

# PLANET stories

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*The* **OUTCASTS OF SOLAR III**

*A Sweeping Novel of Worlds Aflame*  
by **EMMETT McDOWELL**

**DESIGN for DOOMSDAY**  
by **BRYCE WALTON**

**JONAH**  
*of the*  
**JOVE RUN**  
by  
**RAY**  
**BRADBURY**



**MATTHEWS - PULTNAM - GUTH**

# PLANET STORIES



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*Saxon made it to the head of the ladder. Then he, too, lost control over his muscles.*



# The Outcasts Of Solar III

By Emmett McDowell

**Of all Terra's bloodily brawling billions, only mighty scientist Jon Saxon sensed the Others. Even as he swung his fists and dodged the tearing dart guns, his skin crawled weirdly. Who—who—was so coldly watching this war-torn, hell-bent planet?**

**Q**UIET!" JON SAXON'S VOICE was a breath in the night as he cautioned the girl. A warning prickle of danger had run over his skin like gooseflesh. He was a big man, over six

feet, with thick brawny shoulders and arms like a blacksmith. Before the girl could cry out, Saxon swept her into the deep shadow of a doorway. His dark gray eyes probed the street but he could see no one.

This seventh level thoroughfare of Adirondaka appeared utterly deserted. Only occasional street lamps revealed glimpses of the magnificent architecture of the post-atom capitol of Earth. Down the center of the boulevard the public conveyor swept silently, endlessly without a passenger anywhere along its ribbon-like length.

"Where are they?" the girl whispered.

He shook his head. "I can't see them." But his skin continued to prickle its warning. Somewhere in the shadows were men, several of them, stalking him soundlessly.

He became aware of an alien quality about the figures ringing in him and the girl, figures he could sense but not see. Still nothing moved in the street. The girl, he realized, was strangely quiescent.

Then, sharp as speech, her thought impinged on Jon Saxon's consciousness. *"The fools! And after I told Emū not to let them crowd him!"*

Jon Saxon's eyes narrowed. So the girl thought the invisible figures were G. A.'s men. He had known, of course, from their first meeting that the girl was a General Atomic spy. But by not so much as a hint had he let her suspect that her very thoughts betrayed her.

The tingling sensation intensified, warned him that the shadows were closing in. The feel of alienism was stronger, as if they were not quite human. His heart pumped faster, the pulse throbbing in his ears.

The moon was rising, he saw, competing indifferently with the street lights. Its rays streamed down through the ninety-eight levels of the capitol, down through crystal plastic roadways into the dense blackness of the pit itself.

Again he became aware of the girl's thought, *"Why, there's nothing here! He's imagining things!"* It was accompanied by a wave of relief, and at the same time she whispered,

"What is it Jon? What do you see?"

"Hold it, Ileth!"

His hands gripped her slender shoulders, silenced her. The public conveyor still swept past without a sound.

Bewilderment grew in him.

The alien entities were close, all about them, apparently without substance. The tingling sensations were like hot and cold flashes now, signaling him of something

present, something which he couldn't identify.

They were not the girl's men, whatever she thought. He would have recognized them by their feel.

No, these escaped classification. He had never experienced anything like them before. His strange sixth sense, the first extra-human sense which he had begun to develop inexplicably in his twenty seventh year, could perceive nothing beyond their presence.

He took his hand from Ileth's shoulders, groped for the button controlling the door against which they crouched.

"*"Stop!"*

The thought rang like a bell in his skull.

Jon Saxon stiffened. *"What is it?"* he concentrated. *"Who are you?"*

Again the bodiless thought struck into his mind.

*"That is not for you to know—now or possibly ever. The girl is working for General Atomic. Do not allow yourself to be duped. It is decidedly not our policy that General Atomic or any of the corporations learn the secret of the stellar drive!"*

SAXON'S eyes opened with surprise. He had no intention of giving G. A. the secret of the stellar drive. It was a government secret, for one thing . . .

