I heard Lilith gasp.

"A machine?" she breathed. "A ship!"

"The mother of all machines!" old Habibula croaked from the doorway. "It has followed us back from that foreign universe!"

The thing was made of seven unequal spheres, partly fused together. Roughly spindle-shaped, thick at the center, it tapered toward both pointed ends. Three curved rods or tubes made a tight cage that bound the spheres. I shivered with awe at its strangeness—and its enormous size.

"It must be big!"

Dazed, I was trying to imagine just how big it must be. If those gray-green motes flying to meet it were machines a hundred times the size of a Legion cruiser, I thought it must be another hundred times larger.

"Mortal big!" croaked old Habibula. "It's the monstrous mother ship!"

Unbelievably, I turned to Ken Star.

"Is it really—a ship?"

"Space fort might be a better term," Star said. "It's a good ten miles along those—let's call 'em decks—from nose to tail. The middle globe must be two miles through—and it's filled with things you can't imagine."

"Do you mean—?"

He nodded a brisk answer to that half-spoken question.

"We were aboard." He tugged at his neat white beard.

"Long enough at least for this to grow."

"Years!" puffed old Habibula. "Mortal years of fear and famine!"

He had left us on the way from the lock to the drum, and now I saw that he had slipped away to raid his private hoard. His tattered pockets bulged, and he clutched an open bottle of the rare wine of Earth in each baby-hand.

"What does it mean?" Staring at the growing image of that enormous, alien spindle-shape, I felt a chill of puzzled

dread. Nothing about it told me anything. I swung blankly back to Ken Star. "What did you discover?"

"Wait, Captain." He lifted a thin yellow claw. "I want to see what it does."

Moving with an old spaceman's cautious rhythm, Habibula waddled across the curve of the drum to a table. Carefully, he planted the bottles of wine. From his bulging pockets he unloaded clinking tins of caviar. The rest of us stood watching the green electronic shadow of that titanic thing.

We saw a port open in that largest central globe—a faint dark dot. We saw the four drifting sparks converge and wheel outside it. We saw them enter and vanish, one by one. We saw the dot disappear.

"That valve is fifteen hundred feet across," Star said. "Among the instruments around it is a tube which I suppose is a wave-guide for signals from an outside antenna. That's the entrance Giles found for us."

A new respect drew my eyes to old Habibula. He had opened a can of caviar. Using a small pocket tool that combined opener and spoon, he was stuffing the little black eggs into his mouth. He belched.

"A desperate adventure!" His rust-colored eyes blinked across the table. "I've risked my precious life ten thousand times in faithful service to the Legion. But I've never endured such a dreadful time as this!"

"Giles does possess special skill," Star agreed briskly. "Without them, we should certainly have failed."

"But never did my genius face such a fearful trial!" old Habibula moaned. "You know my hard-earned arts have helped me solve some frightful problems for mankind. I entered the black city of the evil Medusae! I unlocked the inner world of the monstrous Cometeers! I solved the deadly riddle of the Basilisk! But never was a time so mortal black as this!"

He paused to gulp from a tilted bottle.

"Beyond the anomaly, we came into a fearful universe you'd never imagine. A black and dreadful world where human life has no right to be. But for my precious genius, we should both have died there."

"Even with all Giles' peculiar aptitudes, we very nearly did."

Ken Star stood watching the shadowy image of that appalling machine. When I began asking, a little wildly, what they had found beyond the anomaly, his withered hand lifted impatiently to cut me off.

"We've been gone too long," he muttered rustily. "I'm too tired—and too much has happened. When we found the station here, I was hoping we were safe. But now, since we've run into anomaly in time, I'm afraid we've no leisure for any connected narrative."

"But—Ken!" Lilith's voice was dry with dread. "Can't we do—anything?"

"Nothing." His old voice was slow with dull despair. "Nothing we haven't done."

"Your theory did prove out?" I insisted. "You did come through into another space and time?"

"I'll tell you what I can." He nodded stiffly. "In whatever time there is."

"Come." Old Habibula waved a bottle of his precious wine. "Sit. If we are doomed to die like vermin in a blessed sterilizer—let's not die famished!"

