

Crashing Suns

BY EDMOND HAMILTON

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As the control-levers flashed down under my hands our ship dived down through space with the swiftness of thought. The next instant there came a jarring shock, and our craft spun over like a whirling top. Everything in the conning-tower, windows and dials and controls, seemed to be revolving about me with lightning speed, while I clung dizzily to the levers in my hands. In a moment I managed to swing them back into position, and at once the ship righted herself and sped smoothly on through the ether. I drew a deep breath.

The trap-door in the little room's floor slid open, then, and the startled face of big Hal Kur appeared, his eyes wide.

"By the Power, Jan Tor!" he exclaimed; "that last meteor just grazed us! An inch nearer and it would have been the end of the ship!"

I turned to him for a moment, laughing. "A miss is as good as a mile," I quoted.

He grinned back at me. "Well, remember that we're not out on the Uranus patrol now," he reminded me. "What's our course?"

"Seventy-two degrees sunward, plane No. 8," I told him, glancing at the dials. "We're less than four hundred thousand miles from Earth, now," I added, nodding toward the broad window before me.

Climbing up into the little conning-tower, Hal Kur stepped over beside me, and together we gazed out ahead.

The sun was at the ship's left, for the moment, and the sky ahead was one of deep black, in which the stars, the flaming stars of interplanetary space, shone like brilliant jewels. Directly ahead of us there glowed a soft little orb of misty light, which was growing steadily larger as we raced on toward it. It was our destination, the cloud-veiled little world of Earth, mother-planet of all our race. To myself, who had passed much of my life on the four outer giants, on Jupiter and Saturn and Uranus and Neptune, the little planet ahead seemed insignificant, almost, with its single tiny moon. And yet from it, I knew, had come that unceasing stream of human life, that dauntless flood of pioneers, which had spread over all the solar system in the last hundred thousand years. They had gone out to planet after planet, had conquered the strange atmospheres and bacteria and gravitations, until now the races of man held sway over all the sun's eight wheeling worlds. And it was from this Earth, a thousand centuries before, that there had ventured out the first discoverers' crude little space-boats, whose faulty gravity-screens and uncertain controls contrasted strangely with the mighty leviathans that flashed between the planets now.

Abruptly I was aroused from my musings by the sharp ringing of a bell at my elbow. "The telestereo," I said to Hal Kur. "Take the controls." As he did so I stepped over to the telestereo's glass disk, inset in the room's floor, and touched a switch beside it. Instantly there appeared standing upon the disk, the image of a man in the blue and white robe of the Supreme

Council, a life-size and moving and stereoscopically perfect image, flashed across the void of space to my apparatus by means of etheric vibrations. Through the medium of that projected image the man himself could see and hear me as well as I could see and hear him, and at once he spoke directly to me.

"Jan Tor, Captain of Interplanetary Patrol Cruiser 79388," he said, in the official form of address. "The command of the Supreme Council of the League of Planets, to Jan Tor. You are directed to proceed with all possible speed to Earth, and immediately upon your arrival there to report to the Council, at the Hall of Planets. Is the order heard?"

"The order is heard and will be obeyed," I answered, making the customary response, and the figure on the disk bowed, then abruptly vanished.

I turned at once to a speaking-tube which connected with the cruiser's screen rooms. "Make all speed possible to reach Earth," I ordered the engineer who answered my call. "Throw open all the left and lower screens and use the full attraction of the sun until we are within twenty thousand miles of Earth; then close them and use the attraction of Jupiter and Neptune to brake our progress. Is the order heard?"

When he had acknowledged the command I turned to Hal Kur. "That should bring us to Earth within the hour," I told him, "though the Power alone knows what the Supreme Council wants with a simple patrol-captain."

His laugh rumbled forth. "Why, here's unusual modesty, for you! Many a time I've heard you tell how the Eight Worlds

would be run were Jan Tor of the Council, and now you're but 'a simple patrol-captain!'"

With that parting gibe he slid quickly down through the door in the floor, just in time to escape a well-aimed kick. I heard his deep laughter bellow out again as the door clanged shut behind him, and smiled to myself. No one on the cruiser would have permitted himself such familiarity with its captain but Hal Kur, but the big engineer well knew that his thirty-odd years of service in the Patrol made him a privileged character.