*"We are quite aware of your intentions,"* came the telepathic communication. *"Otherwise, you would no longer be."*

Saxon swallowed dryly, realized his palms were sweating. He glanced at Ileth. The moonlight had crept into the doorway, illuminating her oval face clearly. He noted the perplexed slant to her fine black brows, the sober, half frightened expression clouding her patrician features.

"Why don't we go?" she asked. "What are you waiting for?"

"In a minute."

He sent his thought probing out toward the alien minds. And brought up sharp before an absolute mental barrier.

No neophytes here. Whatever the creatures were, they were masters of thought-transference. Excitement sent the blood surging through Saxon's veins, blotted out momentarily his alarm.

Until this moment, he had believed himself unique, the single telepath on Earth.

He had been thirty-one when he first be-

came aware of his telepathic potential. It had developed overnight, a seventh extra-human sense, that isolated him forever from the rest of mankind.

There had been something indecent, prying about seeing into the minds of his fellows—like a peeping Tom. It had been intolerable at first, the naked baring of souls before him, intolerable and shocking, until he had learned to block out their thoughts.

He felt the girl shiver against him.

"But what are you afraid of, Jon?"

He didn't answer because the alien thoughts intruded on his mind again.

*"This is a warning, Jon Saxon. Do not divulge the stellar drive to anyone. It is not and never was intended for you to know. Only the unfortunate development of a telepathic sense enabled you to steal it from Villainowski's brain . . ."*

"I didn't steal it!" Saxon thought indignantly. *"I worked with Villainowski building the ship. It would have been impossible for me not to learn it."*

"Exactly," came the reply. *"And your continued existence hinges entirely on your silence."*

A chill wind blew up Saxon's spine, but it only fanned the flame of eagerness which had sprung up in him. Here were others like himself, possessed of telepathic powers.

"Who are you?" he thought passionately.

He realized in dismay that the prickling in skin and scalp had diminished. The telepaths were withdrawing, deserting him without a hint of further contact.

*"Who are you? How can I find you?"*

Nothing!

He and the girl were alone again in the moonlit doorway.

A strange sense of exhilaration replaced Saxon's first feeling of letdown. There were other telepaths on Earth and sometime, someplace their paths would cross again. He stepped into the street, saying to Ieth, "Let's go. I was mistaken. There's no one here."

In the rays of the street lamp, he looked more like a pugilist than a Government Bureau of Research man and one of Terra's top nuclear physicists. He had a big nose, twice broken, strong white teeth and a square massive jaw. He caught the girl's thought and grinned down at her.

"He's not handsome," she was thinking, *"not by any standard, but when he grins like that you don't think about his looks and virility radiates from him like heat waves. He's a dangerous man! Emil under-rates him!"*

"Hadn't we better take the conveyer?" she asked aloud.

JON SAXON nodded, swung the girl lightly by her elbows to the pick-up, transferred to commuter, then express. They found seats while the buildings flowed past on either hand like a speeded-up movie.

"You have a frightening job," said Ieth, looking up at his from big hazel-green eyes. Her shiny black hair she wore in a shoulder length page-boy bob. She smoothed her short-waisted chartreuse jacket over small firm breasts. "I'm surprised Government lets you go out without your body-guard."

"They don't." Saxon's unprepossessing features lit with a boyish grin. "But I slip away from them once in a while."

"You were afraid of an ambush back there in the street?"

He nodded. "Yes. I thought one of the corporations may have got wind of my escapade."

The girl, he saw from her thoughts, was satisfied with his explanation.

In these days of savage competition, the big corporations maintained their own factories and laboratories. General Atomic, Tri-World, Amalgamated Plastic, a score of lesser companies employed staffs of technicians and research scientists. The lives of these men were fraught with a peculiar danger. They were subject to bribery, kidnapping and torture by the spy agencies of rival companies in their efforts to extort from them any new discovery or guarded scientific process their corporations might possess. Independent agencies manned by corrupt technicians had men everywhere.

The corporations protected themselves by confining their technicians to barracks and never permitting them to wander forth unescorted. It was a condition which Jon Saxon found little better than slavery. The constant surveillance irked him to the point of rebellion.

Now he was confronted suddenly with the fact that he had been under observation of an infinitely more subtle kind as

well. Some group was keeping constant watch upon his mind. But who?