We joined him at the table, where once I had presided at meetings of the station staff. Habibula handed around his bottle of wine, his flat shallow eyes watching jealously. Lilith and I let it go by. We all looked at Ken Star.

"Captain, we followed your proposed path into the anomaly." Ken Star took the bottle and sipped lightly. "With the rockets dead, we let the capsule drift at the angle and velocity you had computed. Ten minutes from the station, the invaders picked us up.

"Our forward ports began flashing with an intermittent blue fluorescence. We knew they were tracking us with some kind of black radiation—something that worked in the anomaly. We kept waiting for a micro-missile or a heat beam.

"I don't know yet why they didn't fire. Maybe they did—maybe our course had already carried us into a space where their missiles couldn't reach us. Anyhow, before we were halfway to the center of the anomaly, the stars went out."

Startled, I recalled the strange last words that miner's wife had written on the ore-barge which drifted into Nowhere.

"We didn't feel anything." Ken Star's dry old voice was papery and faint, but firmly controlled and carefully intelligent. "None of the shock or jolt or pain you might expect. But suddenly we were in another space-time universe—"

"A wicked space!" old Habibula wheezed. "A dark and fearful universe!"

A glaze of dread had dulled Ken Star's eyes.

"At first it seemed absolutely dark," he said. "Black and empty everywhere. But then, with the glasses, we did pick up two or three distant galaxies—the nearest must have been a dozen times as far from us as Andromeda is from here. I thought we had dropped into an empty universe—"

"What did you find there?"

"Mortal danger!" Old Habibula's cold-colored eyes peered at me over another open can of caviar. "Fearful things to freeze the precious breath of life. Monstrous evil older than the universe. Ah, it was worse than the worlds of the fearful Cometeers!"

Ken Star had stopped to stare at the telescope screen. It was darker now. The infall of debris from the station must have ceased, because we saw no new sparks or plumes of flame drifting ahead of us into that dreadful chasm. As the last wisps and flecks of incandescence faded, the illuminated image of that unbelievable space fortress faded into darkness. The screen looked empty, dead.

"But the fearful thing is still out there!" old Habibula croaked hoarsely. "Waiting for us in the dark."

Even in the bright-lit drum, I felt a cold tingle at the back of my neck.

"In that other space—" I swung anxiously back to Ken Star. "What did you find?"

"Nothing, for a long time," he said. "In that universal darkness, we couldn't see a thing. Our radar and laser gear didn't work at first. Later, when we had drifted away from the other end of the anomaly, we began to pick up objects—"

"My weapon!" Lilith interrupted him, her face white and desperate. "Would it work there?"

"I don't know." The droop of Ken Star's thin shoulders expressed a dull futility. "Anyhow, they're on this side now. We'll have no chance to try it."

"What were those objects?" Anxiously I urged him on.

"Iron asteroids," he said. "Like those you have been observing, Captain, drifting in and out through the anomaly. A great swarm of them. When we got the laser going we charted eleven hundred.

"Later, we landed on several of them. They're the same queer rocks you have seen. The same tough alloy. The same size—a few miles long. Covered with the same adhering cosmic dust. Old dust. Dust of matter born thirty billion years ago."

His haunted eyes looked blindly up at me.

"Queer rocks!" he muttered. "But one of them you know about. Years ago—even in your time here—it came through the anomaly. Miners here built a town on it. Then it drifted back again."

"You don't mean—Lodestone?"

"That's what they called it."

"Did you find the miners—the people?"

His face turned bleak.

"We landed there," he said. "We spent weeks—maybe months—of that other time, looking for clues. We found empty structures. Abandoned machines. Even frozen supplies that helped us keep alive. But no people. In the time of that other universe, you see, that colony must have been marooned many thousand years ago."

I heard the sharp intake of Lilith's breath.

"The people did survive for several generations," Ken Star continued. "We found notes and diaries, even a graveyard. A pretty grim story. They were trying to find where they were and how to get back. They explored some of the other rocks. Though they were spinning theories, they never cracked the secret. They had no Habibula."

"In life's name, Ken!" Old Habibula blinked uncomfortably. "Don't poke jokes at me!"