As the door slammed shut behind him, though, I forgot all else for the moment and concentrated all my attention on the ship's progress. It was my habit to act as pilot of my own cruiser, whenever possible, and for the time being I was quite alone in the round little pilot-house, or conning-tower, set on top of the cruiser's long, fishlike hull. Only pride, though, kept me from summoning an assistant to the controls, for the sun was pulling the cruiser downward with tremendous velocity, now, and as we sped down past Earth's shining little moon we ran into a belt of meteorites which gave me some ticklish moments. At last, though, we were through the danger zone, and were dropping down toward Earth with decreasing speed, as the screens were thrown open which allowed the pull of Neptune and Jupiter to check our progress.

A touch of a button then brought a pilot to replace me at the controls, and as we fell smoothly down toward the green planet below I leaned out the window, watching the dense masses of interplanetary shipping through which we were now threading our way. It seemed, indeed, that half the vessels in the solar system were assembled around and beneath us, so

close-packed was the jam of traffic. There were mighty cargo-ships, their mile-long hulls filled with a thousand products of Earth, which were ponderously getting under way for the long voyages out to Uranus or Neptune. Sleek, long passenger-ships flashed past us, their transparent upper-hulls giving us brief glimpses of the gay groups on their sunlit decks. Private pleasure-boats were numerous, too, mostly affairs of gleaming white, and most of these were apparently bound for the annual Jupiter-Mars space-races. Here and there through the confusion dashed the local police-boats of Earth, and I caught sight of one or two of the long black cruisers of the Interplanetary Patrol, like our own, the swiftest ships in space. At last, though, after a slow, tortuous progress through the crowded upper levels, our craft had won through the jam of traffic and was swooping down upon the surface of Earth in a great curve.

In a panorama of meadow and forest, dotted here and there with gleaming white cities, the planet's parklike surface unrolled before me as we sped across it. We rocketed over one of its oceans, seeming hardly more than a pond to my eyes after the mighty seas of Jupiter and the vast ice-fringed oceans of Neptune; and then, as we flashed over land again, there loomed up far ahead the gigantic white dome of the great Hall of Planets, permanent seat of the Supreme Council and the center of government of the Eight Worlds. A single titanic structure of gleaming white, that reared its towering dome into the air for over two thousand feet, it grew swiftly larger as we raced on toward it. In a moment we were beside it, and the cruiser was slanting down toward the square landing-court behind the great dome.

As we came to rest there without a jar, I snapped open a small door in the conning-tower's side, and in a moment had descended to the ground by means of the ladder inset in the cruiser's side. At once there ran forward to meet me a thin, spectacled young man in the red-slashed robe of the Scientists, an owlsh-looking figure at whom I stared for a moment in amazement. Then I had recovered from my astonishment and was grasping his hands.

"Sarto Sen!" I cried. "By the Power, I'm glad to see you! I thought you were working in the Venus Laboratories."

My friend's eyes were shining with welcome, but for the moment he wasted no time in speech, hurrying me across the court toward the inner door of the great building.

"The Council is assembling at this moment," he explained rapidly as we hastened along. "I got the chairman, Mur Dak, to hold up the meeting until you arrived."

"But what's it all about?" I asked, in bewilderment. "Why wait for *me*?"

"You will understand in a moment," he answered, his face grave. "But here is the Council Hall."

By that time we had hastened down a series of long white corridors and now passed through a high-arched doorway into the great Council Hall itself. I had visited the place before—who in the Eight Worlds has not?—and the tremendous, circular room and colossal, soaring dome above it were not new to me, but now I saw it as few ever did, with the eight hundred members of the Supreme Council gathered in solemn

session. Grouped in a great half-circle around the dais of the chairman stretched the curving rows of seats, each occupied by a member, and each hundred members gathered around the symbol of the world they represented, whether that world was tiny Mercury or mighty Jupiter. On the dais at the center stood the solitary figure of Mur Dak, the chairman. It was evident that, as my friend had informed me, the Council had just assembled, since for the moment Mur Dak was not speaking, but just gazing calmly out over the silent rows of members.

