

PLANET STORIES



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CITADEL OF THE GREEN DEATH

By EMMETT McDOWELL

JOEL HAKKYT stirred impatiently in the prisoner's chair. His features, homely, strong-boned and intelligent, were inscrutable. But he didn't know how much longer he could bottle up his indignation. It had been accumulating all during his trial. Now this delay!

The machines had been whisked from the chamber. The investigating psychologist should have returned with his verdict minutes ago. What was wrong?

Joel glanced at his parents, at his wife. They were the only spectators, the three of them sitting stiffly in the front row of benches.

Doctor Hakkyt refused to meet his son's eyes. A plump, tall man, the doctor looked stonily out the windows at the park-like grounds surrounding the Hall of Justice. He was president of Clear Springs Community, and his angry red expression said plainly as words that his son had disgraced him.

Mrs. Hakkyt dabbed at cold eyes with a scrap of handkerchief. Joel's glance passed over her swiftly and on to his wife.

She sat next to his mother with a notebook on her knee, a pencil poised in her hand. Joel's wife was a specialist in creative writing, and all through his trial, she



The pseudo-Emperor cursed, struggled, begged for his life.

At the coldly gleaming Experimental Station they flung this choice in Outlaw Joel Hakkyt's teeth: "Grinding, endless slavery on Asgard, that Alpha Centauri hell—or a writhing, screaming guinea-pig's death here?" He chose Asgard, naturally. But what was natural—on Asgard?

had watched him with the same impersonal curiosity she might have bestowed on some animal, jotting down his reactions.

In sudden disgust, Joel wondered why he had consented to marry her. It had been her looks, he supposed. She had a sensual rather pretty face. . .

A panel behind the bench clicked loudly in the silence. The guard stood up, saying: "Attention, please."

It was a useless formality, because everyone's eyes had jerked instantly to the slowly opening door.

The investigating psychologist bustled in, sat down behind his desk. He arranged his black gown with a tug, rattled the papers in his hand.

"An unusual case," he began. "Unusual in several respects!" He turned his eyes on Joel's father. "The examination reveals that the prisoner is possessed of a high I.Q. Very high. However, he is completely maladjusted. A dangerous anti-social type. He is to be committed to the Experimental Station at once!"

Joel caught his breath. The Experimental Station!

Criminals and the maladjusted were committed to the Experimental Stations where they were used as guinea pigs by the scientists. They might live for years, surviving experiment after experiment. But inexorably like the early Roman gladiators they met a ghastly fate.

Doctor Hakkyt had risen furiously. "This is preposterous! Think of the notoriety! I'm the president of . . ."

"That will be sufficient!" the investigating psychologist interrupted. "The prisoner is thirty-four years old. This is the third time he's been up for examination. All the rehabilitative measures have failed!"

Doctor Hakkyt sank back muttering into his seat.

The psychologist rattled his papers again, fixed Joel's wife with a softer glance. "Annulment orders for your marriage, Mrs. Hakkyt, have been forwarded to the capitol. You are free."

"Thank you," said the young woman without glancing up from her notes.

The investigating psychologist wiped his sharp features with a handkerchief and said: "Court dismissed."

Joel watched his father and mother rise. They didn't glance at him. The psychologist cleared his throat.

"If you wish to say goodbye to the prisoner . . ."

Doctor Hakkyt wheeled angrily. "That won't be necessary. As far as my wife and I are concerned, the prisoner is already dead!"

Pompously, he took Mrs. Hakkyt's arm, steered her to the exit. Joel's wife closed her notebook with a snap, trotted out after them without a backward glance.

Only their scent, that unique volatile compound that was as expressive to Joel Hakkyt's sensitive nostrils as a picture, lingered behind.

It was atavistic, Joel supposed, but his sense of smell was as acute as any hound's!

JOEL shrugged, rose from the prisoner's chair. He looked big, burly beside the fragile guard. There was something appealing about his strong homely features—a quizzical directness, an honesty.

"Come along," said the guard.

Joel's nostrils flared as he caught the guard's scent for the first time. It was man-like and yet alien—a curious unrecognizable smell that raised the hair on the back of his neck!

The guard seemed unaware of Joel's scrutiny. He was a thin elderly man in the Republic's blue and yellow uniform. His eyes were hidden behind dark glasses.

"Come along," the guard repeated, and Joel permitted himself to be led into the corridor that ran back to the cells.

The door had scarcely closed on the courtroom, when the guard said in an altered tone, "Keep walking. And don't say a word once we reach the cells. Spy recorders have been installed in all of them!"

Joel came to a dead stop. "Who are you?"

"Keep walking!" The blue uniformed guard tugged in panic at Joel's elbow.

"One of our men'll contact you at the Experimental Station. Don't mention this to anyone!" He gulped slightly. "This is going to hurt some. Don't be startled; it's necessary."

As he talked, he jabbed a needle through Joel's sleeve into his arm.

Joel jumped. "Damn! What are you up to?" He yanked free, swung angrily on the guard.

"Only a tattoo mark. Isn't visible except under black light. Then it fluoresces green."

"But why?"

"Identification: Shows you're a legitimate maladjustment case and not a government spy."

"But what . . ."

"No time now. Wait until our man contacts you. Explain everything. Remember, not a word when we reach the cell block!"

He pushed aside the panel at the far end of the hall. The opening revealed a second corridor lined with small iron-barred cubicles. None of them were tented.

Joel Hakkyt moved into his own familiar cell where he had been lodged during his trial. The gate clanged shut.

The guard removed his glasses, polished them nervously as he gave Joel a warning look.

For the first time Joel could see the guard's eyes.

They had no pupils, no color, only a weird flickering light in their depths that glimmered like candle flame!

Joel could feel his stomach contract like a fist. The alien smell filled his nostrils. He took an involuntary backwards step, his heart hammering against his ribs.

The guard wasn't human!

Before Joel could question him the guard retreated through the door, hastily shut-

ting it with a click. Joel sank to the edge of his bunk.

Where did the guard come from?

A mutation? The Eugenics Board would never have allowed a mutation to survive. Joel himself had escaped their vigilance only because it had been impossible to detect his abnormally heightened vision and sense of smell at birth.

Then what was the creature?

It wasn't a native to Mars or Venus. Their dominant life forms had been exterminated centuries ago. Perhaps it hailed from the Centaurian planetary system. He sat up abruptly at the thought.

A Centaurian?

The Republic had established a colony on Asgard, the second planet of Alpha Centauri A. Joel had seen the three-dimensional reels of its weirdly lovely jungles and grotesque species of plant life.

But so far Asgard's dominant life form had escaped detection!

The Republic's exploring parties had stumbled across strange empty little villages with fires smouldering on clay hearths and the food still hot in clay vessels. Yet not a glimpse of the inhabitants had they ever been able to catch.

By some uncanny means, the natives always eluded them like wraiths.

Anthropologists had been able to reconstruct a theoretical Centaurian thought from the evidence that he left behind—artifacts, huts, footprints. He was man-like, they said, and walked upright. He weighed between a hundred and a hundred and twenty pounds, this theoretical creature. He was in a primitive stage of development possessing neither writing nor art.

There was only one thing they couldn't explain. That was why nobody had ever seen one!

Joel grinned sourly. He was letting his imagination run away with him.

AT nineteen hours a green panel glowed on the rear wall and letters formed on the glass.

SUPPER—PRESS BUTTON.

Joel pressed the indicated button. The panel folded out like a secretary, revealing sanitary food containers which had been delivered via a slot.

He ate slowly. When he had finished he

dropped the empty containers down the disposal chute and stretched out on his bunk.

All at once, he sat up snapping his fingers. Why hadn't that occurred to him earlier?

From the wall above the foot of his bunk, he pulled down a screen about a metre square, dialed a number on the prison intercommunicator.

A pale rose glow spread through the screen. Then the prim starched figure of a girl sprang out in three-dimensional reality.

The girl was working at a desk in the warden's office. Joel felt as if he were looking at her through a window in his cell.

She said, "Yes?"

"May I be connected with the film library?"

The girl opened a file, glanced at a card. After a moment, she said, "That will be all right." She dialed a number and said, "Here's your party."

The screen went agitated like the surface of a pond, then cleared again, disclosing a dry thin woman.

"Clear Springs Public Film Library."

Joel said, "I'd like to see whatever is available on Asgard, second planet of Alpha Centauri A. Travel films, history, exploration records..."

The librarian gave a short brittle laugh "That's a large order. Roughly there must be several thousand reels."

Joel hesitated. "A good condensed history then."

She said, "Flagg's *Stellar Venture* is the latest..."

"That'll do."

"One moment, please."

Once more the screen quivered violently. Music, a thin haunting melody, streamed into Joel's cell, through which came the voice of the narrator. The music stopped.

A dull black space ship was forming within the depths of the screen.

JOEL lay back on his bunk, staring into the glowing square. Walls, floor and ceiling receded from consciousness. He was free of the prison as if like Alice he had stepped through a mirror into a world beyond.

"Sa Nels, a Martian of Terran descent,

discovered the stellar drive in 4471," the narrator was saying. "The Republic organized an expedition to the trinary system of Proxima Centauri, Alpha Centauri A and B, our nearest neighbors; and Sa Nels was put in charge."

The narrator's voice droned on. Joel scarcely heard him.

These were government films of the actual take-off of the Vega, Sa Nel's ship. It lay in its cradle in the midst of the sandy red Martian wastes. The crew were at their posts. Sa Nels waved at the camera, climbed into the Vega. The ports were sealed.

There was a blinding flash from the stern of the ship. It rose slowly, crazily in the rarified Martian atmosphere, gained momentum until it was a thin needle-like streak and dwindled in the flick of an eye and disappeared.

Joel let out his breath with a sigh. He had been clenching his fist until his fingers ached. The first ship to reach the stars!

It had been twenty-one years, he recalled after the Vega passed beyond radio contact before a wondering Earth had heard from them again.

Twenty-one years compressed into as many minutes in the film unreeling before Joel's eyes. He saw the blood red ball that was Proxima Centauri swim into view on the scanner. He sighted the yellow-white star of Alpha Centauri A and its orange twin, Alpha Centauri B.

He landed with the expedition on the second planet of Alpha Centauri A and saw the deserted stone villages of the invisible natives, the thick flesh-like Nigel trees, mobile carnivorous plants that stalked the members of the crew like crawling land octopi...

The rest of the film was taken up with the improvement in stellar travel, the establishment of the first colony on Asgard and its slow growth.

Joel was fascinated. If he had lived during an earlier age, he would have run off to sea.

As it was he had stowed away as a lad aboard a tramp spacer outward bound for Mars. But he had been discovered before the ship cleared.

That was the first time he had been brought up before the examining board. Joel had wanted to become an astro-

geophysicist above all else, but his aptitude tests had revealed a remarkable ability with animals. He had been assigned to the government stock farms instead.

He switched off the telescreen. He had discovered nothing that connected the strange humanoid guard with Centaurus and he had put himself into the mood of despair that engulfed him whenever he contemplated his joyless future.

It was almost dawn before he dropped off into a troubled sleep.

II

THE SOUND OF HIS CELL DOOR opening awakened Joel the next morning. It was a new guard, he saw with disappointment, a perfectly normal human, smelling of tobacco, sweat and stale clothes—a man-like unmistakable odor.

They went into an elevator and so to the roof where the police helicopter was waiting. Joel climbed into the cab, looked out the window as the 'copter rose smoothly into the air.

The rim of the sun was showing above a low range of wooded hills. The town of Clear Springs was bathed in limpid morning light. With a catch in his throat he caught sight of the sun deck of his own home. They would still be abed there—his mother and father and his ex-wife.

It was strange to think that he'd never see them again. It made him realize the finality of this journey.

A human guinea pig!

They had been traveling for several hours when his eyes were attracted by the sparkle of sunlight dead ahead. Then he made out a huge plastic dome cupping hundreds of acres.

The Experimental Station!

The police 'copter lit with a slight jar on the thick green sward of the landing field. Joel climbed down stiffly.

Seen from the ground, the structure took his breath away. It was a tremendous dome of clear plastic like a glass beehive. Thousands of tiny figures could be seen moving about its many levels.

No tree grew around the hive. On all sides gently rolling meadows studded with grazing sheep, goats and cattle fell away for miles.

He began to appreciate why no prisoner

had escaped from the station in over a hundred years!

A guard challenged them at the entrance.

Joel's escort produced his papers and the circular plastic gate rolled ponderously aside.

They walked down a short corridor and were challenged a second time. Joel heard the gate roll back, roll shut. A feeling of helplessness swept over him.

It was the door of life, he thought, that had shut behind him.

THE white-suited attendant who had signed the receipt for Joel led him into one of the opaque offices, where a stout man in a white smock sat behind a black plastic desk.

"A new arrival, sir," said the attendant. "Name of Joel Hakkyt from Clear Springs Community. Convicted on two counts. Maladjustment and manslaughter."

"Ahh," wheezed the stout man and eased himself back in his chair. Joel noticed that his eyebrows slanted upward giving a sardonic cast to his rubicund countenance.

The attendant laid the papers softly on the ebony desk and withdrew.

There was a strong antiseptic smell to the station. It clung to everything, the offices and corridors, the inmates and attendants. It was so strong that it baffled Joel's keen scent.

"Manslaughter." The stout man, picked up the papers, glanced at them briefly. "I see you underwent examination as a child for abnormal vision."

"Yes," agreed Joel, "I've a much higher percentage of light sensitive rods in my eyes than average. I've always been able to see about as well after dark as a cat."

"What did the Eugenics Board say?"

Joel's homely features broke into a grin. "They had their hands full explaining how they let me slip past when I was born."

"There wasn't anything done about it?"

"Oh, I was put under observation. They decided it was a harmless aberration, but I was forbidden to reproduce."

"But I see you were allowed to marry?"

"My wife was not considered good breeding stock either."

"I see." The fat man pursed his lips, gave Joel an appraising glance. "How did you happen to kill your superior at the State Cattle Farm?"

Joel's face darkened.

"It was an accident. I hit him with my fist. I hit him too hard and broke his neck."

"Roll up your sleeve!"

Joel did so in surprise. He glanced down. With a start he saw that the puncture where the humanoid guard had inserted the needle was fluorescing a vivid green. The room must be bathed in black light! Involuntarily he jerked down the sleeve.

"It's all right," said the stout man. "It's what I was looking for."

"What does it mean?" Joel asked when he had recovered from his surprise.

"Mean? It means that you're a legitimate maladjustment case and not a damned spy sent in here by the Senate."

"But..."

The fat man lifted his hand. He said, "I'm Doctor Chedwick, Emile Chedwick. I'm in charge of induction. Sit down, my boy."

Joel sank suspiciously into a relaxer. Doctor Chedwick drummed on the shiny black desk top.

"Understand," he began, "the men and women who are sentenced to the Experimental Station expect to die. And sooner or later they all do die. Some of them rather horribly."

Joel began to fidget. He knew this. Everyone knew it.

"What you don't know," said Doctor Chedwick almost as if reading Joel's mind, "is that there is a chance for you to escape this!"

Joel went rigid. He leaned forward, his eyes fastened on the pale gray eyes of the man behind the desk.

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said. There's an acute labor shortage on Asgard, second planet of Alpha Centauri A. Last year the planters petitioned the Senate to assign them a number of malcontents from the Experimental Stations. There has been an alarming increase in maladjusted cases recently. More than the stations could handle. The Senate jumped at the chance to get rid of the excess."

In spite of his eagerness Joel felt a vague shock. "But that's slavery."

Doctor Chedwick shrugged. "Would you rather work on the plantations or die in some experiment?"

"Why—why—" Joel burst out, "I'd rather work!"

"Exactly. So would the others."

Joel said, "But why the tattoo mark? Why all the secrecy? And the guard. What is the guard?"

"The less you know about that the safer you'll be." Doctor Chedwick's mouth shut like a trap. He stabbed at a button on his desk. "You'll be contacted on Asgard. Everything will be explained then. Meanwhile say nothing about the tattoo mark. Say nothing about our conversation to any one. Understand?"