"I'm not joking," Ken Star said. "The death of Lodestone is certainly no joke. It died of energy-famine. It had no sun. Its radium and thorium had long ago decayed. Most of the desperate survivors left it at last to look for our universe. What they found was that mother machine. It picked them off with micro-missiles. The last few men left fragmentary records on the rock."

He fell silent, his haggard eyes peering at the blank, greenish screen.

"What are those rocks?" I tried to smooth the hoarseness from my voice. "They seem as queer as the anomaly, as strange as that machine. Did you find out—"

"We learned what they had been." His bright, sunken eyes flashed at me and back at the screen, like the eyes of something hunted. "At one time—I think before our space and time were born—they had been ships!"

12 MULTIPLEX UNIVERSE

A SHOCKED STILLNESS filled the drum and vibrated through the whirling ruin of Nowhere Near. Turning blankly to peer at the charted creature that had swallowed us, I heard the stifled catch of Lilith's breath. I started at the click of old Habibula's bottle on the table.

"They couldn't be ships!" I swung to stare at Ken Star. "What makes you think they are?"

"We explored a number of them," Ken Star said. "We found records on Lodestone—narratives written by desperate men who had explored others. Some of them are visibly artifacts. A few still have the shape of ships—queer, enormous ships—even after time we can't calculate."

"But—ships?" A stubborn unbelief shook my voice. "They're miles long!"

His gaunt head nodded at the blank screen.

"So is that thing."

"What—" I had to get my breath. "What happened to them?"

"Time." In the vibrant silence of the drum, his precise old voice echoed like a gong of doom. "Time and catastrophe. I think their last voyage was begun before our own space and time were born."

"You know where they came from?"

About to speak, he stopped to watch that blank screen again. Old Habibula dropped an empty caviar can, which made a shocking clatter. Glancing at Lilith, I found her staring into the mocking ruby eyes of that small skull. Her face was bloodless and desperate. I caught her hand, covering the poison ring. She turned slowly to watch Ken Star, her cold hand limp in mine.

"I think we know," he said at last. "I believe I told you long ago about my theory that our own space-time universe has grown from the space and mass ejected from an exploding galaxy in that mother universe? Well, I think the fleet carried refugees from that galaxy.

"A tremendous, tragic saga! Its heroes, I imagine, were creatures a little like ourselves. We found doorways, anyhow, not much too large for men, and dust of phosphorous and calcium where one of them must have died. Their biochemistry is lost beyond reconstruction, but those ships prove a high technology.

"Only old galaxies explode. Their race must have been ancient and powerful. They have left the traces of an awesome struggle to survive. They must have fled first to the fringes of their galaxy, ahead of the explosion.

"There, with the whole galaxy behind them exploding like a hundred million supernovas, they built their fleet. Apparently the expansion of their old universe had left their galaxy isolated, with no other near enough to reach. Anyhow, they took the dangerous path that the galactic explosion had revealed. They attempted interspatial flight."

He paused again to watch that black circle of greenish darkness, with its dim fringe of shifted stars.

"That one surviving ship is manned with robots," he said. "Its survival is ironic, because it was built to take the greatest danger. The refugees built it to open a way from space to space, for their escape. When the way was open, it was to come through first, to survey the new space and secure a bridgehead for their invasion."

Lilith's cold hand clenched hard on mine.

"I'm not sure what all went wrong," Ken Star said. "We found no records we could read—none except those old machines. But I believe part of the fleet was trapped in

that galactic explosion. Nothing less could have fused and battered those magnificent ships into the things we took for natural asteroids.

"I think more of them were mauled when they came into the new universe too soon—while its expanding mass was still as deadly as the exploding galaxy. Perhaps there were other fatal excursions—we can only speculate. But the deadliest surprise of all must have been the anomaly of time."

"And that's a fearful thing!" gasped old Habibula. "But for Lil's precious serum I'd be frozen and dead a thousand years ago in that foreign universe!"

Shivering, he drained his wine.

"The crippled fleet must have been left to wait while the robots came through to prepare for their invasion," Ken Star said. "At the different rates of time, a million years—or a hundred million—may have passed for the fleet before the robots could send the signal for it to follow.