In a moment we had passed down the aisle to his dais and stood beneath him. To my salute he returned a word of greeting only, then motioned us to two empty seats which had apparently been reserved for us. As I slipped into mine I wondered, fleetingly, what big Hal Kur would have thought to see his captain thus taking a seat with the Supreme Council itself. Then that thought slipped from my mind as Mur Dak began to speak.

"Men of the Eight Worlds," he said slowly, "I have called this session of the Council for the gravest of reasons. I have called it because discovery has just been made of a peril which menaces the civilization, the very existence, of all our race—a deadly peril which is rushing upon us with unthinkable speed, and which threatens the annihilation of our entire universe!"

He paused for a moment, and a slow, deep hum of surprize ran over the assembled members. For the first time, now, I saw that Mur Dak's keen, intellectual face was white and drawn, and I bent forward, breathless, tensely listening. In a moment the chairman was speaking on.

"It is necessary for me to go back a little," he said, "in order that you may understand the situation which confronts us. As you know, our sun and its eight spinning planets are not motionless in space. Our sun, with its family of worlds, has for eons been moving through space at the approximate rate of twelve miles a second, across the Milky Way. You know, too, that all other suns, all other stars, are moving through space likewise, some at a lesser speed than ours and some at a speed inconceivably greater. Flaming new suns, dying red suns, cold dark suns, each is flashing through the infinities of space on its own course, each toward its appointed doom.

"And among that infinity of thronging stars is that one which we know as Alto, that great red star, that dying sun, which has been steadily drawing nearer to us as the centuries have passed, and which is now nearest to us of all the stars. It is but little larger than our own sun, and as you all know, it and our own sun are moving toward each other, rushing nearer each other by thousands of miles each second, since Alto is moving at an unthinkable speed. Our scientists have calculated that the two suns would pass each other over a year from now, and thereafter would be speeding away from each other. There has been no thought of danger to us from the passing of this dying sun, for it has been known that its path through space would cause it to pass us at a distance of billions of miles. And had the star Alto but continued in that path all would have been well. But now a thing unprecedented has happened.

"Some eight weeks ago the South Observatory on Mars reported that the approaching star Alto seemed to have changed its course a little, bearing inward toward the solar

system. The shift was a small one, but any change of course on the part of a star is quite unprecedented, so for the last eight weeks the approaching star has been closely watched. And during those weeks the effect of its shift in course has become more and more apparent. More and more the star has veered from the path it formerly followed, until it is now many millions of miles out of its course, with its deflection growing greater every minute. And this morning came the climax. For this morning I received a telestereo message from the director of the Bureau of Astronomical Science, on Venus, in which he informed me that the star's change of course is disastrous, for us. For instead of passing us by billions of miles, as it would have done, the star is now heading straight toward our own sun. And our sun is racing to meet it!

"I need not explain to you what the result of this situation will be. It is calculated by our astronomers that in less than a year our sun and this dying star will meet head on, will crash together in one gigantic flaming collision. And the result of that collision will be the annihilation of our universe. *For the planets of our system will perish like flowers in a furnace, in that titanic holocaust of crashing suns!*"

Mur Dak's voice ceased, and over the great hall there reigned a deathlike silence. I think that in that moment all of us were striving to comprehend with our dazed minds the thing that Mur Dak had told us, to realize the existence of the deadly peril that was rushing to wipe out our universe. Then, before that silence could give way to the inevitable roar of surprize and fear, a single member rose from the Mercury section of the Council, a splendid figure who spoke directly to Mur Dak.

"For a hundred thousand years," he said, "we races of man have met danger after danger, and have conquered them, one after another. We have spread from world to world, have conquered and grasped and held until we are masters of a universe. And now that that universe faces destruction, are we to sit idly by? Is there nothing whatever to be done by us, no chance, however slight, to avert this doom?"

A storm of cheers burst out when he finished, a wild tempest of applause that raged over the hall with cyclonic fury for minutes. I was on my feet with the rest, by that time, shouting like a madman. It was the inevitable reaction from that moment of heart-deadening panic, was the uprush of the old will to conquer that has steeled the hearts of men in a thousand deadly perils. When it had died down a little, Mur Dak spoke again.