Joel nodded.

The door opened and the attendant appeared.

Doctor Chedwick said, "Put this man in 745B. He's had training and practical experience in animal husbandry and he's husky as an ox. He's to be shipped to Asgard with the next labor battalion. Take him away."

THE attendant turned Joel over to a guard who escorted him from the offices into the clear plastic division of the dome. It was like stepping out into space. He sucked in his breath. He could see straight down through level after level for hundreds of feet.

Dormitories lined the passage on either hand. He could see men and women asleep in their bunks, sitting at tables, taking showers or dressing. The transparent walls were soundproof, and Joel experienced the peculiar sensation of walking through an animated silence.

They were approaching a small ante chamber that must be a guard room. Half a dozen armed and uniformed men were sitting about a table playing cards.

Beyond the transparent walls of the guard room Joel could see into another chamber. It was long and low and lined with bunks like the fo'cas'le of a spaceship. Forty or fifty people in gray were milling about two men on the floor who seemed to be doing their best to murder each other.

"Here's a new guinea pig for the labor battalion, Captain," said Joel's escort, pushing him into the guard room.

With a grunt of annoyance, a tall man rose from the table and surveyed Joel with bleak gray eyes. His blue tunic was un-

buttoned at the throat, his holster pushed around in back.

"Papers," he snapped.

Joel's escort handed over a folder, which the captain took to his desk.

Joel's eyes returned to the next room. It was like being in a soundproof broadcasting cage, watching two men batter at each other beyond the glass.

One of the men had the other by the throat and was throttling him. The strangler's arms were corded; his face shone with sweat; there was an insane fixed glare in his eyes. The other man's tongue was protruding, as he tore at his assailant's wrists.

"My God!" Joel burst out. "Aren't you going to break it up?"

"Let them kill themselves," said the captain indifferently. He opened the door. "In with you," he said and shoved Joel into the melee.

Bedlam burst on his ears as he stumbled into the room.

A woman was screaming in a shrill hysterical voice. The men milled about pushing to see better. No one paid any attention to him.

He clenched his fists. He couldn't stand by and watch a man murdered.

Impulsively, he shouldered through the press, got his hands on the strangler's wrists, tore them away.

"Herec!" somebody yelled. "Leave 'em be, you fool!"

He ignored the warning, heaved the man from his victim.

The fellow came to his feet, stared at him with that glazed intensity as if he didn't realize what had happened. Then without a sound he hurled himself at Joel's throat!

III

JOEL WASN'T TAKEN ENTIRELY by surprise. But the ferocity of the attack drove him back a few steps. He wrapped his arms about the man's shoulders and hung on.

A furious animal smell filled his nostrils. The man was berserk, his breath whistling through his teeth as he strove to tear himself free. Then like a mad dog, he sank his teeth in Joel's shoulder.

Joel gave a yelp of surprise, pushed him off, bit him with his clubbed fist.

His assailant reeled backwards, staggered to his knees. He was a giant of a fellow with shaggy black hair and curious yellow gray eyes.

Joel was on him like a tiger, smashing his fist into the giant's unprotected face.

The man lunged over backwards, rolled to his belly and tried to push himself to his hands and knees.

Joel kicked him behind the ear.

The giant's arms collapsed. His face struck the floor and he lay still.

The other prisoners had drawn back against the bunks. There was a minute of stunned silence. Then with whoops of delight they crowded around slapping his back, shaking his hand.

Joel was too surprised to utter a word.

The man who had been throttled, was sitting up massaging his throat. He regarded Joel with a puzzled expression.

"Thanks," he wheezed painfully, "but what made you risk your neck?"

"Risk my neck?"

"You're new, aren't you?" asked the man, pulling himself to his feet and holding out his hand. "I'm Nick Thorp."

Joel introduced himself. Thorp, he saw, was short and husky with prematurely gray hair and blue eyes bright as bits of china.

"You've made yourself a wicked enemy," Thorp observed, prodding the giant with his toe. "That's Walt Eriss."

"Walt Eriss!" Joel's green eyes widened. Walt Eriss' trial had created the sensation of the decade.

Walt Eriss had been a brilliant surgeon, but with a pathological twist. A modern Jack the Ripper who delighted in torturing his patients. He had killed forty-three women by his own confession before he was apprehended!

Joel stared at the hulking form as if it were some monster. "But why were the others letting him throttle you?" he asked Nick Thorp. "Why didn't they stop him?"

"They're afraid of him."

"But they could've ganged him..." Joel stopped with his mouth open.

A bell had begun to ring with an ear-splitting clangor!

Muttered exclamations burst from the prisoners as they exchanged alarmed glances. The bell continued to ring.

"What's happening?" Joel asked.

Nick Thorp shook his grizzled head. "I

don't know. But the bell's a signal for us to line up at our bunks."

Joel realized that the other prisoners had formed in a row down the walls. He glanced about uncertainly.

"There's a vacant bunk beside mine," Nick Thorp suggested.

Joel gratefully took his place beside Thorp. The bell fell silent. Everyone was staring through the wall into the guard-room.

The guards had abandoned their card game, he saw. They were straightening their uniforms, buttoning their tunics. He could see the passage beyond and two men making their way along it.

One, he recognized, was Doctor Chedwick, white-frosted and moon-faced. The other was a short man with a truculent walk. He was wearing the green uniform of a space man.

A low excited buzz arose from the prisoners. Joel caught words here and there. "Asgard! So soon!"

He felt tight with excitement and glanced surreptitiously at the girl beside him.

She was an exotic elfin creature, even in the shapeless gray coveralls. Her black eyes and hair, the smooth olive of her complexion lent her the appearance of an Arab. He wondered what crime she had committed that had condemned her to the Experimental Station.

Then the door to the guardroom was flung violently open. The captain appeared in the entrance and shouted, "Attention!"

THE whispering ceased as the guards in their peacock blue and yellow filed into the dormitory. They were carrying a long plastic chain, which they stretched down the center of the floor. About every yard, Joel saw that a metal collar had been linked to the chain.

Doctor Chedwick came through the door with the green-uniformed spaceman beside him.

"This is Sam Mullin," he said indicating the spaceman. "Third mate of the *Zenith*. Mister Mullin will be responsible for you while you're aboard the *Zenith*. You're to be embarked at once..."

Joel's heart leaped against his ribs. Even the archaic title of "mister" had a heady sound. It was a tradition among spacemen,

he knew. Only officers of Star Ships were called "mister."

"What's this?" Doctor Chedwick interrupted himself catching sight of the unconscious figure of Eriss on the floor.

"There was a fight, Doctor," the captain hastened to explain. "The new man and Walt Eriss."

"Hakkyt knocked out Eriss?"

The captain nodded.

Doctor Chedwick shot Joel a startled glance. "Watch those fists of yours, young man. You're too free with them." Then to the captain, "Revive Eriss and shackle the prisoners."

Joel noticed that the guards were careful to fasten one of the collars about the ex-surgeon's neck before they broke a vial of some liquid and held it under his nose.

Eriss opened his eyes and sat up groggily. Then his gaze fastened on Joel. With a bellow of rage he was on his feet, charging across the room like a mad bull.

Three men, hanging onto the chain, snubbed him up short!

Eriss wheeled furiously, found himself facing half a dozen drawn paralyzers and brought up with a curse.

Joel could see the veins throb in the giant's temples. But the captain turned indifferently to the other prisoners. "Line up beside the chain."

Joel took his place between the black-haired girl and Nick Thorp. The collar was snapped about his throat. In single file and with a good deal of tripping, the prisoners, chained neck to neck, tramped through the door.

Doctor Chedwick left them at the main corridor, but the Captain and Mister Mullin helped the guards herd them into a lift.

They dropped soundlessly level after level until they were well below the surface. At length the lift stopped, the doors opened.

To his surprise Joel saw that there was a pneumatic station beneath the dome, and a train was waiting in the tube.

They were shepherded into a coach. They had a good deal of trouble arranging themselves in the seats because of the chain linking them together, but at last it was done.

Captain Goplerud blew a whistle and swung inside the car. The door slammed

shut. With a powerful surge and a whoosh the train shot off.

Joel found himself beside Nick Thorp. "Where do you suppose we're going?" he asked breathlessly.

"Nu York," Thorp replied. "All the Star Ships berth at the White Plains spaceport. We're lucky. The *Zenith's* a crack luxury liner. No being battered down in the hold of some stinking freighter for us."

"You've been to space before?"

Thorp turned his incredibly blue eyes on Joel. "For twenty-three years. Rocket ships and Star Ships. I never thought I'd see space again..."

Joel eyed the battered gray-haired spaceman with increased respect. Here was a man who'd seen the stews of Venusport, breathed the murky air of Jovopolis, gazed out on the frigid whiteness of Pluto.

"Then you've been to Asgard?"

"Many's the time. Wait 'til you see it, lad. Jungles and rain and crawling plants that can pluck a man off the ground and devour him quick as a cat!"

Joel was fascinated. The train slid along with a monotonous roar that shut them in a cell of privacy.

"Who's the girl?" he asked, nodding at the elfin sloe-eyed brunette in the seat ahead.

Nick Thorp's eyes twinkled. "Tamis Ravitz. She used to be a dancer. Poisoned her dancing partner in a fit of jealous rage. So I've heard."

Joel was shocked and looked it.

Thorp's battered features cracked into a broad grin. "We're a rum bunch. None of us can afford to throw stones at the others."

Joel felt the rebuke in his words and reddened.

THE spaceman had slumped in the seat and closed his eyes. The dull roar of the train had a soothing quality. But Joel was too keyed up to relax.

He kept thinking of the humanoid guard and the fluorescent tattoo mark on his elbow and Doctor Chedwick saying: "The less you know about them, the safer you'll be. Someone will contact you at Asgard. Don't mention our conversation to anyone..."

A buzzer began to whirr softly. The

train braked. The guards rose and shouted, "On your feet! On your feet! Line up in the aisle."

The train whooshed to a soft stop as if it had run into a foam rubber cushion. The doors slid back, letting in a thundering bedlam of sound.

Joel found himself staring out into a vast groined hall lit by harsh violet light. Streams of beetle-like robot trucks, piled high with baggage, darted along elevated roadways. People were everywhere, a crazy throng like a disturbed colony of ants.

He drew a ragged breath, feeling his heart thud against his ribs. The metal collar jerked against his throat and he fell into step.

They shuffled out of the coach onto a long ramp. A huge red sign directly ahead caught Joel's eyes. It's flashing letters were at least ten feet high.

CENTAURUS FLIGHT
TAKE OFF—15:52
STAR SHIP ZENITH

The file of prisoners made straight for the sign, entered a narrow corridor that sloped downward like a tunnel. From the tunnel they emerged into the maw of a huge pit. Joel rubbed his eyes. He'd never seen the rocket pits before.

The Zenith, a dull black, bullet-shaped monster, rested on her fins with her nose pointing straight up towards the starry black firmament. Gangplanks like airy cobwebs spanned the gap between the Star Ship and the blackened concrete walls.

The file of prisoners crawled out along one of the gangplanks. They were in the center of it, when Joel felt Nick Thorp's fingers close like a vise on his shoulder.

"Look! Overhead! We're having distinguished company this-voyage!"

Joel glanced up.

ABOVE and to one side another gangplank crossed the gap. A stout man was leaning on the rail and watching the prisoners. Beside him stood a young woman with the warm beautiful face of a Venusian dancing girl.

She was clad in a short green coat with exaggerated square-cut shoulders, and for one shocked moment Joel thought that she

didn't have on anything beneath it. Then he realized that she must be wearing shorts which the coat was just long enough to hide.

For the rest, he received a swift impression of long shapely tanned legs, sooty lashes, green eyes and hair. *Green hair!*

Then their eyes met—met and held. There was a swift outleaping of spirit between them, an indescribable feeling of kinship, of recognition. Joel felt shaken, bewitched. A smile was trembling on the girl's half-parted lips.

And then he had been carried into the ship and he couldn't see her any longer.

"Who were they?" he asked unsteadily.

"Humphrey Cameron, Governor of Asgard," Thorp explained. "The girl was his daughter, Priscilla Cameron."

Tamis Ravitz said over her shoulder, "Did you see that hair? *Green!* She's been the talk of Terra."

Joel thought the dancer sounded envious. They were shuffling single file down a long corridor that led straight into the bowels of the ship. A vague rumbling made the deck tremble beneath his feet. He heard shouted orders, the sound of the gangplank being run in.

His face whitened in the raw violet light. All thoughts of the green haired Priscilla Cameron were driven from his mind.

From the passage the prisoners were herded into a long low chamber outfitted with tables. Here they were unchained.

Mister Mullin glanced at his chronometer. "Take-off in fifteen minutes," he warned. "Strap yourselves into your bunks."

He disappeared at a run. The guards filed out of the prisoner's mess locking the door behind them.

"Come along," Thorp urged Joel as a wild clangor broke out from the stem to stern of the Zenith. "We've time for a quick look around before we get settled."

Joel followed him wordlessly into the sleeping quarters. Beyond the fo'c's'le were the washrooms and that was all. A second bell rang just as they flung themselves into empty bunks.

The rumble of the tubes mounted into a furious roar. A trip hammer struck Joel in the chest, pinned him into the cushion. He gasped, strained to inflate his lungs.

The Zenith was off!

IV

JOEL FELT HIMSELF GROW heavier, heavier. His arms were lead. The sweat glistened on his homely drawn features. His green eyes lost their sparkle.

After what seemed hours, he heard Nick Thorp croak from his bunk overhead, "Watch y' self. Stellar drive! Any minute!"

Joel felt a surge of unreasoning fear. A bell rang suddenly.

"That's it!" Thorp warned. "Lie still."

As suddenly as it had struck, the acceleration ceased. A terrifying sensation of weightlessness possessed him. He felt as if he were falling—falling! He wanted to spring from the bunk, but remembered Thorp's warning.

Startled cries burst from the passengers. Several of them jumped up. From the corner of his eye Joel saw them shoot to the overhead where they hung kicking. Then the artificial gravity came on and they fell back to the deck a great deal faster than they'd gone up.

Thorp climbed down. "You can get up now."

Joel scrambled to his feet. He felt light, giddy. Nick Thorp took a look at his alarmed countenance and burst into laughter.

"You'll get your space legs quick enough," he assured Joel. "The gravity aboard ship is only about a third of Earth's pull. You'll enjoy it when you get used to it."

Joel had his doubts about that, but when he glanced at the antics of the others he couldn't resist a grin.

A tall red-haired girl kept bounding into the air at each step. Then she flipped all the way over and lit on her bottom.

Just then a whistle blew. Joel wheeled around to find Mister Mullin, the third mate, standing in the door to the mess-room.

"Line up at your bunks," the third ordered. "This is a Star Ship and no stinking freighter. You'll be expected to keep your quarters clean. Inspection every day!"

"Day?" someone asked.

"We're on Earth time. Lights out at twenty-two hours and on again at six. Meals at eight, twelve and eighteen hours."

With the same dispatch he divided the

prisoners into squads of four and assigned each their job.

Joel was relieved to find that he and Nick Thorp were in the same group along with Tamis Ravitz, the dancer, and another man whom Joel didn't know. Their job, it developed, was to keep the mess room in order.

Mister Mullin glanced at his watch, said, "It's eighteen hours now. You can go in to dinner," and trotted out.

Joel realized that he hadn't eaten in hours. He was famished. He hastened into the mess room and sat down at a table along with Nick Thorp and Tamis Ravitz.

The tables, which seated four, were built against the bulkheads down each side of the mess-room. Joel was pressing the button for his meal when a tall handsome man with a black goatee approached them.

"I'm Gustav Liedl," he introduced himself in a cultured voice. "I've been assigned to your squad. I thought it an excellent opportunity to become better acquainted."

"Sit down," Nick Thorp invited, introducing the others.

Joel's dinner arrived just then via a slot in the bulkhead and he addressed himself to it silently. Gustav Liedl, though, dawdled over his meal, talking with Tamis.