"By that time, the invading race was dead—"

"So we've just machines to fight?" I whispered. "No living things at all?"

"Just machines." Ken Star nodded. "Such machines as those four robots we saw."

"Mortal great machines!" gasped old Habibula. "On their fearful scale of time and size, we're less than any insect!"

"But still they are machines." Ken Star smiled bleakly at him. "They are excellent machines. They do what they were built to do, and that is all—I am quoting Giles. He observed them. He saw their function in their form. That's how we escaped alive—"

"I thought we had escaped." Old Habibula sat staring sadly at the empty bottle. "Until we found we were still caught in this old game the robots play."

"A game?" Squeezing Lilith's hand, I tried not to shiver. "With robots?"

"I suppose they've been playing it, in different times and spaces, since our universe was born. They make a crossing. They prepare a base. They signal for the fleet. Of course it cannot come—except for those few hulks that are caught and drawn through by the forces of the nexus itself."

"What happens then?"

Sitting hunched and tense and old, Ken Star peered at the screen.

"We're waiting to find out," he said. "I hope the robots conclude that the invasion point was somehow unsuitable. I hope they retreat, to try some other point—perhaps in some other universe."

"Do you think they will?"

"The evidence hints that in the past they have." His gaunt head nodded. "Hundreds of thousands of times, I imagine. The mother machine is old enough itself—though time is almost stopped in the anomaly and those wrecked ships have been exposed to perhaps a billion-fold the time—

"Look at that!" His voice lifted sharply. "Another spray of debris, I suppose, from the shot that hit this asteroid."

The screen glowed again, with sparks and plumes of pale green fire. Born among the dim stars around that circle of darkness, they flowed into it, spilling over the lip of that dreadful funnel, flowing before us in a giddy torrent toward that midnight universe. They lit the mother machine.

It looked bright and near, terribly huge and terribly strange. Parts of it sprang out at me—jutting things that were not booms or planes or antennas or jets. It was swiftly turning—swinging so that its seven fused spheres merged into one, so that their enclosing cage became three projecting tabs.

"It's pointing straight at us!" Alarmed, I turned to Ken Star. "What does that mean?"

"We'll soon know."

Desperately, I swung to the chart on the opposite wall. The green point of Nowhere Near was deep in the creature's belly. The machine was a bright red point. They were creeping together.

"A collision course!" I gasped. "That's what the computer shows. We're going to hit it!"

"I don't think so." Ken Star's old voice seemed oddly calm. "They won't let that happen—whatever they do." His hollowed eyes flashed at old Habibula. "Giles, what do you think?"

"They're machines." Habibula's pebble-colored eyes blinked uneasily. "They're doing what they were built to do. They hold us no malice at all. They aren't wicked like nature or men. But if they read the movement of the asteroid as a threat to their task, they'll destroy us instantly."

"Shall we abandon Nowhere Near?" I looked anxiously at Ken Star. "We might get away in your escape rocket, under cover of the station—"

"Too late to think of that." His haggard head shook grimly. "The station wouldn't give us cover long enough. The robots would pick up the flare of our rockets, and they're programmed to shoot any unidentified craft."

His haunted eyes went back to the dark funnel about to swallow us, to that enormous alien ship waiting in its throat. Now the ship looked like a single globe, ring-marked and greenish, bright in the fall of fire around it.

"We'll have to wait," he muttered huskily. "We'll have to see—"

Old Habibula sat staring at the screen, clutching his empty bottle as if it held some promise of escape.

"Tell 'em how we found that fearful ship," he gasped. "Tell 'em how the laser signal flamed out of it, burning red as blood, to call their fleet—that couldn't answer. Tell 'em how we came to the signal, clinging in the precious shadow of a dead and drifting ship."

Haggard eyes fixed on that black, unthinkable passage before us, on the bright-green image of that monster machine in the ring of falling fire, Ken Star said nothing.

"Tell 'em how we got aboard," croaked old Habibula. "Tell 'em how I found the wave-guide duct. Tell 'em how I opened it. Tell 'em how we had to leave the rocket and climb through that cold steel gut."

The fall of fire that rimmed that dreadful funnel was spreading out to take us in. The bright globe of the robot ship was swelling fast ahead.