"It is not my purpose to allow death to rush upon us without an effort to turn it aside," he told us, "and fortune has placed in our hands, at this moment, the chance to strike out in our own defense. For the last three years Sarto Sen, one of our most brilliant young scientists, has been working on a great problem, the problem of using etheric vibrations as a propulsion force to speed matter through space. A chip floating in water can be propelled across the surface of the water by waves in it; then why should not matter likewise be propelled through space, through the ether, by means of waves or vibrations in that ether? Experimenting on this problem, Sarto Sen has been able to make small models which can be flashed through space, through the ether, by means of artificially created vibrations in that ether, vibrations which can be produced with as high a

frequency as the light-vibrations, and which thus propel the models through space at a speed equal to the speed of light itself.

"Using this principle, Sarto Sen has constructed a small ten-man cruiser, which can attain the velocity of light and which he has intended to use in a voyage of exploration to the nearer stars. Until now, as you know, we have been unable to venture outside the solar system, since even the swiftest of our gravity-screen space-ships can not make much more than a few hundred thousand miles an hour, and at that rate it would take centuries to reach the nearest star. But in this new vibration-propelled cruiser, a voyage to the stars would be a matter of weeks, instead of centuries.

"Several hours ago I ordered Sarto Sen to bring his new cruiser here to the Hall of Planets, fully equipped, and at this moment it is resting in one of the landing-courts here, manned by a crew of six men experienced in its operation and ready for a trip of any length. And it is my proposal that we send this new cruiser, in this emergency, out to the approaching star Alto, to discover what forces or circumstances have caused the nearing sun to veer from its former path. We know that those forces or those circumstances must be extraordinary in character, thus to change the course of a star; and if we can discover what phenomena are the causes of the star's deflection, there is a chance that we might be able to repeat or reverse those phenomena, to swerve the star again from the path it now follows, and so save our solar system, our universe."

Mur Dak paused for a moment, and there was an instant of sheer, stunned silence in the great hall. For the audacity of his

proposal was overwhelming, even to us who roamed the limits of the solar system at will. It was well enough to rove the ways of our own universe, as men had done for ages, but to venture out into the vast gulf beyond, to flash out toward the stars themselves and calmly investigate the erratic behavior of a titanic, thundering sun, that was a proposal that left us breathless for the moment. But only for the moment, for when our brains had caught the magnitude of the idea another wild burst of applause thundered from the massed members, applause that rose still higher when the chairman called Sarto Sen himself to the dais and presented him to the assembly. Then, when the tumult had quieted a little, Mur Dak went on.

"The cruiser will start at once, then," he said, "and there remains but to choose a captain for it. Sarto Sen and his men will have charge of the craft's operation, of course, but there must be a leader for the whole expedition, some quick-thinking man of action. And I have already chosen such a man, subject to your approval, one whose name most of you have heard. A man young in years who has served most of his life in the Interplanetary Patrol, and who distinguished himself highly two years ago in the great space-fight with the interplanetary pirates off Japetus: Jan Tor!"

I swear that up to the last second I had no shadow of an idea that Mur Dak was speaking of me, and when he turned to gaze straight at me, and spoke my name, I could only stare in bewilderment. Those around me, though, pushed me to my feet, and the next moment another roar of applause from the hundreds of members around me struck me in the face like a physical blow. I walked clumsily to the dais, under that storm

of approval, and stood there beside Mur Dak, still half-dazed by the unexpectedness of the thing. The chairman smiled out at the shouting members.

"No need to ask if you approve my choice," he said, and then turned to me, his face grave. "Jan Tor," he addressed me, his solemn voice sounding clearly over the suddenly hushed hall, "to you is given the command of this expedition, the most momentous in our history. For on this expedition and on you, its leader, depends the fate of our solar system. It is the order of the Supreme Council, then, that you take command of the new cruiser and proceed with all speed to the approaching star, Alto, to discover the reason for that star's change of course and to ascertain whether any means exist of again swerving it from its path. Is the order heard?"

Five minutes later I strode with Sarto Sen and Hal Kur into the landing-court where lay the new cruiser, its long, fishlike hull glittering brilliantly in the sunlight. A door in its side snapped open as we drew near, and through it there stepped out to meet us one of the six blue-clad engineers who formed the craft's crew. "All is ready for the start," he said to Sarto Sen in reply to the latter's question, standing aside for us to enter.