"Yes," Joel heard Liedl say in reply to one of Tamis' questions. "I was a professor." He made a rueful face, tugging at his black goatee. "At the Sorbonne. Anthropology was my subject."

"Anthropology!" Joel interrupted. "Then you must have some ideas about the natives of Asgard. What they are? Why no one has ever seen them?"

Liedl regarded Joel with a smile. "Ah, the elusive Centaurians! Yes. I've a theory about the Asgardian natives. I spent several years, you know, studying their villages with the Sorbonne's Asgardian Institute . . ."

Joel, glancing at Tamis, surprised a startled, half-frightened expression on her smooth ivory countenance.

"I've a theory," Liedl repeated, "that the Centaurians are masters of camouflage. I doubt very seriously that they are human. They may even be a quasi-intelligent species of plant life. Have you ever seen the Asgardian jungles, young man?"

"No," Joel admitted.

"Horrible!" Liedl said. "Plants with

snaky tendrils like jointless arms. And they aren't rooted. They're capable of independent motion. It's amazing the number of Asgardian species that can move around freely as mammals."

Tamis said gaily, "Then you think the anthropologists have been looking for a man-like animal when all the time the natives have been plants who crept off into the jungle and hid?"

"Exactly!"

"Sounds like a reasonable explanation," Thorp admitted. "I've seen those Asgardian jungles. Crawling, thrashing masses of vegetation." He shook his head. "It gives a body the creeps."

"But how can anything live in that jungle?" Joel protested.

Liedl said triumphantly: "Nothing could! *Nothing but plants!*"

FIFTEEN minutes before twenty-two hours, a warning bell rang and the lights dimmed. Nick Thorp showed Joel the clothes locker where he could secure sleepers.

The lights went out while Joel was taking his shower. He switched on the dryer in the dark.

After a few seconds his eyes began to adjust. There was a dim night lamp in the mess room beyond the fo'cs'le. Joel could see by its reflected light almost as well as he could by day. The only difference was the absence of color. Everything appeared in varying shades of gray like a photograph.

The deadening effect of the chemicals that had been used to purify the air of the Experimental Station was beginning to wear off. A medley of familiar and unfamiliar smells beset his nostrils.

All at once, he halted.

There was something here that shouldn't be. Joel could smell it. A strange alien odor that he'd caught only once before.

It was the same smell that had clung to the humanoid guard!

Joel's nostrils flared, but the odor was so faint that he couldn't tell from whence it came. It might be emanating from any one of the gray figures placidly asleep in the gray bunks.

He moved to his own bunk and lay down, but he couldn't sleep. That strange scent had acted like a dash of cold water.

He didn't know how long he lay there. Hours, it seemed. There was no sound beyond the muted rumble of the *Zenith's* jets, the snores of some of the prisoners.

The temperature had dropped automatically when the lights were extinguished. He adjusted the thermal unit in his sleepers and closed his eyes.

A faint noise from across the fo'cs'le brought them open again instantly.

The gray elfin figure of Tamis Ravitz, the dancer, he saw, was rising cautiously from her bunk. She was barefooted, clad in the loose sleepers. She put her hand to her eyes. When it came away, she swept the fo'cs'le with a brief glance.

Joel almost forgot to breathe.

The dancer had done something to her eyes because they glowed faintly with an eerie flame!

Joel's pulse throbbed in his ears. Tamis, he saw, was moving to the next bunk with a soundless cat-like glide. She pointed a slender metal cylinder at the man who lay sleeping there. A bright green spot sprang out on the man's arm!

The tattoo mark!

The cylinder must be a source of black light able to kick fluorescence out of the tattoo marks. What did it mean? Who was Tamis?

From sleeping figure to sleeping figure, the girl glided. Sometimes she found the tattoo mark; sometimes she didn't.

She was approaching Joel's bunk. He forced himself to relax, to breathe evenly as if in a deep sleep.

Then she was hovering over him . . .

Joel's hand closed with a crushing grip about her wrist, yanked her off her feet into the bunk!

Tamis uttered one smothered cry, struggled soundlessly. Then she seemed to realize the futility of trying to break free and went limp.

Joel could feel her warm lithe body pinned against him. A strange alien scent filled his nostrils. It was delicate, flower-like, yet utterly alien.

The hair lifted on the back of his neck like the hackles of a dog. He found himself staring deep into the girl's eyes.

They had no pupil, no color, only a weird flickering light in their depths that glimmered like candle flame.

A shudder of revulsion swept over him.

Tamis Ravitz, the dancer, wasn't human!

"Who are you?" Joel asked in a low hoarse voice. "What are you?"

"Please! Softly!" She lay beside him, relaxed, breathing tremulously.

"What are you?" he repeated.

"I can't tell you."

"You'll tell me or I'll turn you over to the guards. What did you do to your eyes?"

"This." She held up a pair of contact lenses. Realistic pupils and iris, Joel saw, had been moulded into the thin slivers of glass. She slipped them quickly into place. Her eyes looked normal, human. They were a perfect disguise.

"What are you?" Joel asked fiercely.

"I'm a mutation."

"No, you're not. I can tell by your scent! You're not human!"

The girl went rigid. Then she began to kick and twist and squirm desperately. Joel pinned down her legs, tightened his grip.

"D'you want me to yell for the guards?"

"No! No!" she breathed in panic.

"Then tell me what this is all about!"

"Have you the tattoo mark?"

JOEL held up his left arm, being careful to retain a grip on her with the other. She trained the cylinder at his elbow. The green spot began to fluoresce.

"Ah," she breathed, relaxing limply. "You *are* a legitimate maladjustment case. I thought you were a spy . . ." Her voice trailed off.

Joel remained silent.

"Believe me," she said. "I can't tell all. Not now. It's too dangerous. Suppose someone should wake and find me here!"

"What are you?" he repeated stonily.

She hesitated; then, putting her lips against his ear, she breathed, "Ganelon. I'm ganelon—not human. I—I am a native of the planet you humans call Asgard."

"But how have you escaped detection?"

"Why hasn't anyone ever seen a Centaurian?"

"They've seen us—often." There was the suggestion of a giggle in Tamis' low voice. "Perhaps, like Professor Liedl thinks, we're plants."

"No. You're animal. I can tell. Maybe you could fool my eyes but not my nose."

"That nose of yours. It is unfair. *You* are the mutation!" She gave a silvery chuckle and then clapped her hand over her mouth.

"Please," she begged. "I must go. We are courting discovery!"

"You haven't told me . . ."

"Tomorrow night," she interrupted. Suddenly she stiffened.

Joel heard it too. The faint noise of a heavy body shifting in one of the bunks. His eyes darted across the darkened fo'cs'le!

Walt Eriss, the burly ex-surgeon, had raised himself to one elbow and was staring across into their bunk.

Joel's heart stood still.

How long had Eriss been awake? Had he heard anything?

Joel could distinguish his features clearly but in shadings of gray and black. Eriss' eyes were narrowed, his mouth open in an expression of acute concentration.

"Does he see us?" Tamis breathed in terror.

"No." The word carried only as far as the girl's ear.

With a swift cat-like movement, Tamis slid to her feet and stood like a gray statue.

The shaggy giant was swinging his legs silently over the edge of his bunk. With infinite caution he began to creep towards them.

Joel stood up beside Tamis. Around him there was silence broken only by the low breathing of the prisoners, the faint rumble of the *Zenith's* jets.

He pressed himself against the foot of the bunk, waiting, waiting for that stalking gray giant to creep within reach.

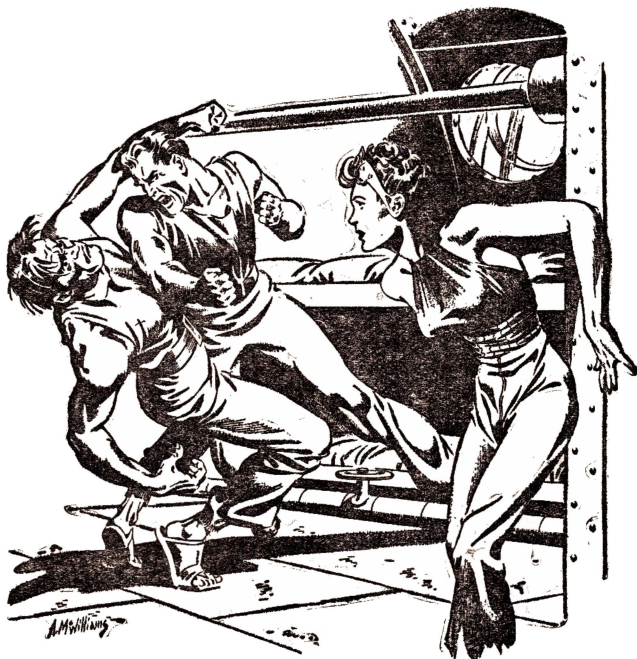
Joel didn't dare breathe. The ex-surgeon was so close that he could see his lips drawn back from his teeth, his blind staring eyes trying to probe the blackness. It took an effort of will to realize that it was too dark for Eriss to see anything.

Another step.

Joel set himself.

Eriss' foot glided forward. He was within reach.

Joel's balled fist came up like a sledgehammer, cracked solidly against the point of Eriss' chin. There was a distinct "pop!" as the ex-surgeon's jawbone broke. His head snapped back, his knees buckled . . .



Joel's balled fist came up like a sledge-hammer.

Joel stepped forward, caught him beneath the arms. Walt Eriss was out cold.

"Tamis!" Joel hissed.

"Yes?"

"Grab his feet. We'll lay him in his bunk."

Together they lifted the giant, hauled him across the deck, stowed him in his bed.

"Tomorrow!" Tamis breathed.

Joel saw her slide into her bunk. He retreated across the fo'cs'le and lay down, but his brain was reeling.

What did the presence of a native Centaurian among the malcontents signify? Then he thought of Walt Eriss and a coldness flowed through his veins. How much

had the ex-surgeon overheard of this?

At length in utter emotional exhaustion, he dropped off to sleep.

JOEL was awakened by lights and the angry sound of voices. He opened his eyes. Beams of light were darting here, there. The fo'cs'le seemed overflowing with guards in their gaudy blue and yellow uniforms.

He caught sight of the third mate, tousle-haired and wearing a lemon yellow dressing gown.

The third was saying, "By God, Captain Goplerud! What have we got this voyage? A gang of homicidal maniacs?"

Walt Eriss, Joel saw, was sitting up mumbling inarticulately. His jaw was swol-

len and queerly crooked. The ship's doctor was fussing over him.

"Jaw's broken," the doctor diagnosed.

Captain Goplerud ran his fingers distractedly through his hair. "It's that damned Hakkyt!" he said. "Hakkyt did this."

"Who's Hakkyt?" Mister Mullin wanted to know.

"He's the fellow who beat up Eriss before."

"Where is he?"

"Here," said Joel swinging his feet to the deck.

The beam of a flashlight struck him in the eyes.

"D'you know anything about this?" Mister Mullin demanded.

Joel shook his head.

"Does anyone know anything about it?" the third mate cried swinging the light beam in a flashing arc.

No one answered.

Captain Goplerud said, "It's no use. They're tight-mouthed as clams."

Mullin cursed, then he said, "Get this man to the hospital."

Walt Eriss was bundled onto a stretcher. The guards moved off. The doctor, Mullin, and Captain Goplerud disappeared with the lights.

Darkness settled once more over the fo'cs'le.

For a moment there was silence. Then a prisoner asked, "What happened?"

A babble of voices answered. Somebody said, "The first I heard was Eriss beating on the door to the guardroom. When it was opened he fainted and they carried him in here."

Thorp leaned down from the bunk above.

"You hurt, Joel?"

"No. Why should I be?"

He was answered by a chuckle.

V

WHEN JOEL SAT DOWN TO breakfast the next morning, Tamis shot him a warning glance from beneath lowered lashes. The pallor of her cheeks was accentuated by her sooty hair. She had the exotic look of some temple harlot strayed through time from ancient Babylonia.

Joel realized suddenly that Professor Liedl was talking to him. "What did you say?" he asked.

"That was a splendid service you performed last night."

"You mean Eriss? But I didn't do it."

"You're too modest." Liedl combed his black van dyke with long brown fingers. "I'm a light sleeper, my boy. And my bunk, you may recall, is next yours."

Joel's face stiffened. He glanced quickly at Tamis. The blood had drained from the girl's countenance.

"What did you hear?" he asked in a frozen voice.

"Don't be embarrassed. Your voices didn't carry, and I'm quite broadminded."

Joel stared at him bewildered. Then the blood began to burn in his cheeks as it dawned on him what Liedl meant. "The old goat," he thought. "So that's what he believes!" And he felt suddenly relieved.

Tamis' lashes were lowered. She bit her nether lip. But whether from amusement or confusion, he couldn't decide.

Fortunately, at that moment the door to the guardroom opened. Mister Mullin stuck his head inside; shouted:

"Get a move on. Inspection in fifteen minutes."

With relief Joel made his escape. He didn't like Liedl's insinuation. He didn't like Liedl. There was something cold and repellant about the black bearded professor. He wondered what crime he had committed to be sentenced to the Experimental Station.

In exactly fifteen minutes Captain Goplerud, accompanied by Mister Mullin entered the prisoners' quarters and lined them up at their bunks. Then a dozen guards filed in and took posts about the fo'cs'le with drawn paralyzers.

Joel wondered uneasily what was up. He wasn't left long in doubt.

A stiff-backed man in a faultless olive-green uniform came through the door. He was wearing the gold sunburst of a Star Ship commander on his breast.

Nick Thorp nudged Joel. "The old man!" he said out of the corner of his mouth. "What the devil brings him down here?"

The commandant ran his eyes over the prisoners. "Very good, Mullin." He turned, said crisply, "This way, Governor."

Governor Cameron and his daughter came through the door together. The governor was a big man with harassed gray eyes. He faced his daughter in obvious exasperation. "Well, here they are, Priscilla. Now why were you so confounded anxious to see them?"

The girl stared around with parted lips. There was a curious eagerness in her green eyes. Then she discovered Joel and he was suddenly conscious of that strange affinity between them.

She wore gold sandals and her toenails and fingernails were lacquered green to match her eyes and hair. She had on a brief pleated skirt, a matching monkey jacket of shimmering rose silk. Her bare midriff, the valley between her breasts, her long legs were smooth golden tan.

"Which one," she asked in a breathless voice, "broke Walt Eriss' jaw?"

"Hakkyt," Mullin informed her briskly. "The big ugly one over there." He pointed at Joel.

Joel found himself staring into the girl's green eyes again. Her lashes were long, black and curly. Her green hair was startling but it wasn't garish.

Without taking her eyes from Joel's, she asked, "Could I see his examination reports? I think he's a . . ."

The governor started nervously. "You're buying no more serfs Priscilla!" he interrupted in haste. "That's final!"

Joel felt his face burn. Buy him? So that's what had brought them down here to the prisoners' quarters!

The girl was staring at her father with a puzzled expression. Something very like a warning flickered between them—something in Governor Cameron's expression. Joel couldn't be sure.

But the girl's eyes widened.

For a moment there was a strained silence. Then she shrugged, turned back to Joel, studied him brazenly detail by detail. He felt naked beneath those probing green eyes. He felt like a prize Hereford bull.

Priscilla said, "Nevertheless, I should like to glance over those reports, Captain." Her voice didn't sound quite natural.

She had slipped into a part, Joel sensed; she was acting. But why? He was too furious to care. He created a shocked disturbance by saying in a cold voice, "I wouldn't be a good buy!"

JAWS dropped among the prisoners. Mister Mullin shouted, "Speak when you're spoken to!"

Priscilla Cameron suddenly smiled. "Why not?" she asked him, silencing the apoplectic mate with a wave.

"I'll damn well see to it that I'm not!"

Priscilla continued to regard him with delighted green eyes. "A challenge!" She turned to the saturnine man wearing the gold sunburst. "How much do you want for him, Commandant?"

The commandant had been observing the scene with cynical gray eyes. He was the perfect Terran type; tall, brown-skinned, erect. Now he said,

"Sorry, Priscilla, but he's not mine to sell. He's the property of the Republic, and the laws are specific. He has to be sold at auction in Eden."