Ileth sighed and laid her sleek black head on his shoulder. "Jon, you've been so quiet tonight. Is it because tomorrow the expedition leaves for Alpha Centauri?"

"I don't know. I'm not afraid, exactly. We know the drive is practicable, but it's the first attempt man's ever made to reach the stars. We've never been beyond the Solar System before, Ileth."

He felt the girl's arms slip around his neck, cling with surprising strength. "I'm afraid, Jon. I wish you weren't going."

"What are you afraid of?"

Ileth bit her lower lip. She was feeling rather than thinking, Saxon realized, a mental chaos bubbling in the primitive thalamic regions of her nervous system, a formless intuition of disaster stalking the first expedition into stellar space.

"I—I don't know exactly," she confessed. "I don't understand it, Jon."

Saxon's eyes narrowed. He had intercepted that dread of the expedition's fate before. He had felt it emanating from hundreds of individuals otherwise unrelated. It was like a hypnotically imposed command: "*Don't venture into the Stellar Depths!*"

And it always stemmed from the subconscious, the regions of the human mind telepathically closed to him. At first he'd been inclined to think it was dread of the unknown. But now he was not so sure.

Facts, Saxon knew, were assimilated by the subconscious, later to emerge as hunches and intuition. He had grown to believe that there must be reason behind this universal fear of stellar space.

He had even felt it in himself; in his chief, Villainowski; in his co-workers at Government's Bureau of Research. It was a very real feeling that nothing but disaster for the human race could come of this venture to the stars.

## II

**I**LETH'S APARTMENT WAS ON the ninety-eighth level, flush against the transparent plastic dome which hermetically sealed in Adirondaka.

Jon Saxon followed the girl out of the lift, watching her with admiration.

She was a slim, long legged creature in chartreuse green, jodhpur-like trousers that

moulded her slender waist and rounded hips with amazing fidelity before flaring at her thighs.

Ileth Urban was as fetching a bit of scientist-bait as General Atomic could have desired.

All the corporations used these girls. They scoured the Solar System for the cleverest, most beautiful ones to be found. They paid them fantastic wages and trained them to worm secrets from susceptible males. Scientific Mata Hari's.

Government itself used them, Saxon was fully aware. Only by employing even more ruthless measures than the corporations was government able to maintain itself. Government had the finest research department anywhere. And the Terrestrial Intelligence Service was the most efficient organization of its kind. Not only that; Government had power, power unbelievable in its Space Navy.

Ileth paused, allowing him to come abreast of her, her hazel-green eyes smiling at him.

Saxon hastily blocked out her thoughts in embarrassment. "*You're a pretty little Judas,*" he thought, then glanced up as a bright glare lit the night sky.

A trail of orange flame streaked above the city and disappeared like a meteor in reverse. The *Morning Star*, a crack luxury liner, was heading out for Venus. It must be nineteen hours.

"Our last night," said Ileth softly. "Tomorrow we'll be leaving for Alpha Centauri like that ship."

They had reached a door in the glistening plastic face of a building. The door opened automatically, responsive to the girl's personal vibration.

Saxon saw a lambent darkness beyond the entrance. The ceiling of Ileth's apartment was the transparent rind of the city itself. The moon streamed through the crystal plastic, lighting it faintly.

His nerves tightened, his sixth sense of feel exploring the apartment for a trap.

But no warning tingle prickled his skin. Then the lights came on as Ileth passed inside. They glowed from the walls like cold flame.

With a sigh of relief, Saxon saw that the chamber was empty.

"Sit down," said Ileth, "I'll get you a drink." She disappeared through a door-

way across the room, stripping her yellow green jacket from her shoulders as she went.

Jon Saxon sank onto a lounge, following Ileth's progress by her thoughts.

"Soda. Where's that soda? Oh, here it is. Emil must have put it there. Like a man." Then, "Contact Emil?"

A moment's indecision. Saxon could almost hear the girl thinking. "Not yet," she decided with a mental shiver. "Saxon would be no good to us dead." Then, "Make the drink strong. Take a gallon to make him drunk. Big brute. Shoulders like a door. I could . . ."