We passed through the door into the cruiser's hull. To the left an open door gave me a glimpse of the ship's narrow living-quarters, while to the right extended a long room in which other blue-clad figures were standing ready beside the ship's shining, conelike vibration-generators. Directly before us rose a small winding stairway, up which Sarto Sen led the way. In a moment, following, we had reached the cruiser's conning-

tower, and immediately Sarto Sen stepped over to take his place at the controls.

He touched a stud, and a warning bell gave sharp alarm throughout the cruiser's interior. There were hurrying feet, somewhere beneath us, and then a loud clang as the heavy triple-doors slammed shut. At once began the familiar throb-throb-throb of the oxygen pumps, already at work replenishing and purifying the air in our hermetically sealed vessel.

Sarto Sen paused for a moment, glancing through the broad window before him, then reached forth and pressed a series of three buttons. A low, deep humming filled the cruiser's whole interior, and there was an instant of breathless hesitation. Then came a sharp click as Sarto Sen pressed another switch; there was a quick sigh of wind, and instantly the sunlit landing-court outside vanished, replaced in a fraction of a second by the deep, star-shot night of interplanetary space. I glanced quickly down through a side window and had a momentary glimpse of a spinning gray ball beneath us, a ball that dwindled to a point and vanished even in the moment that I glimpsed it. It was Earth, vanishing behind us as we fled with frightful velocity out into the gulf of space.

We were hurtling through the belt of asteroids beyond Mars, now, and then ahead, and to the left, there loomed the mighty world of Jupiter, expanding quickly into a large white-belted globe as we rocketed on toward it, then dropping behind and diminishing in its turn as we sped past it. The sun behind us had dwindled by that time to a tiny disk of fire. An hour later and another giant world flashed past on our right, the icy planet Neptune, outermost of the Eight Worlds. We had passed

outside the last frontier of the solar system and were now racing out into the mighty deeps of space with the speed of light on our mad journey to save a universe.

2

An hour after we had left the solar system Hal Kur and I still stood with Sarto Sen in the cruiser's conning-tower, staring out with him at the stupendous panorama of gathered stars that lay before us. The sun of our own system had dwindled to a far point of light behind us, by that time, one star among the millions that spangled the deep black heavens around us. For here, even more than between the planets, the stars lay before us in their true glory, undimmed by proximity to any one of them. A host of glittering points of fire, blue and green and white and red and yellow, they dotted the rayless skies thickly in all directions, and thronged like a great drift of swarming bees toward our upper left, where stretched the stupendous belt of the Milky Way. And dead ahead, now, shone a single orb that blazed in smoky, crimson glory, a single great point of red fire. It was Alto, I knew, the sullen-burning star that was our goal.

It was with something of unbelief that I gazed at the red star, for though the dials before me assured me that we were speeding on toward it at close to two hundred thousand miles a second, yet except for the deep humming of the craft's vibratory apparatus one would have thought that the ship was standing still. There was no sound of wind from outside, no friendly, near-by planets, nothing by which the eye could measure the tremendous velocity at which we moved. We were racing through a void whose very immensity and vacancy

staggered the mind, an emptiness of space in which the stars themselves floated like dust-particles in air, a gulf traversed only by hurtling meteors or flaring comets, and now by our own frail little craft.

Though I was peculiarly affected by the strangeness of our position, big Hal Kur was even more so. He had traveled the space-lanes of the solar system for the greater part of his life, and now all of his time-honored rules of interplanetary navigation had been upset by this new cruiser, a craft entirely without gravity-screens, which was flashing from sun to sun propelled by invisible vibrations only. I saw his head wagging in doubt as he stared out into that splendid vista of thronging stars, and in a moment more he left us, descending into the cruiser's hull for an inspection of its strange propulsion apparatus.

When he had gone I plunged at once into the task of learning the control and operation of our craft. The next two hours I spent under the tutelage of Sarto Sen, and at the end of that time I had already learned the essential features of the ship's control. There was a throttle which regulated the frequency of the vibrations generated in the engine-room below, thus increasing or decreasing our speed at will, and a lever and dial which were used to project the propelling vibrations out at any angle behind us, thus controlling the direction in which we moved. The main requisite in handling the craft, I found, was a precise and steady hand on the two controls, since a mere touch on one would change our speed with lightning swiftness, while a slight movement of the other would send us millions of miles out of our course almost instantly.

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