Priscilla said, "Stuff! The governor can authorize the private sale of any serf . . ."

"We're not on Asgard," the commandant reminded her dryly. "This is a Star Ship."

Governor Cameron's visage had grown a rich plum shade. "This farce has gone far enough!" he bellowed furiously. But his anger didn't ring quite true. "I wouldn't authorize the sale of this fellow to my daughter if I could!"

Priscilla said sweetly, "I'll buy him at public auction."

"You will not!"

"Exactly how, pater dear, do you propose to stop me?"

The governor looked as if he were about to have a stroke. Then he swung around, stamped from the fo'cs'le.

It struck Joel as a shade overdrawn. As if Priscilla inadvertently had been about to let something slip, and they'd staged this impromptu fight to cover up.

He heard the commandant say, "Sorry, Priscilla, but I'm due on the bridge."

Priscilla gave Joel a last searching look. Her green eyes sparkled. "I'll see you at the slave block in Eden," she said as she preceded the commandant through the door.

As soon as the guards had withdrawn, Nick Thorp gave a low whistle.

Joel was still furious. "What was she driving at? Why the devil did she pick me out?" He noticed that Professor Liedl was regarding him with a frown. Tamis, too, was watching him, a speculative ex-

pression on her elfin piquant features.

Thorp shrugged. "That's hard to tell. She's got a reputation from one end of Asgard to the other. There's even been talk that she's a mutant."

"Mutant." Joel frowned. She certainly hadn't bred true to type. The standard Terran female had light brown skin, black hair and gray eyes. But hers were green—like cat eyes. Like his own eyes!

A startled expression passed over his likeable rugged features. "By George!" he said aloud. "I wonder!"

Later, when the lights had been extinguished again, he lay awake in the dark—tense, listening. The fo'c's'le was quiet. At length, satisfied that everyone was asleep, he slid from his bunk, crossed the deck to the messroom.

The faint yellow night light was burning. He sat down at a table, lit a cigarette, waited. He was chain-smoking his third cigarette before he heard a step. He glanced up quickly. Tamis was standing in front of him.

Joel said, "I thought you must have gone to sleep."

TAMIS sat down facing him. She'd removed the contact lenses. The liquid luminous depths of her eyes were hypnotic. "No. I couldn't sleep. We need men like you too badly. You especially."

"Me?" he said, startled. "You need me?"

She smiled. "My people, Joel, are a timid race, unwarlike, unaggressive. There are many differences between us. Not of an organic nature. We are fundamentally alike. The differences lie in our culture."

"How do you mean?"

"It is difficult to explain. But your race is so far advanced in the physical sciences that it terrifies us. With your incomprehensible machines you could sweep us into extinction in the wink of an eye.

"When the first Terran ship landed on Asgard, we were careful not to show ourselves. Then we learned a queer thing. Although the Terrans were amazingly clever in physics and chemistry; they knew nothing about the potential of the machines that were their own bodies. Nothing! So we continued to elude them and to study them . . ."

"How?"

"I am not at liberty to tell you that. If the Thinkers accept you, they'll inform you how it is done."

Joel stared at her narrow eyes. "But . . ."

"No. Don't interrupt. Your civilization, we learned, was a machine civilization. Your race even went so far as to reject any individual who differed from the norm. The Republic's goal was an ant-like similarity of all its members."

Joel said, "I don't see . . ."

"Don't you? What becomes of any mutation who escapes the vigilance of the Eugenics Board? What happened to you, Joel Hakkyt?"

Joel was silent.

She looked at him searchingly. "Instead of concentrating on the physical sciences, my people have studied—themselves! The psychological sciences. We don't try to control our environment; we fit ourselves to it."

Joel shook his head, still not comprehending.

She said, "You humans build elaborate shelters to protect yourselves against the elements; we have developed our bodies to resist the weather. We revel in rain. Sunlight is intoxicating.

"You have added speed to your legs with machines, wings to your arms with machines. Your machines are like crutches. They give you an immense power, but they atrophy the natural endowments of your body. Could you do this?"

She pointed with a bird-like gesture behind Joe. He swung around. His eyes widened.

The bulkhead had disappeared! He was staring straight through the ship as if it had ceased to exist. He could see the awesome black infinity of deep space speckled with countless pinpoint suns.

Then the bulkhead gathered substance and he was looking at the blank wall again.

He let his breath escape. "How did you do that?"

"You were seeing with my eyes. Your people have invented machines to do that—the X-ray machine, the fluoroscope. They are crutches. They cannot do half so well as the eye alone!"

"But it's impossible!" he burst out.

She shook her head. "No. Consider the facts. Even in the densest solid, there is

more space than matter. Every atom is like a miniature solar system. There is an infinity of space in that bulkhead but only a drop of matter no bigger than a grain of sand. Is it not true?"

Joel nodded.

Tamis giggled. "You know that, and yet you let the grain of sand obstruct your view!"

"But why hide yourselves?" he burst out. "With powers like that . . ."

"I didn't destroy the wall," she interrupted. "I recognized its transparent qualities. That is all. We have no weapons, no science that can destroy. We can only hide!"

"But why hide?" he persisted.

She regarded him sadly. "Your people are a hard grasping race—ruthless. What has happened to the dominant life forms of Mars and Venus? They are extinct!"

"We don't propose to be driven into extinction. We have hidden ourselves, waiting for a weapon to free Asgard. And now the Republic itself has given us one!"

"The Republic has given you a weapon!"

"Yes. The maladjusted. The misfits. They are being organized. They are our weapon!"

"Very interesting!" drawled a low voice from the doorway to the fo'cs'le.

Tamis gave a startled gasp. Her face paled. Joel sprang to his feet.

Professor Gustav Liedl stood just inside the doorway. He held a small poisoned needle automatic trained unflinchingly at Joel's belly.

VI

IN THE TENSE SILENCE, LIEDL moved into the messroom.

"What are you going to do?" Joel demanded hoarsely.

Liedl grinned, his teeth glittering in the subdued night light.

"Spy!" said Tamis.

Liedl shrugged. "The word has a disagreeable sound. I prefer to call myself a Government Investigator."

He was edging past them toward the door to the guardroom. The muzzle of his gun hung to Joel's belly like the needle of a compass.

"Stop him, Joel!" Tamis begged wildly. "You are human. You can kill!"

Liedl had to pass within three feet of Joel down the narrow aisle between the tables in order to reach the guardroom. Joel could see the sweat standing out on his fallow forehead.

"Don't try anything!" the professor croaked and began to slide past.

There was the sound of a step from the fo'cs'le. Then the voice of Nick Thorp sang out softly, "Where are you going, Gus?"

Liedl blanched, jerked his head. For a second his eyes were off Joel.

Joel's hand whipped out, slapped the dart gun. It was torn from Liedl's fingers, went slithering across the deck to fetch up with a clatter against the bulkhead.

Liedl opened his mouth to yell. Joel's big hands closed about his throat.

"Kill him!" said Nick Thorp in a brittle voice.

Liedl clawed wildly, spasmodically, at Joel's wrists. The ex-professor's black goatee stuck straight out like a spear. His mouth was open. His round gray eyes bulged.

The muscles of Joel's forearms stood out like cords. Sweat trickled unheeded down his nose. His face was expressionless, his green eyes narrowed morosely.

The only sounds were Nick Thorp's hoarse breathing and the muted rumble of the jets. Tamis pressed herself against the bulkhead, a fixed, horrified expression on her face.

Liedl's convulsive thrashing grew weaker. Suddenly his knees buckled. He buckled. He slumped to the deck.

Joel followed him down, stooping over him bear-like, never relaxing the throttling pressure. Sweat ran into his eyes.

He became aware of Thorp shaking his shoulder.

"He's dead!" Thorp was saying. "Dead. Do you hear me?"

Joel drew a gasping breath, stood up, wiped the sweat out of his eyes. He didn't look at the crumpled figure on the deck. This was the second man he'd killed. The first had been an accident, but not Gustav Liedl.

Tamis said suddenly, "We can't leave him there!"

"No," Thorp agreed. "We'd better dump him down the waste chute. The converters will dispose of him."

He picked up the body like a limp sack of potatoes. "Open the chute."

The girl held up the lid while Thorp slid the body into it. There was a faint swoosh. Tamis let the lid drop.

An awkward silence fell upon them.

"Well," Thorp broke it, "we're in this together. Liedl was a government spy. There'll be hell to pay when he turns up missing."

"But they can't trace it to us," Tamis asked. "Can they?"

"No. The reconverters will take care of that."

Joel stood up abruptly, started for the fo'cs'le.

"Joel!" Tamis said.

He didn't answer.

WALT ERISS, the ex-surgeon, returned eventually from the ship's hospital—a savage-eyed Eriss who obviously had been nursing his grievances. Almost his first act was to confront Joel.

"Hakkyt," he said thinly, "that's twice you've struck me." He fingered his jaw, his curious yellow-gray eyes aflame. "I'll kill you for this."

Everyone stopped talking, stared breathlessly at the shaggy haired giant. Thorp moved beside Joel, but he didn't say anything.

Joel said dryly: "Well—what's stopping you?"

Walt Eriss began to tremble. "No," he said in a harsh voice. "I don't want witnesses."

"Talk," said Joel. "You talk too much to do anything."

The ex-surgeon turned abruptly on his heel and stalked away.

Thorp said, low-voiced, "Watch him. Don't ever let him get behind you."

"He's a bluff."

"No. He's a killer. I've seen his kind before. He'll get you, Joel." The spaceman's blue eyes were cold. "You're not safe while he's alive . . ."

Joel frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean we'd better dump him down the reconverters tonight!"

Joel was shocked. "I'm not a murderer!" "It's not murder; it's self-defense."

"No!" said Joel and refused to hear any more about it.

The succession of days crept past as

alike as beads on a string. Joel tried to draw Tamis out about the Ganelons, but she had been too badly frightened by Liedl's death.

She was afraid of him, too; he could see it in her eyes and it worried him. One sleeping period he asked her about it with characteristic bluntness.

Tamis bit her lip. "I—I never saw a man killed before. I can't get it out of my mind. It's not you, Joel." And then she began to tell him about her early life in the Ganelon village.

It was a life without sham—a simple joyous pagan existence close to the primal forces of nature. Tamis' voice trembled with nostalgia.

Joel was fascinated. He was on fire with impatience to reach Asgard.

On the forty-third day the *Zenith* came out of the Stellar Drive and began to fire her braking tubes.

Down, down she settled towards the surface of Asgard, second planet of Alpha Centauri A. An electric excitement ran like flames through the Unfit.

Joel couldn't eat. "How much longer?" he asked Thorp for the hundredth time.

"For Saturn's sake, sit down," the spaceman exploded.

Joel dropped into a relaxer, lit a cigarette. His green eyes glittered with anticipation. Tamis gave him an amused glance, but Joel sensed that the Ganelon girl was as excited as himself.

"We should be landing in an hour," she informed him.

Joel felt the *Zenith* shiver from the violence of her braking blasts. Minutes ticked past like hours. Then a bell began to ring and went on ringing.

After an interminable wait, Joel was shaken by a heavy jar. The *Zenith* rocked sickeningly. There was another blast of the jets. Another jar.

The roar dwindled and fell silent. A strange hush pervaded the ship.

"Asgard!" Thorp shouted, leaping to his feet and slapping Joel on the shoulder. "We're down!"

THE prisoners were led straight from the Star Ship into the spaceport where a robot surface bus was waiting to carry them into Eden. The bus was constructed after a design strange to Joel. It

was a half-track with heavy mesh screens at the windows.

When he accidentally touched the screen, he received a jarring electric shock. Tamis, who was seated beside him, giggled.

"Where do they think we'd escape to?" he demanded bitterly.

"They're not to keep us from escaping, Joel."

Just then the bus started smoothly, gathered momentum, burst out into the brilliant light of Asgard's twin suns.

Joel forgot the electrified screens, craning his neck, trying to see everything at once. The spaceport, he realized, must be located at some distance from Eden. The road ran straight ahead—a glittering plastic ribbon cutting a channel through the fantastic jungle.

It was monstrous, that jungle. It writhed, twisted, swayed in great swaths although there wasn't the faintest breeze. Suddenly the bus stopped with a jerk to allow a herd of huge tree-like plants to swarm across the road.

Joel gaped at them in amazement. They had thick flesh-like trunks from which writhing tentacles sprouted like the arms of an octopus. A mass of wriggling squirming thread-like roots propelled the plants forward with startling speed.

"Ugh!" Joel shuddered, turned to Tamis. "What are those?"

"Nigel trees."

Joel wrenched back suddenly from the window. One of the nigel trees had lashed out with a tentacle. It touched the screen. There was a green spark. The tentacle jerked back.

"Now do you see why the screens are electrified?" Tamis asked. "The nigel trees are carnivorous."

The bus started to move again. Joel was regarding the Ganelon girl with a frown. "You actually live in the jungle with those things roaming about?"

"Yes. They don't bother us."

He looked incredulous. "Why not? Don't they like your flavor?"

Tamis giggled. "We can control them—a little. They don't think. They react to external stimuli."

"I see," said Joel. But he didn't.

He heard a wailing siren overhauling them fast from the direction of the spaceport. The bus pulled over to let an escort

of guards on armored prowl-cycles roar past. Immediately following them, came a plastic tear-drop tri-wheeler. The governor and his daughter were lounging back in its roomy seats.

Priscilla glimpsed Joel and waved mockingly. Then the procession was gone, a second detachment of guards bringing up the rear.

Buildings, Joel noticed, had begun to replace the jungle, buildings of thick opaque plastic without windows. The moving sidewalks, shaded by gaudy awnings, were crowded with men and women clad in little more than shorts and sandals.

The air, Joel realized, was stifling. The dazzling yellow ball that was Alpha Centauri A rode high in the steel blue sky. Alpha Centauri B was a smaller molten-orange sun swimming just above the horizon. Joel had never felt such heat before. It was like the engine room of a tramp space.

The bus slowed down, swung into the curb. Captain Goplerud shouted, "Pile out!"

Joel saw a detachment of guards drawn up at the curb. They wore white uniforms and pith helmets and carried small automatic paralyzers. A crowd began to collect behind the double line of guards, which ran like a gauntlet into a massive prison-like structure. From behind him, Nick Thorp said, "Here's an old friend of yours."

"Who?" He glanced up in surprise, recognized Priscilla Cameron grinning at him with an impish expression.

SHE was dressed in crisp white shorts and a brief jacket. Her green hair wasn't so startling as it had been aboard ship. Joel had noticed other women on the street of Eden with green hair, with yellow hair, with cerise, vermillion, chartreuse hair. It obviously was the latest mode of Asgard.

"That's the one, Colonel!" he heard Priscilla say to the man beside her. "Be sure to notify me when he comes up for sale."

Joel reddened.

The colonel touched his cap. "I'll be glad to, Miss Cameron." He turned to Captain Goplerud.

"Move them inside, Captain. They're

not used to the suns. Have a good crossing?"

"Rotten," said Goplerud. "I'm glad to get 'em off my hands. Watch that fellow Halkyt, by the way. He's a killer."

Then the line began to move. He had been carried beyond earshot into the dim warmth of the prison.

VII

THE VOICE OF TAMIS RAVITZ came softly, insistently through the steaming prison twilight. "Joel. Joel!"

He swung away from the window through which he'd been staring at the streams of pedestrians outside. "Yes?"

The Ganelon girl lowered her voice. "I've been in communication with my people . . ."

"What?" Joel couldn't believe his ears. For two days the Unfit had been locked in the prison. All of them in a single barracks-like room. The girl hadn't been out of his sight. "How the devil . . ."

She smiled, tapped her forehead with a slim forefinger.

"Telepathy?"

She nodded.

Joel's green eyes narrowed. Tamis never failed to astonish him. The suffocating heat didn't bother her in the least.

The other prisoners were sprawled about the floor, many of them stark naked. Clothes of any kind were a torment. The slightest exertion brought fountains of sweat pouring from the skin. But Tamis wasn't even perspiring.