Saxon hastily blocked out her thought in embarrassment. The girl's mind was too graphic.

For the hundredth time his brain grappled with the identity of those alien telepaths who had warned him in the street tonight.

The radiation branch of Government's Bureau of Research had been experimenting with thought projection. Could they have been successful? It might account for the alien feel he had experienced for that impenetrable barrier which had defeated his attempt to reach their minds.

A machine?

Unconsciously, he shook his head. His sixth sense, the ability not only to feel a presence but identify it almost as if he were seeing it, convinced him that there had been life in the street, a strange invisible form of life possibly; but the reality of it was inescapable. In some ways his heightened sense of feel was more reliable than his ears or eyes.

Ileth returned bearing a tray with glasses, a decanter of whiskey and soda. "I wasn't long, was I?"

**T**HERE was a hard bright glitter in her hazel green eyes. Saxon saw that she had changed to a halter and skirt of Martian microweb. He swallowed, feeling a pulse beginning to tick in his throat. The microweb was as black as the girl's hair, but not anywhere so thick.

Only her cold determination to keep him there until after the sailing, which he could feel like a dash of cold water, defeated her purpose.

She handed him a glass, set the tray on an end table, switched on the telecaster.

Instead of music, the newscaster was blaring forth the announcement of the expedition to Alpha Centauri.

"...greatest page in the annals of the Empire. Tomorrow at nine hours the *Shooting Star* with a picked crew, with a staff of specialists and representatives from all the great corporations will blast off for Alpha Centauri.

"Under the directorship of John Villainowski of Government's Bureau of Research, the man who developed the stellar drive, the expedition plans to investigate the planetary systems of the Centaurian suns.

"His excellency, Mustapha IX, will be present..."

Ileth snapped off the telecaster.

"Jon," she asked and leaned against him, "why did you sneak out tonight of all nights?"

He sensed the girl's tension, knew that it would be difficult to fool her. Suddenly, he decided to quit beating around the bush and strike straight into the heart of the opposing forces.

"I know you're an agent of General Atomic, Ileth. I've..." He paused.

Ileth had gasped and drawn back from him. Her thoughts were in turmoil. "*Emil! I must reach Emil!*" was clear.

Saxon went on inexorably. "I've wind of a plot by General Atomic against the *Shooting Star*. If they could get their hands on the stellar drive, no doubt they could control deep space. They'd be in a position to dictate to Government."

Ileth was thinking furiously now, Saxon realized, trying to figure how much he knew and how much he was guessing.

He laughed without amusement. He knew damned little, too damned little.

Only this morning, he had intercepted the stray thought of one of his co-workers and realized that the man had sold out to General Atomic. To his horror he had read in the man's mind where General Atomic, after securing the stellar drive, intended to overthrow Government.

How General Atomic planned to get the drive, who else was in the plot, the man hadn't known. He had been bribed to take orders from a GA agent, whom he knew only as Q62.

Saxon couldn't inform the T.I.S. of his knowledge. He had no proof, except what



he had read in this one man's mind.

He had told Villainowski of his suspicions. The chief had promised to set the T.I.S. onto the case, but they had turned up no evidence of any kind against the great corporation.

General Atomic had done its work with utmost secrecy, not letting its right hand know what its left hand was doing.

Saxon was desperate. He grasped the girl's slight shoulders. "What do you know about it, Ileth?"

"I don't know anything. Oh Lord, Jon, I'm to be General Atomic's representative aboard the *Shooting Star*, and they've told me nothing of any plot against the ship. Nothing, Jon, I swear it."

With a disheartening feeling of defeat, Jon realized the girl was telling the truth. She had been told nothing of General Atomic's plan. She, too, he read in her frightened thoughts, had been instructed to take orders from a General Atomic's agent whom she knew as Q62.

"Who's Q62?" he shot at her.

Ileth's hazel-green eyes were enormous. "You! How did you know?"

"Who's Q62?"

"I don't know. I've never met him."

"How will you know him?"