"Tell 'em how we hid and schemed and fought to learn the mortal secret of the ship," old Habibula whined forlornly. "Tell 'em how we got into the quarters of the vanished master-creatures. Tell 'em how the wicked robots hunted us. Tell 'em how we got inside that fearful main computer."

Lit by that circular torrent of toppling greenish fire, every part of the alien ship looked bright and cold, unbelievably enormous, chillingly strange. I saw things in motion. Clutching Lilith's icy hand, I braced myself—for precisely what, I could not guess.

"Tell 'em how we got away," whimpered old Habibula. "Tell 'em how we worked it out. Tell 'em how we got back inside our own precious rocket. Tell 'em how we waited till the mortal robot ship had brought us halfway back from that fearful universe. Tell 'em how we pushed off beneath that fan of falling fire."

Watching the bright-green disk of the alien ship growing wider on the screen, I made a quick computation. Its apparent diameter had doubled in the last forty seconds. That meant our falling station had covered half the distance to it in the same forty seconds. We had forty seconds to live—unless something happened.

"Tell 'em how we got back," old Habibula rasped. "Tell 'em how you computed the angle of the sterilizing ray. Tell 'em how we gained our velocity in the shadow of the mortal ship itself, and slipped beneath the fan of fire with all rockets dead, and coasted on to the precious station—"

His rusty voice sobbed and stopped.

"Lars!" Lilith's hand squeezed mine desperately, vibrant and alive again. "Oh, Lars!"

The anomaly was gone.

Black funnel and green machine had flickered off the telescreen. The northward stars shone clear where they had been, no longer dimmed or reddened. Nowhere was nowhere—with a small letter now.

Unbelievably, I looked at the other end of the drum. That devouring creature had become a thin gray ghost fading from the electronic chart. The bright magnetic web dissolved. In a moment all the chart was blank, except the bright green dot of Nowhere Near.

"They've closed the gate." Ken Star's voice was faint and shaken. "I knew—I nearly knew they would. Giles said they wouldn't let us strike them."

"They're machines," old Habibula wheezed. "They do what they must. When the fleet didn't follow, they had to go back."

"I thought—" I had to catch my breath. "I thought they'd fire on us."

"We got inside their main computer," old Habibula puffed. "We smashed a hatful of transistors to take care of that."

"Giles!" Lilith threw her arms around him, gay malice glinting in her wide bronze eyes and breathless laughter ringing in her voice. "I never quite believed the yarns you used to tell—"

"But now you know I'm an immortal hero!" He kissed her on the mouth. "A mortal hungry hero! We found wonder and danger and secrets enough in that dead universe, but precious little to eat and drink. Let's find my caviar and wine!"

"Come along, Ken." She slipped away from old Habibula to catch Ken Star's time-shrunken arm. "Let's go by the station hospital. I want to look at our patients there—and you need a shot of Giles' serum."

I stood alone in the drum as they all turned to go, the taste of triumph strangely flat. Nowhere Near was safe again and still my own command—though now our task was done. Interstellar communication would be open now. We could report to sector base and request relief.

Heavy at heart, I stood watching Lilith. Here in our own native space and time, her weapon would work again. She was once more a goddess, no longer afraid of the dull cold skull on her finger. With life and death to give, serene in absolute authority, she was leaving me.

I took a step to follow her, but I couldn't chase a goddess. I stopped and let her go, trying not to envy her laughing joke for old Habibula, her thoughtful hand on Ken Star's arm. Woodenly, I turned back to the computer.

After all, I had enough to keep me busy. Nowhere Near had lost air and suffered damage. The blast area had to be decontaminated. The wrecked atomic plant had to be inspected. Interstellar communication had to be restored. I had to keep us all still alive, while we waited for relief.

"Lars—" I heard Lilith's voice, choked and high. "Did you think—did you think I didn't need you now?"

I turned and saw her coming back to me, flying across that low-G space like a white and graceful bird. I caught

her in my trembling arms, warm and quick and wonderful. Tears shining in her wide bronze eyes, she clung to me desperately, more girl now than goddess. I held her hard, and kissed the white distress from her face, knowing now that she needed me.

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