She said, "I've made my report. I've been given permission to tell you certain facts. Is there anything you particularly want to know?"

Joel scratched the bristles on his chin, frowned. "How is it," he asked finally, "that the Ganelons have never been discovered?"

An impish grin crossed her smooth elfin features. "Professor Liedl was almost right."

"Camouflage?"

"Yes. Mental camouflage. Is anyone watching?"

Joel glanced about swiftly. "No."

Tamis put her hand to her throat, unzipped the coveralls. With a sinuous movement, she freed her shoulders. The baggy

garment fell about her ankles. She stepped out of them—and disappeared.

Literally!

It took Joel a full moment for the realization to penetrate. He'd caught one arresting glimpse of Tamis, nude like a slim marble statue. Then she'd disappeared into the hot, fertile smelling air like a grain of sugar in a glass of water.

Suddenly he realized that he could still scent her. He became sharply aware of that alien, flower-like odor.

He heard her giggle, whirled around. She was standing not six feet off, regarding him with an amused expression.

"How did you do it?" Joel blurted out.

"It is difficult to explain. You have no words in your language to signify what I just did. I—I removed myself from your range of vision."

"Hell! I know that. But how?"

She tapped her forehead again. "It's done with an understanding of the nervous system."

Joel stared at her without any sign of comprehension.

"How can I make it clear?" she asked helplessly. "There are sounds you can't hear because they extend beyond the range of human ears. There are limits to your vision too. And I removed myself beyond those limits."

He said, "Oh," continuing to regard her fixedly. Then, "You could escape any time."

"Yes," she admitted. "But this is my job. I don't want to escape."

"What exactly is your job?" he demanded.

"Intelligence. There are many of us, both men and women disguised as humans who circulate among the Unfit."

"Then—?" Joel prompted.

"Then we make our reports to the Thinkers."

"You've mentioned these Thinkers before. Who are they?"

"Our scientists. Our wise men." She paused, changed the subject abruptly. "Today, Joel, we are to be sold."

"Damn!" He was appalled, remembering Priscilla Cameron's threat to buy him.

"Joel," she went on earnestly, "you are one of us now. The Thinkers have a job for you."

"For me?"

"Yes. Obviously Priscilla Cameron is interested in you, Joel. You must play up to her. It's the first chance we've had to get a spy close to Governor Cameron . . ."

"Hell, Tamis," he interrupted with an expression of distaste. "I can't do that!"

"But, Joel, you must! Not even my people have been able to get into the palace."

His green eyes quickened with interest. "Why not? They've been able to insinuate themselves everywhere else."

TAMIS shook her head. "We don't know! Dozens of Ganelons have slipped into Governor Cameron's palace. For a while we continue to receive their telepathic reports. Then nothing!"

He said: "Let me get this straight. The Ganelons have sent spies into the palace and all of them have simply vanished?"

She nodded.

"But who detected them, if they were invisible?"

"We don't know. Oh, Joel, that's why it's so important for you to obtain Priscilla Cameron's confidence. Women are—are indiscreet with their lovers."

Joel looked shocked.

"But Joel, she'll buy you anyway! You'll have the run of the palace. Slaves hear things and see things no one else can!"

She paused, saw him wavering, hurried on. "We're blind without someone close to the governor. The Thinkers are worried. They're holding off, afraid to give the word that'll start the revolt."

"How near is it?" he asked.

"We're ready to strike. The Unfit have stolen arms, built secret laboratories in the jungle. But we don't dare go ahead until we find out how much the governor knows. We may be blundering into a trap."

Joel drew a deep breath. "All right," he agreed reluctantly, "I'll try. How do I pass my information on—if I get any?"

She looked relieved. "The Thinkers will contact you."

A yell from outside their prison interrupted her. Somebody blew a whistle. A chorus of shouts, muted by the thick walls, reached them faintly.

Joel swung toward the door. The prisoners were all staring in that direction too.

Nick Thorp scrambled to his feet, came over to Joel and Tamis. "What's the fuss?"

Tamis shrugged naked ivory shoulders.



She slipped into her coveralls, a frown tugging at her eyebrows.

Suddenly a siren turned loose like a blast from the last trumpet. Joel jumped involuntarily.

"Someone's escaped!" Tamis gasped.

The door burst open. Guards spilled into their prison. They wore white shorts and tunics and carried paralyzers. The dapper colonel was no longer jaunty. His face was red.

"Line up against the wall!" he shouted in a furious tone.

Joel fell into line beside Tamis and Thorp. The colonel opened the muster, barked, "Allyn!"

"Here."

"Aus!"

"Here."

"Baden!"

"Here."

Through the open door, Joel could see a white uniformed guard sprawled on the floor. Blood trickled from his mouth and nose and the doctor was fussing over him.

The colonel reached the D's. Then he said, "Eriss."

There was no answer.

"Eriss!" he repeated. The silence was explosive. No one breathed.

Joel craned his neck, looked up and down the line. The shaggy ex-surgeon was conspicuously absent!

The colonel swore. He turned on an under-officer at his elbow. "That's the man!" he said savagely. "Get his dossier and put his picture on the televisior immediately!"

The under-officer sprinted from the room, almost collided with a man entering the prison. Joel saw that it was the guard who'd been lying unconscious outside the door. His white uniform was blood-spattered and he was holding a handkerchief to his nose.

The colonel caught sight of him at the same time, asked in a cold voice, "What happened to you?"

The guard looked unhappy. "This fellow called me to the door. He asked to see you."

"See me?"

"Yes, sir. He said some of the prisoners were planning to escape. He wouldn't tell me about it. I was taking him to you . . ."

"Why did you let him out? Why didn't you send for me?" The colonel's voice was brittle as ice.

"He acted frightened, sir. Said they would kill him if he wasn't taken out."

"I see. Then he hit you. Is that it?"

"Yes, sir. As I was locking the door after him. I dropped the paralyzer. He snatched it and turned it on me. I don't remember anything else." The guard hesitated. "Did he get away, sir?"

"Yes. From the roof. Helicopter." The colonel turned on his heel, marched from the room. The guards withdrew.

Joel could hear the wailing screams of sirens rising all over the city.

"But where can he escape to?" Joel asked.

Tamis gave him a sober glance, lowered her voice. "There are half a dozen bands of escaped serfs in the jungle. My people have been protecting them. He may be able to join them—if the nigel trees don't get him first."

Thorp said, "Good riddance."

Joel didn't say anything. The ex-surgeon was a shrewd, brutal man. He didn't think the nigel trees would be able to catch him.

THE slave block was located in the principal square of Eden. Joel had been escorted thither along with the other prisoners, stripped and chained naked inside a long pavillion like the cattle sheds at a fair.

Streams of planters flowed through the pavillion, studying the prisoners, discussing their good and bad points before bidding on them. A good natured holiday air pervaded the throng. Alternately Joel was white-lipped with fury and red with embarrassment at their pointed observations.

All at once he stiffened, catching sight of Priscilla Cameron heading straight for him through the crowd.

Joel flushed darkly. He had never disliked anyone with the passion he felt for this girl with her defiant green hair, her slim cool arrogance.

Tamis Ravitz was chained in the stall next to Joel. The Ganelon girl leaned over and said, "Here she comes. Remember!"

"I see her. Who's the fellow with her?"

"General Roos. Fredrik Roos. He's head of the Asgardian Police."

Joel thought the police chief looked young and dashing in the white Asgardian uniform. A tiny jeweled paralyzer was belted about his waist.

There was a twinkle in Priscilla's green eyes when she paused in front of Joel's stall.

"Here he is, Freddy. Isn't he lovely?"

Joel stiffened.

"Lord," General Fredrik Roos drawled, "what a big brute!"

"Isn't he, though?"

Despite her light manner, Joel sensed a strain in Priscilla's voice. She was wearing a diminutive yellow jacket with puffed sleeves and a matching skirt. The shimmering microweb accentuated the firm youthful modeling of breast, hip and thigh.

"Did you ever see such shoulders?" he heard her ask Roos. "He's magnificent!" She turned back to Joel. "Flex your biceps, Joel."

Their eyes locked. Joel didn't move, but an expression of surprise swept his features.

For a moment, Priscilla's guard had dropped. Fear was mirrored in her vivid green eyes. Fear and appeal. The girl was in a panic!

"Surly brute," Roos said.

"Oh, I'll tame him," she began gaily. Then she broke off, staring at Tamis Ravitz with a frozen startled expression.

Tamis was crouched against the wall in fright. Her small breasts rose and fell rapidly.

Priscilla wheeled suddenly, beckoned a guard. "That girl! Get her out of those chains and take her to the governor!"

The guard looked startled. He glanced at General Roos for confirmation.

Roos' face hardened. "Do what Miss Cameron says!"

The guard looked bewildered, but he hauled Tamis to her feet, unlocked the shackles. They fell to the floor with a clank.

Tamis straightened. Like the rest of the Unfit, she had been stripped of her baggy coveralls. She looked like a painting of Psyche by Boucher. She took one step . . .

"Keep hold of her wrist!" Priscilla cried.

But Tamis had vanished!

VIII

THE DELIVERY TRUCK RESEMBLED a dog catcher's wagon as it rolled up behind the governor's palace. It was Joel's first glimpse of Priscilla's home—a towering plastic structure in the style of the symbolists.

After the girl had bought him, guards had whisked him from the slave block. He'd been hauled through the streets like a wild beast.

Joel was led inside an office where the major-domo, a tall, tremendously fat man in a white slave tunic, signed the receipt for him. Alpha Centauri A had set. An angry orange light streamed through the windows from Alpha Centauri B.

The major-domo grunted, heaved himself to his feet. He was staring fixedly at Joel's arm.

Joel glanced down. The tattoo mark was fluorescing a vivid green!

"So!" said the major-domo.

Joel opened his mouth. The major-domo put his finger to his lips with a silencing gesture, covered the action with a yawn. But his eyes held a warning.

He slid his hand beneath his desk. Something clicked. The tattoo quit fluorescing.

"Put this on," he said going to a clothes locker and tossing Joel one of the white slave tunics. "Miss Cameron left orders that you weren't to be assigned until she sent for you."

Joel dropped the tunic over his head with a confused feeling.

"This way." The fat man led him into a corridor. As the door shut on the office, he stopped so abruptly that Joel bumped into him.

"All right," he said, "it's safe to talk here. But watch the mirrors. They're tele-visions! There isn't a room in the palace that isn't equipped with them. We're under constant surveillance."

Joel's brain was reeling. So the palace serfs were organized too!

"Listen close," the major-domo went on low voiced, "Meeting tonight. You'll be instructed in your part for *the day*."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when the door at the opposite end of the corridor slid aside. The fat man jumped a foot, his face taking on the color of wet clay.

A girl brushed into the passage, stopped with a startled expression. She was young, Joel saw, and pretty with straight brown hair. Her short white tunic exposed long symmetrical legs.

"Hullo!" she said. "I was looking for you." Her brown eyes flicked a glance at Joel. "This the new man?"

The major-domo said, "Yes," in a relieved voice.

"Big devil. Does he bite?"

"He's a legitimate maladjustment case, if that's what you're driving at," the fat man replied stiffly. "What did you want?"

"Miss Cameron sent me to fetch him." She jerked her head at Joel.

The major-domo frowned. "You'll have to go," he said to Joel. "I was hoping she'd give you time to get your bearings. But that's not her way."

"Listen," said the girl turning anxiously to Joel. "I'm Peg—Miss Cameron's maid. You watch your step. That baggage has bought dozens of men off the Star Ships. They would be around for a week, ten days. Then pouf! Gone! Nobody would ever see 'em again!"

Joel looked startled. "What is she? A lady Bluebeard?"

"She's no lady," said the girl. "And it

Isn't funny. You watch your step. She can see in the dark like a cat!"

"What's that?" Joel's interest quickened. "See in the dark?"

"Like a cat!" Peg repeated. "And that's not the half of it. She can smell a person out like a hound! I mean actually. Just let her get one whiff of you and she knows who you are!"

Joel wasn't surprised. That explained how Priscilla had detected Tamis at the slave market. It also explained why the Ganelon spies had always been caught in the palace. Their alien scent had betrayed them to Priscilla's keen nostrils. Trapping them was easy.

"We've loitered here as long as we dare!" Peg said nervously. "I'll get in trouble."

The major-domo said, "Don't forget tonight," retreated down the passage to his office.

Joel followed the girl through a maze of corridors. Peg switched along, chattering incessantly. Once she hissed out of the corner of her mouth, "Talk! Don't gape at the mirrors. We're not supposed to know they're televisions!"

For the life of him, Joel couldn't think of anything to say. The mirrors were everywhere. They gave him a bad case of stage fright.

At the top floor, Peg paused before a door, pressed a stud. Joel saw that a panel of opaque plastic had been let into the face of the door.

"I'm on the terrace," said Priscilla's voice suddenly. It sounded so close that Joel's head snapped around. "Bring him back here."

And the door opened, silently, disclosing an empty vestibule. The walls were mirrors glowing with a subdued rose light. Their feet made no sound on the dull black plastic floor as they crossed the vestibule, entered the salon.

Like the vestibule, Joel saw, it was paneled in dimly gleaming mirrors. It made the room stretch out forever except where crystal doors gave onto a roof garden. He could see Priscilla Cameron stretched on a deck chair sunning herself in the luminous orange rays of Alpha Centauri B.

Peg pushed aside the crystal doors. "Here he is, Miss Cameron."

AT THEIR appearance, some creature set up an excited yap-yapping. Joel stared around trying to locate the beast. Then he swallowed. The yapping noise was issuing from a plant in a greentub!

"Thank you, Peg," Priscilla said. "That's all."

Peg curtsied, backed out.

"What is that thing?" Joel demanded.

"It's an Asgardian lung beast." Priscilla went to the excited plant, stroked it gently. The yapping ceased. "See. It's not a plant at all. It's one of the three known species of Asgardian rooted mammals."

Joel put his hand on the creature. It was like a lump of flesh covered with soft brown hair! He shuddered, snatched his hand away.

Priscilla laughed. She was wearing a short yellow smock and sandals. She said, "Sid down, Joel. I want to talk to you."

He sank into the relaxer she indicated. Instantly, flexible metal bands whipped about his throat, his biceps, his wrists and ankles. He wrenched convulsively, squirmed.

The more he fought the tighter the bands contracted. He couldn't breathe. A red haze swam before his eyes.

"Relax!" he heard Priscilla's voice coming from a great distance.

He slumped in the seat. The bands slacked off. He could breathe again.

"Damn you! Damn you!" he rasped. His throat was raw.

"I'm sorry, Joel!" she said in a scared voice. "I have to know something!"

Sitting stiffly in the chair's metal embrace, he watched her from the corner of his eye. She was wheeling a machine onto the terrace. Wires sprouted from it like the ganglia of the nervous system. Each wire terminated in a tiny saucer-shaped disk. She fastened them to his temple, the base of his skull, his solar plexus, his spine. Sweat burst out on Joel's face.

Priscilla finished attaching the sucker discs. Then she sat down at the machine, began to fiddle with a dial.

The machine went "*glug—glug—bubble—glug—*"

"What the hell is that thing?" Joel demanded in a tight voice.

Priscilla didn't answer. The only sound was the "*glug—glug—bubble—glug*" of the machine. Then it said, "*What the hell*

is she up to?" in an alarmed metallic voice.

Joel jerked as if he'd been slapped.

The machine said, "No! No!" And then it became absolutely unintelligible. It babbled.

Joel stared at it in consternation.

It said: "My Lord, it's reading my thoughts!"

He turned horrified eyes to Priscilla.

The machine rattled on inexorably: "Why? Why? What does she want to know? Ganelons. Don't think . . . Tamis. Where's Tamis? And Thorp. Wonder—. I'm being verbose. Go around in circles. Circles. Curves. Good legs and—. A hell of a thing to be thinking of now! What happened to those other men? Lady Bluebeard. She's no lady. She sure as hell isn't . . ."

"For Pete's sake shut that thing off!" Joel and the machine roared in unison.

Priscilla lifted her eyes, asked, "Have the rebels contacted you?"

"No," said Joel.

The machine said: "That damned machine will give me away."

"So they have contacted you?"

"Yes," he replied bitterly.

The machine said: "What's the use of lying?"

Priscilla threw back her head and laughed. "Joel, are you in communication with the Ganelons?"

"Ganelons?" he said, "What are they?"

The machine said: "How did she know that? Ye gods, she'll pull everything out of me. Make my mind a blank. Don't think about Tamis. Don't. . ."

"Who's Tamis?" Priscilla asked.

"She's forgotten," the machine said in surprise. "No. She didn't know the girl's name; just that she was a Ganelon. Wow, what a horrible, uncontrollable thing a person's mind is. Multiplication tables. Two times two is four. . . Damn! I can't remember the multiplication tables!"

"Joel," said Priscilla, "I'm going to make you my bodyguard."

"Bodyguard!" echoed Joel and the machine together. "Hell fire. . ." He shut his mouth. The machine went, "Glug—glug—bubble—glug. 'Out damned spot! Out, I say! One: Two: Why, then 'tis time to do't . . ."

"What's that?" Priscilla demanded suspiciously.

"Macbeth," Joel replied with a grin. And for ten minutes she had to listen to the machine spouting quotations from Shakespeare. After that it started on nursery rhymes, began a dissertation on cattle breeding.

"All right!" said Priscilla savagely. "You win. I can stand anything but hearing about the love life of a cow!" She shut the machine off.

Joel slumped weakly in the seat. Sweat was rolling down his face.

PRISCILLA was pensive as she removed the suckers, rolled the machine away. When she returned she was carrying a small paralyzer.

"Did you mean it," Joel asked, "when you said I'm to be your bodyguard?"

"Yes."

"But that's absurd!"

"Would you stand by and watch me murdered?"

"No," he admitted.

"Fair enough," she said. "That's all I ask."

She threw a switch on the back of the chair. The bands loosened. Joel stood up, rubbing his throat.

Priscilla shot him an oblique glance, said dryly, "Don't misunderstand me. I need protection. Nothing else."

Turning abruptly she entered the apartment, beckoned for him to follow. She touched a hidden plate in the floor with her toe. Joel saw a section of the mirror paneled wall slide aside revealing a shallow passage beyond.

"This is where you're to stay. So that you can watch the apartment at all times."

Joel entered the passage, gave a low whistle of surprise. It ran all around the salon behind the mirrors. He could see the room through them as if they were the clearest plate glass.

Security glass, he realized. It had been bombarded with chromium so that from one side it acted as a mirror. But from the other it was transparent.

"Who built this?"

"The last governor. He was terrified of assassination. The palace is a rat-run of secret passages and lifts, concealed televisors, electronic eyes and alarms."

Joel said, "Priscilla, why did you buy me?"

The twinkle returned to her green eyes. "You'll learn. Meanwhile you'd better familiarize yourself with these passages." And she shut the panel on him.

Joel spent the next week exploring the labyrinthine passages that ran everywhere from the sub basement to the top floor. He emerged only to eat or when Priscilla called him over the wrist radio.

From the serfs he heard echoes of what was taking place in the outside world. Walt Eriss, he learned from Peg, had joined one of the outlaw bands. He was being talked about constantly among the serfs.

A man of action, they called the ex-surgeon, brutal, ruthless, shrewd. A strong man. Joel held his own counsel. But the reports worried him.

He was exploring between the walls on the ninth level when he came to one of the trick mirrors and peered through. A long magnificent corridor met his eye. Directly across from the mirror was a lift.

General Fredrik Roos had his quarters on this level, Joel knew, but the hall was empty. He was about to turn away when the indicator light on the elevator glowed faintly.

Someone was coming up.

The car stopped, the doors slid back. Joel frowned. There wasn't a soul in the cage.

Then the doors shut and the cage dropped from sight.

Joel bit his lip. All at once, the indicator lit up again. The car was ascending to the ninth floor once more.

Again the doors slid aside. But this time General Fredrik Roos stepped briskly from the cage, turned left down the corridor.

The chief of the Asgardian police had taken only half a dozen steps, though, when he halted. Joel could see his nostrils twitch. Then his hand darted to the jeweled paralyzer at his waist. It was like a man practicing a quick draw—shadow boxing.

Roos pointed the paralyzer at emptiness, pressed the stud. A dazzling yellow beam lanced down the corridor, winked off.

Joel sucked in his breath. The misty outline of a body was materializing on the floor just ahead of Roos!

There had been someone there—someone who'd been invisible until the ray knocked him out!

"Ganelon!" Joel thought. He could see the shape of bare ivory legs and a delicate waist. It was a girl lying huddled on the floor!

Roos had snatched up a heavy vase from a niche in the wall. He was striding toward the unconscious Ganelon girl.

The ray only paralyzed; it didn't kill. Roos was going to murder the spy, Joel realized. At that instant he recognized her.

It was Tamis Ravitz!

IX

JOEL'S REACTION was instinctive. He pressed the mechanism that actuated the mirror, drew his paralyzer. The yellow beam flicked down the corridor, touched Roos's spine.

The general went limp as a microweb stocking!

Joel was at the girl's side with a bound. He scooped her up, plunged back into the passage behind the mirrors. He never glanced at Roos. The police chief, he knew, would be unconscious for an hour or more from the effects of the ray.

Joel hurried between the walls with the limp Ganelon girl in his arms. When he reached his own room he stretched her on his bunk.

Joel's room was only a niche in the wall between Priscilla Cameron's bedroom and the salon. It was just big enough for a bunk, a stool and a desk. One-way mirrors sealed it off from the apartment.

A glance assured Joel that Priscilla wasn't in. He began to chaff Tamis' limbs.

The minutes dragged past. Joel saw the color return to her cheeks. She looked like a slim, adolescent Aphrodite.

The girl opened her eyes, stared up at him blankly. "Joel! I—I did find you!" Then her features froze with horror. "But Roos! He knew I was there! He—he saw me. The ray..."

"You're safe," said Joel. "I knocked him out with a paralyzer."

"But how did he discover me?"

"That's what's troubling me. Unless..." He paused, stared thoughtfully at the frightened Ganelon girl. "Priscilla Cameron is a mutant. Her sense of smell is as keen as mine. That's how your spies have been detected. Maybe Roos is a mutant also."

Tamis sat up, glimpsed Priscilla's luxurious bedroom through the mirrors, caught her lip between her teeth.

"Joel! Where are we?"

"Priscilla Cameron's apartment." He explained about the mirrors.

Tamis sighed in relief. "Joel, what have you learned? The Unfit are impatient. That ex-surgeon, Walt Eriss, you remember him? He's insisting that we attack at once. He—he's insane Joel!"

"He's a homicidal maniac," Joel agreed dryly. "I wish I'd taken Thorp's advice and dumped him down the reconverters." He shook his head. "I haven't learned much; but it's all bad!" And he told her about Priscilla's knowledge of the slave organization.

"They can't know!" Tamis' voice was tight with horror. "They can't, Joel! After all our precautions. What are they going to do?"

"I don't know."

"Hasn't Priscilla Cameron confided in you? I thought..."

He laughed shortly. "I might as well be a piece of furniture."

"You mean she hasn't..."

"That's exactly what I do mean. I'm her bodyguard. She gave me to understand the first day that our association was to be strictly business." He made a wry grimace. "And that's what it has been!"

"But why—" Tamis looked utterly dumbfounded. "She acted like a wanton aboard ship."

"It was just an act. Don't ask me why. I don't know."

"Where is she now?"

"In conference with her father."

Tamis rose shakily. "I don't understand it, Joel. There are wheels within wheels. I must get back to the Thinkers."

Joel guided her through the walls to a tiny lift barely large enough to hold them both. They dropped swiftly to the basement, traversed a long tunnel.

"This comes out in an alley beyond the gates," Joel informed her. "Have you heard anything of Nick Thorp?"

"He escaped," Tamis said, "He's staying in my village."

"Thorp?"

"Yes. He joined the outlaws first. But he had trouble with Walt Eriss. Eriss had him thrown into a herd of Nigel trees."

"Good Lord," said Joel. "How did he get away?"

Tamis began to grow red. "I—I was watching out for him."

"Sort of a Guardian Angel?"

She giggled. "You could call it that."

There was a scanner at the end of the tunnel. Joel put his eye to it. "The alley's deserted. You can go now." He touched a button, the wall slid aside. The brilliant light of Asgard's twin suns flooded the entrance. He began, "When will you—" and stopped.

Tamis was gone.

WHEN Joel returned to his cell, Priscilla Cameron was sitting on the edge of his bunk, tapping a sandaled toe on the floor. "You've had a visitor!" she greeted him.

Joel concealed his astonishment. Priscilla was wearing her green hair in a roll about her face. Crisp white shorts and halter made a sharp contact against the warm *sepia* of her skin.

He said, "That's preposterous..."

But Priscilla stopped him with a laugh. "She left her scent all over the place. It was that Ganelon girl, wasn't it? Never mind lying; I know!"

Joel grinned crookedly. "Well?"

"Are you in love with her, Joel?"

"Love?" He looked puzzled. The word was archaic. The Eugenic Board's policy of controlled scientific breeding had pretty well obliterated that particular passion. Desire remained, but it was physical. "Oh," he said finally, "you mean the emotion that all the old poets used to rave about. That's atavistic, isn't it?"

"But we're atavisms," she said.

Joel stared at Priscilla, conscious of that strange affinity binding them together. He could feel the pulse ticking in his throat. He took a step towards her, stopped, furious with himself.

"What about those other men you bought?" he demanded hoarsely; "the ones who disappeared?"

Priscilla's green eyes were alight. "Why, Joel, you're jealous!"

"What happened to them?" he repeated.

She said: "You're going to find out now. That's why I came for you," and sprang to her feet. "Hurry. We mustn't keep them waiting any longer."

"What the devil are you talking about?" Joel demanded suspiciously. "Keep who waiting?"

"You'll see," she laughed.

Priscilla led him straight to the governor's suite. The guard at the entrance saluted smartly, stood aside.

The governor's aide, a young, pink-cheeked cadet, was sitting behind a bank of televisors. He sprang to his feet, clicked his heels. "They're in the conference room," he said to Priscilla.

She nodded, shoved Joel down a corridor at the left. A panel opened automatically at their approach. Joel paused on the threshold startled.

The conference room was long, low-ceilinged and devoid of windows. Perhaps twenty people were sitting at a long table with Governor Cameron at the head. Fredrik Roos, Chief of the Asgardian Police, was on the governor's right.

"Sit down, Hakkyt," Cameron said and indicated a vacant chair.

Wordlessly, Joel sank into the relaxer. Priscilla pulled up a chair beside him. She clutched his hand beneath the table, squeezed it reassuringly.

"You're a mutant," the governor began abruptly. "Don't be alarmed. We're all mutations here."

Joel's jaw didn't actually drop but he felt that it had. "Mutants!" he managed to say. "All of you?"

"Precisely."

"But you're the Governor of Asgard!"

Priscilla laughed excitedly. "Let me introduce him, father. Joel, you've met General Roos. He's commander-in-chief of Asgard's police."

The lean handsome General inclined his head. There was a glitter in his gray eyes.

Joel felt suddenly cold, thought, "He knows that it was I who rayed him with the paralyzer."

Priscilla was proceeding around the table, reeling off names and titles. There were too many for Joel to remember. But one thing stood out. They were all from the Executive Class. The Chief Administrator of Eden, of Nelsville, of Nuvenice. The port officials, the security officers. . .

They were all there—and all mutants!

"Hakkyt," said the governor softly, "you're skeptical, but understand this. The human race has progressed from the level

of apes through its mutations. Not startling ones. But millions upon millions of minor unnoticeable variations!

"When the Eugenics Board first began its experiments in controlled breeding its policy was more liberal. It recognized the value of mutations and tried to incorporate the best variations into the race.

"Gradually though, they grew more rigid. When the present type homo sapiens was produced about a thousand years ago, they quit experimenting altogether."

The governor brought his fist down with a bang on the table.

"Hakkyt," he said in a rising voice, "evolution isn't static! If a species doesn't progress, it degenerates! The human race is on the point of extinction!

"Have you ever noticed how an apple tree will bear a bumper crop just before it dies? It's the tree's blind effort to reseed itself. What do you think has brought on the present wave of mutations, of socially maladjusted individuals?"

Joel stared at him fascinated.

"I'll tell you!" the governor answered himself. "The policy of the Eugenics Board has dammed the course of human evolution! The race is dying. But before it dies, nature is making one last attempt to perpetuate the species!

"We're the only hope of mankind. "You—" he stabbed a forefinger at Joel's chest—"and I and the rest of the mutations here on Asgard!

JOEL'S brain was reeling. Governor Cameron's words had the ring of truth. "But how did you get control of Asgard? Does the Republic know?"

It was General Roos who answered in his lazy drawl. Joel turned his head to stare at him.

"No," said Roos. "The Republic is unaware that mutants hold all the administrative posts in the colony."

"But how. . ."

"Briefly, Hakkyt, the mutants on Terra saw that if they didn't unite, they were doomed. Societies were formed. The mutants were taught to disguise their oddities, submerge themselves in the race."

"But the psycho-detectors," Joel protested. "They couldn't fool the machines!"

"No. But Asgard was different. Asgard is a frontier. It's four and a third light

years from the Republic. The laws are not enforced so strictly."

The implications were too startling for Joel to grasp all at once. These were mutants, and he was one of them. They were his kind whether he liked it or not.

Roos was saying, "The mutants migrated—secretly. Some of them rose to minor administrative posts. And when a mutant was placed in authority, he bent every effort to install others of his class."

"We're trying to give the human race a new lease on life—a new beginning!" Priscilla broke in passionately. "This—this is a sanctuary where people won't be persecuted because they're different."

"Slavery..." Joel began.

"It's not slavery," the governor interrupted. "We petitioned the Republic to send us the Unfit in order to rescue them from the Experimental Stations.

"Ordinarily, Hakkyt, you would have been separated immediately from the maladjusted and the criminally insane of the labor battalion. True mutants are rare, and Priscilla usually buys them..."

"Priscilla buys them?" Joel caught the flash of amusement in the girl's green eyes.

"Yes," said the governor. "We've encouraged the rumor that she is—ah—headstrong in order to divert suspicion. Actually the mutants are brought to the palace where they can be taught to disguise themselves, given a new identity, put in posts of authority.

"That is what should have happened to you. Except your report from the Eugenics Board disappeared!

"Priscilla, though, insisted that you were a true mutant. We didn't, however, feel that we could take a chance. Not when we're in the midst of a crisis..."

"Crisis?" Joel's eyes swept the circle of faces. Their expressions had changed subtly. They were intent, nervous. He felt a coldness creep up his spine. "What has happened?"

"Nothing—yet!" General Roos drawled.

A woman with claret hair said, "It's what is about to happen!"

"The Republic?" Joel hazarded.

Governor Cameron shook his head. "We're not afraid of the Republic. They're four and a third light years off. They haven't the Star Ships necessary to trans-

port and maintain an army across such a vast distance."

Joel's green eyes narrowed. "Then what are you afraid of?"

"The Ganelons!" Governor Cameron gave Joel a shrewd glance. "We know that you've been in contact with the natives. Frankly, Hakkyt, that's why you're here!"

"But I don't see..."

General Roos smiled grimly. "Oh, we're not afraid of the Ganelons themselves. But they've organized an underground movement to overthrow the government. That's us!"

Priscilla took Joel's hand, gripped it convulsively. "That wouldn't be so bad, Joel, even though we stand to lose everything. But they've organized the maladjusted, the criminally insane! The worst elements among the unfit!"

"But can't you put down a revolt?"

General Roos laughed savagely. "I've a handful of police with paralyzers. Paralyzers, mind you! Don't you understand? There hasn't been a war in a thousand years! There are no weapons! No factories to make them. No officers with even the most rudimentary knowledge of tactics."

"But the Unfit haven't weapons either..."

"That's where you're mistaken! Our spies have reported a ray type projector that destroys the red blood corpuscles! They've been manufacturing them in hidden laboratories in the jungle!"

Silence fell over the conference table—a breathless anxious silence. Joel could feel their eyes on him and he shifted uncomfortably.

"But what do you expect me to do?" he asked defensively.

Governor Cameron stared at Joel with his penetrating green eyes. "Hakkyt, we want to treat with the Ganelons. There's room for both our races. You're in communication with their Thinkers. You're our only contact with them."

Joel said suspiciously, "If you were anxious to treat with the Thinkers, why did you murder their spies?"

"Murder their spies?" Priscilla echoed. Half a dozen voices burst out in protest.

Joel stared pointedly at General Fredrik Roos. The dark, handsome general smiled, shrugged.

"But no one's killed any Ganelons!" the

governor said, "You're mistaken, Hakkyt."
Fredrik Roos said, "I'm afraid he's quite right."

"What?" said the governor.

"This is no time for sentimentality," Roos went on dryly. "Too much is at stake. Several Ganelons have been trapped in the palace by my officers. They have some trick of invisibility. Psychological, I believe. But we could still scent them. We knocked them out with paralyzers. Since they are telepathic, it wouldn't silence them to lock them up. I ordered them destroyed."

Governor Cameron's face blackened. "Why..." he began.

A shout interrupted him. There was a chorus of startled exclamations. Joel glanced over his shoulder.

The governor's aide had just burst into the conference room. A terrified expression convulsed his pink face.

"Governor!" he yelled. "They've risen! They're attacking Eden!"

"Who?" the Governor half rose from his chair. "Get a grip on yourself! Who, man?"

"The Unfit!"

X

JOEL WAS STUNNED. The silence held a moment longer, then everyone began to shout at once.

Roos leaped to his feet. "The control hall, Governor! Join me there as soon as you can!" Before the last words were out of his mouth, he was sprinting through the door.

Governor Cameron succeeded in catching the attention of the Nuvenice and Nelsville officials, ordered them back to their posts to organize the free planters. As the last of them trooped from the room, he swung on Joel. "Well, Hakkyt, which side are you on?"

It was a decision that Joel had known for some time he must make. The realization of what it would mean to have men like Walt Eriss, the ex-surgeon, in power tipped the scales. He said, "I'm with you, I suppose, Governor." And felt like a traitor to Tamis and Nick Thorp and the rest.

"Then for Heaven's sake, contact the Thinkers. Tell them we'll arbitrate!"

"But I can't!"

"What?"

"You should have let me know about this sooner. I don't know how to contact the Thinkers."

Governor Cameron stared at him with blazing green eyes. Then he swung abruptly on his heel, tramped from the room.

A rumble of sound like the mutter of surf vibrated against the soles of Joel's feet. He felt Priscilla tug at his sleeve.

"The control room," she was saying. "Hurry!"

Pandemonium burst on Joel's ears as they entered the control hall. The uproar of battle was emanating from banks of televisions. They were being operated by a score of young officers—General Roos' staff. The general himself strode back and forth in front of the screens.

Scenes of the bitter house-to-house fighting, the stampeding mobs of civilians flashed across the screens with terrifying reality. Joel was appalled. He felt his throat tighten, his heart hammer against his ribs.

A young field officer appeared briefly in one of the screens. "*We can't hold them, sir,*" he panted. "*It's those damn rays!*"

"Fall back to L Street," Roos ordered. "We're making a stand along the moon-rail."

"Look!" Priscilla said, clutching Joel's arm and pointing at another screen.

It mirrored a broad empty street down which rays were probing like searching fingers. They were pale green, scarcely visible in the blinding light of Asgard's twin suns.

Serfs in white ketons were carrying the deadly projectors at their hips. There was a Ganelon with them, Joel saw. One lone naked man walking in their midst.

"There's a Ganelon with every squad!" Roos said at Joel's elbow. "They're directing the attack."

Just then Governor Cameron stood up. He'd been in communication with Nuvenice. "They can't spare any troops." His voice was stricken. "The serfs have risen there, too."

Roos began to curse.

Joel felt numb. The Unfit, he realized, were being led by a master strategist. The slave rebellions at Nelsville and Nuvenice had been instigated in order that troops

could not be diverted to Eden against which the main assault was being directed.

A voice from one of the audios blared suddenly. "Spaceport calling. The rebels are..." A faint hissing noise burst from the instrument.

At that instant every screen in the television bank flickered and went dead!

Joel's ears rang with the silence. It was like the dead spot following an explosion.

Roos turned a blanched face toward them. "They've cut the power!"

In the unnatural silence, Joel could hear that muttering roar again. It was louder. He could even distinguish shouts and screams.

A guard burst suddenly into the disorganized control hall. His features were pale as chalk. "Slaves! he gasped unsteadily. "Palace slaves—fighting! Ray projectors!"

He sank on a bench. Joel stared at him in horror. The guard was slipping sideways. Then he rolled to the floor. He was dead.

"The ray!" Priscilla said in a faint voice. "It destroys the red blood corpuscles!"

Joel clenched his fist. "If I could reach any of those Ganelons with the Unfit, I could establish contact with the Thinkers. They're telepathic!"

"But can you get out of the palace?" Roos demanded.

Joel said, "Yes." He was surprised that Roos didn't seem to know about the secret passages.

The chief of the Asgardian police unpinned the gold and azure shield, the insignia of his office. "Take this. It'll get you through our lines." He made a wry grimace. "I've been at fault about the Ganelons. I hope it doesn't queer your mission."

It had cost Roos an effort to make that admission, Joel realized. He said, "I feel as if I were deserting..."

"Nonsense, man," the governor interrupted. "You're the one who's taking the risk. We can barricade ourselves in these rooms. We're safer here than anywhere else on Asgard."

Priscilla took Joel's face between her cool palms, kissed him passionately. "I— I love you, Joel. Please take care of yourself."

Joel was startled. Then his arms closed about her hungrily.

The governor cleared his throat. "There's a proper time and place for everything."

Joel tore himself away. "I'll be back," he said. "And to hell with what's proper!"

TERRA Parkway was jammed with refugees streaming toward the palace. To the south, Joel could see a black pall of smoke overhanging the streets.

A worried frown creased his forehead. He had slipped from the palace by the tunnel along which he had escorted Tamis earlier. He should be devoting his whole attention to his immediate danger. But he couldn't dismiss the green-haired Priscilla Cameron from his thoughts.

He was worried about her there in the palace. Was this love? It was a disturbing sensation.

He began to breast the flood of refugees streaming from the battle area. White faces, taut with fear. The faces of children and women. It was like a nightmare.

After a while the faces began to thin out. And then there weren't any left at all. The street lay empty before him.

"Hey!" a voice called. "Where do you think you're going?"

Joel caught sight of a guard crouched in a doorway.

"Get in here!" the guard growled. "What'd you want to do? Get killed? The rebels are up ahead."

Joel slid into the doorway. The smoke clouds were spreading. Alpha Centauri A was a blood red ball just above the house tops.

"What's happening?" Joel demanded. The strange quiet felt unnatural.

The guard said, "Our officers are having a talk with the rebels?"

"Talk? What for?"

"We're tired of being rayed down. And nothing but paralyzers to fight back with. We're going over to the rebels. Hey! Come back here!"

But Joel was gone, running down the empty street.

Other men shouted at him from doorways, from windows. Suddenly an officer jumped in his path, raised a paralyzer.

"Hold up there!"

Joel skidded to a halt. If the troops

were deserting to the Unfit, General Roos' badge would be of no help to him now.

"Where—", the officer began.

Joel hit him in the temple with a sledgehammer fist. He didn't wait to see the effect of his blow, but darted into an open doorway.

There was an entrance hall and it was crowded with men. Joel put his head down, charged straight through them.

He hit the steps four at a time. Yellow flame lapped at his heels. Then he was around a curve. A whistle blew someplace below, shrill, threatening. He leaped up two more flights of steps, came out on the roof.

More guards were lying on their bellies behind a coping. They stared at him curiously.

"Ray that damn fool down!" a voice roared from the street.

Joel plunged straight for the recumbent soldiers. They clawed at their paralyzers, trying to twist around.

He leaped to the coping, hung there a second silhouetted against the murky sky. Then he jumped spasmodically for the adjoining roof.

He didn't look at the ground three stories below, but he was aware of it. His feet struck the edge of the next roof and he sprawled forward, gasping for breath.

Two roofs in front of him, he could see a row of shaggy heads raised above another coping. They were watching him curiously.

Then they began to yell and beckon, lifting projectors into sight. Pale green fingers probed all around him, but none of the deadly blood-destroying rays touched him.

They were covering his retreat, Joel realized. He scrambled to his feet. He leaped the next gap easily and the next.

The grinning serfs pulled him down behind the wall, clapping him on the back. Joel was too winded to talk.

One of the rebels was crawling across the roof towards him. He had a black armband. Something dangled from his belt—like hair. It was hair! Long black woman's hair—and it was bloody!

Joel bit his lip, feeling sick at his stomach. He remembered suddenly what Priscilla had said, "The Ganelon's have organized the worst elements among the Unfit—the criminally insane!"

The man reached him, said, "Who are you?"

"I'm from the palace," said Joel. He was careful not to look at the scalp. "I've news!"

"Palace!" echoed the serf. "Has it fallen?"

"No. Quick, man, where's a Ganelon. I have to make my report."

The rebel gave Joel a sharp suspicious glance. Then he lowered his eyes. "There's one below stairs. Come on." He began to crawl across the roof, hitching his projector after him. Joel followed on hands and knees.

A stairwell gaped ahead. As soon as the walls shielded them, the serf stood up. "Hurry it up," he growled. "I'm in charge. I'm not supposed to leave the roof."

Joel rose.

"You go first," said the serf. "You may be all right, but I don't want you breathing down the back of my neck."

Joel started down the steps in the lead. He heard a whisper. Then the roof caved in!

Something seemed to burst inside his skull. He pitched forward, rolled down the stair, brought up in a limp unconscious heap at the foot.

Above him, the serf frowned at the shattered barrel of his projector. "Must have a skull like a meteor shield," he muttered. He threw the projector over the railing.

JOEL opened his eyes. Pain wrenched at his skull. There was noise and dust.

At first he thought he was back on Terra in the cattle sheds. Then the scene jarred into focus. He remembered the serf with the woman's scalp at his belt.

He was lying on the ground, he realized, in the midst of a hideous tangle of shouting men and half-tracks. Dust sifted into his nostrils. The furious orange rays of Alpha Centauri B cast an ominous glow over the endless line of vehicles moving into the gutted city.

He sat up. It was a clearing in the jungle. It must have covered hundreds of acres. Prisoners were being held in herds like cattle. Loot was stacked everywhere.

Someone prodded him roughly with a toe, said, "Get up!"

Joel scrambled to his feet, stood there weaving. His hands were manacled. His head felt as if it must burst.

Then he drew in his breath sharply.

Just behind him stood a yellow tree and beneath it a deal table with the shaggy figure of Walt Eriss bending over it!

The ex-surgeon was talking over a portable televisior. A dozen men surrounded the giant. They were wearing scarlet arm-bands.

Joel could hear Eriss saying, "Yes, we're pushing on the palace now. No. I'm using runners." He clicked off the set, looked up, staring coldly at Joel.

"Where are the Ganelons?" he demanded in a harsh voice.

Joel's eyes widened. There wasn't a Ganelon in sight. Then he caught their alien unhuman scent. They were all around, invisible to the mind's eye! What did it mean?

A thrill of alarm rippled up his spine. He shrugged, said, "How would I know?"

"You're one of their spies," stated Eriss flatly. "I want to know what they're up to!"

"But I thought they were leading the attack on Eden."

"The Ganelons?" Eriss' voice was sarcastic. "They're a pack of old women. I directed the attack. I'm in charge."

"But I saw them..."

Eriss leaned forward, said savagely, "They were my eyes and ears. They telepathed my orders! But they tried to stop the killing. When I refused to listen to them they deserted." He began to beat the table with his fist. "I want to know what they're up to!"

All the time Joel was conscious of the Ganelons' scent. He could feel their eyes on him. He said, "Then you've broken with them?"

"What are they trying to do?" Eriss repeated, purple faced.

Joel's green eyes narrowed. The ex-surgeon was afraid of the Ganelons, he realized suddenly. Eriss was concentrating his attack on Eden, his rear unprotected. For all he knew a Ganelon army might be massing silently in the jungle. Millions upon millions of the natives...

Joel had to reach the Thinkers! He could sense the invisible natives all about him. He said in desperate ringing tones,

"I'm Joel Hakkyt. I've a message for the Thinkers. Please relay this to the thinkers. I'm Joel Hakkyt. I've a message..."

Eriss looked startled, roared, "What are you talking about?"

Sweat burst from Joel's face. He expected to be rayed down any moment. He said, "Tamis was my contact. I have information—vital information." He could scent the Ganelons closing in. Eriss was staring at him with flaming yellow-gray eyes.

"What sort of information?" he demanded.

Joel said, "Mutants are in control of all government posts. True mutants. They are fighting for the same things that the Ganelons are. Freedom!"

"You've organized the worst elements among us, the unbalanced, the criminally insane. You've helped them to devise weapons, given them unlimited power. They'll turn on you in the end, ferret you out..."

A frown was gathering on Walt Eriss' forehead. He glanced a question at his lieutenants. They shrugged.

Joel saw that they were about to catch on. He said quickly, "Governor Cameron and a party of mutants have barricaded themselves in the palace. They want to arbitrate. Relay message. This is Joel Hakkyt. Contact Tamis. She will verify..."

"By George!" roared Eriss. "He's communicating with the Ganelons!"

He leaped to his feet, sending the deal table over with a crash, struck Joel in the mouth. "Take him off and ray him!"

The blow knocked Joel sprawling. He scrambled to his feet, his head ringing. Two men seized him by the arms. But Eriss wheeled back.

"Wait," said the ex-surgeon. He gave Joel a shrewd look. "Any more information?"

Joel stared at him with hot furious eyes. He didn't say anything.

Eriss laughed harshly. "So that was all. You've finished your spiel, eh? You're harmless." He turned to the men who were holding Joel's arms. "I've changed my mind. Take him into the jungle and stake him out for the nigel trees. There's a herd of 'em in the neighborhood."

And he burst into laughter.

THE heat in that forest of fetid grotesqueries was like the atmosphere of an orchid house. Joel was bathed in sweat as the serfs manacled him to a tree trunk.

He could tell by their actions that they were frightened. They kept their voices down, glanced nervously over their shoulders. The minute they finished, they crashed away through the thick underbrush toward the distant sounds of Walt Eriss' headquarters.

Joel's nerves were taut as fiddle strings. He didn't know whether his message had gotten through to the Thinkers. He could feel small snaky tendrils pluck at his tunic, brush against his bare legs.

There was a rustling noise behind him.

He lunged in panic. The manacles cut into his wrists, bloodied them. He was like a goat staked out to bait a tiger. A sinuous vine wrapped itself about his waist, tightened.

It was like the coil of a boa constrictor, thick as his thigh, tough as cable. It wrenched him against his manacles until he thought his arms were going to be torn out at the sockets.

He squirmed helplessly. Then he caught sight of the plant that had snared him—the thick flesh-colored trunk, the crown of writhing tentacles. It exuded the odor of carbolic acid. The pool of digestive acid glistened deep within its maw.

Nigel tree! He was caught by a carnivorous nigel tree!

Then, unexpectedly Joel felt the tentacles relax. He leaned gasping, choking against the trunk of the tree to which he was manacled. He was dazed from shock.

A voice said, "You're safe now, my son."

Joel shuddered, looked over his shoulder. A naked white-haired Ganelon was standing scarcely a yard off. He stooped and fumbled with Joel's manacles. They fell to the ground with a clank.

Joel's knees began to buckle. He threw his arms about the trunk.

"We came as quickly as we could," the Ganelon said in a kindly voice.

Joel asked, "You—you relayed my message to the Thinkers?"

"We are the Thinkers, my son. We were there." As he spoke, more of the creatures materialized. It was completely unnerving as if they were popping from another dimension.

They were a handsome, sprightly race. There wasn't a stick of clothing or an ornament in the crowd. Then Joel saw a familiar figure emerge from the undergrowth.

"Thorp!" he cried. "Nick Thorp!"

The battered amiable ex-spaceman came forward, hand outstretched. "Not so loud, lad. We're too close to Eriss' headquarters."

The uproar from the rebels' camp was muted by the dense jungle, but it was still audible. Joel asked, "Have you seen Tamis?"

"Look around, lad!"

Joel heard a giggle, spun about. Tamis was standing at his elbow, laughing at him. Then she quit laughing. Her elfin features sobered. "Joel," she said, "we didn't know about the mutants."

"Why did the Ganelons withdraw from the attack?" he asked in a puzzled voice.

"It was horrible," she said. "We—we unleashed a force we couldn't control. It's beyond description, the scenes of rapine and carnage that are being enacted in Eden. The police have gone over to the rebels . . ."

"The palace?" Joel interrupted harshly. "What has happened to the palace?"

"The palace has fallen."

Joel felt the blood drain from his face. He said, "Then what is Walt Eriss doing in the jungle?"

"He doesn't know, yet. His men are mopping up. Many of the free planters have barricaded themselves in their houses."

Joel clenched his fists. He stared at the circle of kindly troubled faces.

"The Unfit must be wiped out!" His voice trembled with suppressed fury. "Don't you know what it will mean to have homicidal maniacs, the mentally unbalanced, in power?"

The Ganelons gave him a pitying look. "My son," interposed the old man who'd freed him, "as you say, they should be exterminated. They are like the nigel trees—senseless brutes with an instinct to kill."

"Then why don't you stop them?"

"We can't."

"You can't!" said Joel. The words were like a blow to his solar plexus. "You can't . . ."

"We are not a numerous people." the

old Ganelon explained softly. "Moreover we have a repugnance towards killing that amounts to a psychological block..."

"But you started the attack!"

"No. It was someone else who ordered the attack, someone else who planned the strategy. We went along to try to stop the bloodshed. But it was useless. We had less control over them than we have over the nigel trees."

Joel's eyes widened. He stared at the old Ganelon's saddened mien. There could be no doubt but that he was telling the truth.

"Who?" Joel breathed.

The naked Ganelon shook his head. "We don't know. He's like a puppeteer hiding behind the scene. And Walt Eriss is only one of his puppets!"

XI

THE UTTER ALIENNESS OF the jungle suddenly impressed itself on Joel. The creeping crawling plants. The shouts from Eriss' headquarters, the rumble of vehicles sounded startlingly close.

Through the interstices in the foliage he caught a glimpse of something moving. His eyes widened. Then he saw that it was the herd of nigel trees and he shuddered.

He frowned. "Nigel trees!"

"Yes," Tamis nodded. "But they won't bother us."

"You can control them!" Joel said thoughtfully. "Could you direct them to attack?"

"Attack?" The elder Ganelon looked puzzled. "I don't know. We could arouse their appetite, lead them to the rebels." He narrowed his pupilless eyes. "Attack..."

Joel was like a drowning man clutching at a straw. "The ray couldn't harm the plants. It destroys red blood corpuscles. They'd be invincible!"

Thorp suddenly smacked a fist into his palm, "By Neptune!" he said, "it's worth a try. How do you control the brutes? Telepathy?"

Tamis nodded. "They're mindless; that is, they react to external stimuli. We create the illusion that generates the desired response. It is as easy to influence a herd as a single tree."

"A conditioned reflex," said another.

The old man said, "But to attack a city with plants—even cannibal plants..." He shook his head.

"But there would be thousands of them."

Joel's voice trembled in excitement. "Each Ganelon could control a herd. They'd pour down the streets, create a panic..." He paused. "If you're doubtful, why not tackle Walt Eriss' headquarters first?"

The old Ganelon looked startled.

Joel said, "There's a herd of the trees here now. Try it. Drive them into the rebels' camp!"

"But there are only fifty or so trees in the herd. We'd have to call others..."

"Call them! Call them now."

The old Ganelon bowed his head. Moments slid by. With a sense of terror Joel was conscious of their passing. What had become of Priscilla? Who was the mysterious man behind the uprising of the Unfit. Why didn't the Thinkers act?

"Do something!" Joel burst out savagely. "Don't just stand there! Do something!"

The elder Ganelon smiled. "Patience, my son. The trees are being called."

Alpha Centauri B hung just above the treetops, casting long orange rays across the rebels' camp. Joel and Thorp and Tamis lay side by side in the shrubbery at the edge of the clearing.

The endless procession of cars still rolled into Eden down the muddied highway. Another line of cars returned, bringing exhausted men, wounded men, loot and prisoners.

"Where are the trees?" Joel asked.

Tamis said, "Shhh."

Joel heard a crackling of branches behind him, stiffened. Then he caught sight of a moving trunk. More and more of them appeared, blending with the jungle until they were scarcely discernable.

They smelled like carbolic acid! It was the weirdest march he'd ever witnessed, the massed shuddering movement of herd after herd of the carnivorous nigel trees. The balls of thread-like roots at their bases squirmed like Medusa's heads, thrusting the ungainly plants forward.

A wave of trees broke suddenly from the opposite wall of the jungle. For a moment they went unnoticed. Then someone shouted.

More trees squirmed into the clearing, green fronds asway. It looked as if the

jungle itself were creeping back over the cleared ground.

Pandemonium broke loose. The two lines of cars ground to a halt. Pale green rays sprang at the nigel trees, bathed them futilely. The trees inexorably tightened the circle.

A man was snatched up by a tentacle. He kicked, screamed. More men were caught by the ravenous plants. The stench of carbolic acid stung Joel's nostrils.

The rebels broke and ran. But there was no place to run to. They saw only a second wavering wall of greenery, of thrashing tentacles!

Joel was white, sick at his stomach. He caught sight of Walt Eriss. The shaggy giant was sprinting for a half-track. He almost made it. Then a tentacle girdled his ankle.

The ex-surgeon was lifted head downward into the air, squirming, shrieking. Then he vanished into the gaping maw of the plant.

All at once, one of the Ganelons stepped out from the midst of the trees.

"Surrender!" he yelled. "Surrender, and we'll call off the plants."

HE had to repeat his offer a dozen times before he could catch the attention of the frantic serfs. Then one of the rebels threw his projector to the ground, raised his hands. Another and another followed suit. It was over.

Joel felt dazed.

Tamis touched his shoulder. "The Thinkers are expressing their thanks."

Thorp said, "You're on the air. You're a celebrity," and grinned.

But Joel didn't smile. "What about Eden?" he asked.

Tamis said, "The Thinkers are calling the neighboring tribes. There will be a big round-up of nigel trees..."

Joel let his breath escape with relief. "Tamis," he said, "can the Thinkers give me a guide to the palace? I've got to get back."

"Is it Priscilla Cameron, Joel?"

He looked at the Ganelon girl. She had tight hold of Nick Thorp's hand.

"Yes," Joel replied. "Lord knows what might have happened to her."

"We'll guide you."

"We're both with you," Thorp added.

Joel felt suddenly grateful to the strangely assorted pair. He'd had to come all the way to Asgard to rediscover the meaning of friendship. Like love, he thought.

Alpha Centauri B had set and Alpha Centauri A had not yet risen when they arrived at the outskirts of Eden. The sky over the city was lurid from the reflection of burning buildings. Whole blocks must be afire.

"There's Proxima Centauri," Tamis said, pointing to a drop of blood gleaming in the night sky. "The little yellowish star above it is Sol."

Joel stared at it with a lump in his throat. It looked very cold and far away. He hunched his shoulders, started down the street towards the twinkling lights of Palace Hill.

The city itself was dark, lit only by ruddy flames. Gangs of looters prowled the streets carrying torches. They paid no attention to Joel and Thorp and the elfin Ganelon girl.

At the entrance to the tunnel beneath the palace, Joel halted. "Tamis, it isn't safe for you to come any farther. You either, Nick."

But Tamis said, "I'll step out of sight," and did so. Thorp growled, "You'll need me. Maybe Priscilla's alive."

Joel said, "Maybe," and touched the switch. A section of the wall slid aside revealing the black tunnel mouth.

Thorp whistled softly.

"The walls of the palace are hollow," Joel explained. He closed the door behind them.

At the first floor, he stopped the lift, crept out to one of the mirrors. An immense hall met his eyes. It overflowed with guards armed with ray projectors. The mutter of their voices was a low rumble in Joel's ears.

"But can't they see us?" Thorp hissed.

"No," Joel explained the mirrors.

"Priscilla's not there," Thorp said. "How are you going to find her?"

"I'll find her," said Joel grimly and for the next hour he prowled through the walls of the first floor like some ancestral ghost. Serfs and police were everywhere. In some of the rooms indescribable orgies were taking place.

"It'll take a year to search this maze," Thorp growled.

Joel stopped, wiped the sweat out of his eyes. Glancing through the customary mirror, he saw a narrow passage down which a man was walking.

"Hold it!" he said. He waited until the serf was passing the mirror, touched the switch. The panel slid aside. The serf jerked his head around. Joel hit him in the temple with his clubbed fist.

The rebel smashed into the wall across the corridor. Before he could fall, Joel grabbed him by the collar, hauled him into the passage. The panel clicked shut.

"Jupiter!" Thorp breathed. "Did you kill him?"

"No. He's just stunned." Joel slapped the man's face, shook him.

The rebel opened his eyes, stared at Joel groggily. Then he let out a yell, tried to heave himself to his feet.

Joel shoved him back to the floor. "Yell your head off. Nobody can hear you."

The man stopped yelling. "What's the idea?" he demanded.

"Who's in charge here?"

"The Emperor."

"The Emperor?" Joel felt a tingle of excitement. "Who's he?"

"He's the Emperor. That's all I know. I never saw him before today."

Joel shook his fist under the fellow's nose.

"So help me!" the man said in a scared voice, "that's all I know!"

"Where is this Emperor?"

"He's in his rooms on the top floor."

"What have they done with the governor and his daughter, the chief of police?"

"Don't hit me. I don't know. It's the gospel truth."

Joel said savagely, "Tie him up."

Thorp tore up the serf's tunic, bound his wrists and ankles, tied them together so that he arched backward like a bow.

"Don't forget me," the serf pleaded. "I'll rot here in the walls."

But Joel was gone.

SUBDUED indirect lighting illuminated the top floor. Joel paused behind a mirror with Thorp at his elbow. He glanced into Governor Cameron's suite. The rooms were gutted, empty.

He said, "There's only one other apartment up here. That's Priscilla's. He must be there."

"Emperor!" Disgust was heavy in Thorp's voice. "What does he think this is, the pre-Atomic age?"

Joel didn't reply. He was conscious of Tamis' alien scent as he threaded his way between the walls. He could see guards lounging before Priscilla's door.

"That's where he is!" he said savagely. He was trembling, he realized. He drew his paralyzer.

But when he reached the salon, it was empty. He ran through the passage to Priscilla's bedroom, halted, icy fingers squeezing his heart.

Through the one-way mirrors, he could see Priscilla sitting in a relaxer. There was a frightened, defiant expression on her face. And she was staring up at Fredrik Roos.

The lean saturnine chief of the Asgardian police was bending over the green haired girl, saying furiously, "After what I've done, do you think I'd hesitate to kill you?"

Priscilla shivered.

Behind Joel, Thorp said, "The Emperor, Fredrik I of Asgard. He's going to have the shortest reign in history!"

"Shut up!" said Joel. "He's talking."

Roos said, "I don't need the mutants; they need me! Look what happened to Eden. Nelsville and Nuvenice will fall the same way. But you can save thousands of lives if you persuade them to cooperate."

Joel said, "I'm going to take him," and touched the switch.

The panel made a faint squeak as it slid back. Joel leveled the paralyzer, touched the stud.

Roos jerked around, his eyes widening. Then he leaped aside spasmodically. The yellow flame splashed harmlessly against the opposite wall.

Before Joel could catch the police chief in his sights again, the room was plunged into darkness. Priscilla screamed.

"Stay back, Thorp!" Joel yelled. "He can see in the dark!"

Something snatched his paralyzer. He struck out blindly, felt his fist crunch against flesh and bone. The paralyzer clattered on the floor.

Joel's eyes were adjusting. He could make out a dim gray silhouette dancing in front of him. He struck at it. The shadow bobbed. Joel's fist whistled through air.

He struck again and missed. Then a barrage of fists exploded in his face. He was driven back against the wall.

He could see the elusive Roos more clearly, a weaving, bobbing silhouette. He swung and missed, swung and missed.

Roos hit him in the mouth, in the solar plexus.

Joel sagged gasping to his knees. Roos kicked him viciously in the kidneys. It was like the searing thrust of a knife.

He thought, I'm being licked. Once he'd seen a Histrofilm of a prizefight. That was why he couldn't hit the police chief. Roos was a skilled boxer.

He pulled himself groggily to his feet, lunged for him. He could see him quite clearly now but in varying shades of gray like a black and white photograph.

Roos danced aside, clipped him behind the ear. He was grinning. "Ox!" he said.

Joel felt like a bear attacked by a slashing pack of wolves. He shook his head, shuffled after Roos cautiously. He took three hard punches in the face without faltering, kept closing in.

Roos backed up. Joel crowded him in the corner, letting the police chief hit him with everything he had.

At the last moment Roos guessed Joel's purpose. He tried to duck and slide clear.

Joel grabbed him by the collar and belt. With a grunt, he heaved him over his head.

The police chief kicked, squirmed frantically. The muscles in Joel's shoulders cracked. But he held him aloft, began to walk deliberately toward the crystal doors leading to the terrace.

Roos cursed, wrenched, flailing wildly with arms and legs. Joel kicked the doors aside.

Alpha Centauri A was flooding the terrace with a clear dawn light.

Roos began to beg for his life.

Joel's face was a grimace of triumph. He reached the parapet, heaved the pseudo-Emperor over the edge.

A single piercing scream came up to him.

JOEL didn't look down. He gripped the railing, staring out over the gutted city. He heard a step behind him, felt Priscilla cover his hand with hers.

"I knew you'd come. But Joel, we mustn't waste time!" Her voice was tremulous. "Please hurry before the alarm is given!"

"No," he said. "We'll wait here."

"Joel! Roos' death won't stop the revolt. There'll be a dozen men to take his place. Maybe the Ganelons will take us in!"

"Look," he said simply, and pointed out over the parapet.

In perplexity the girl glanced down on the city spread out below. Then she gave a little scream, clapped her hand over her mouth.

Slowly, inexorably, the encircling jungle was enveloping the city! Already the outlying districts were submerged beneath a wave of thrashing greenery.

Joel saw a band of ant-like men trying to stem the advance of the nigel trees with ray projectors. Then they broke and ran.

Someone began to pound on the door to Priscilla's suite and shout for the Emperor. Then he went away.

Thorp called, "What is it, Joel?"

"The plants! They're attacking!"

With a shout, the ex-spaceman rushed to the parapet, dragging Tamis with him.

The Ganelon girl's ivory cheeks were flushed and she held tight to Thorp's hand as she leaned over the parapet.

Priscilla's green eyes widened. "The Ganelons! They've set the nigel trees onto the rebels."

Joel nodded.

"Oh, Joel! Then you did get through to the Thinkers!" She threw her arms around his neck. Suddenly she drew back. "But are we safe here?"

Tamis said, "My people are directing the trees. We're safe. So are your father and the other captives."

Priscilla let herself go limp in Joel's arms, nestled her head on his shoulder.

Beneath them the sea of vegetation flooded down the streets, swarmed over the buildings.

"The new Eden," said Joel. He glanced down into Priscilla's upturned face. What he saw there set his pulse racing. He had come a long way, he realized, from the dissatisfied specialist in animal husbandry.

He had come a long way, but it was only the beginning.