"I don't know. They said he would be able to identify himself. That's all. They wouldn't tell me how."

All at once Saxon's skin began to prickle its warning of danger. He released the girl, wheeled towards the door just as it was flung viciously back.

He saw three men in the opening and reached for his dart gun.

With a half sob, Ileth hurled herself on him, bearing him backward to the couch, her arms around his chest, her long legs tangled with his.

"Emil!" she panted. "Quick! He's got a gun!"

"Easy. Easy. Easy," said a man's low amused voice.

Jon Saxon succeeded in throwing Ileth off his chest and surging to his feet. He found himself staring into the tiny barrel of a dart gun. The dart gun was being held steady as a rock by a gray-eyed, yellow-haired man with a faint smile on his wide thin lips.

Saxon let his hand fall away from his holster.

"Get his gun, Ileth."

"Right, Emil."

Saxon felt the girl's cool fingers slip inside his blouse, pluck his automatic from his holster.

"Has he any other weapons?"

She patted Saxon deftly, impersonally, shook her head, her black hair swinging.

"No. That's all."

The blond man lowered his gun. "You may sit down, sir."

Saxon sat down.

THERE were two others behind the blond man but Saxon kept his eyes on Emil, recognizing a dangerous type. Obviously well educated, intelligent, the blond man was fiercely loyal to General Atomic.

Not such a queer combination in these times, Saxon thought; when the corporations had come to replace countries in men's loyalties.

The anarchist revolt against Bureaucratic-Socialism had seriously weakened Terra and corporate business had fought its way back to power. Determined never again to permit the sacred laws of property to be so violated, it had fastened its tentacles to the very roots of society. It organized a government in an image of itself—a corporate government.

Men became known no longer as American or Spanish but as General Atomic men, or Tri-World men, or Corporate Government men and were as blindly patriotic to their corporations as they had been in earlier ages to the lands of their birth.

Such a one, Saxon recognized, was Emil of General Atomic, a fanatic who would consider it the greatest honor to die for his company.

"You realize, sir," said Emil, "that we regret very much what we must do."

"Why do it, then?" Jon Saxon asked bluntly.

The blond Emil looked shocked. "Are you suggesting treason, sir?"

"I'm not suggesting anything," replied Saxon, who had already read his death sentence in Emil's brain. "But you don't expect me to give you any information, when you plan to kill me immediately after."

Emil's expression was vaguely disturbed. "Nonsense! I'm commissioned to offer you



*With a half sob, Ieth hurled herself on him.*

a post in General Atomic's research department at twice your present salary, if you can give us the information we wish."

But Saxon still read nothing but inexorable death in Emil's mind.

"Eyewash," he said.

In the ensuing silence the men's thoughts beat at Saxon's brain like the confusing racket of people talking all at once.

At length Emil moved aside, saying, "We're prepared for obstinacy. Georg, take over."

A plump man of middle age drew up a chair facing Saxon.

"Georg," explained Emil, "is an N.P.A."

Saxon stared into the moon faced neural-psychoanalyst. The man possessed the most unusual pair of twinkling blue eyes like bits of glass, a smooth pink face, thin sandy hair. He was dressed like Emil in loose, comfortable coveralls of a gray siliconex.

He took Saxon's wrist, said pleasantly, "Hmmm, pulse rapid but strong. Unusual

nervous control. Strip to the waist, if you please."

As Saxon pulled off his blouse, the plump N.P.A. turned to the third man, obviously his assistant, and said, "Bring the machine, Alph."

The man called Alph lugged a heavy case in front of the couch, opened it. Georg began to attach saucer shaped suction discs to Saxon's temples, the base of his skull, his solar plexus. Wires led from the discs to the machine in the black case.

"Quite ready," said Georg to Emil. "Ask any questions you wish."

Saxon could feel a delicate tingle rippling up his spine into his brain like a mild electric shock. Emil asked, "Do you know the secret of Villainowski's stellar drive?"

"No," returned Saxon. "That's preposterous. No one understands that except Villainowski himself. Do you think Gov-

ernment would be so stupid as to let the secret out?"

The plump N.P.A. who had been studying a bank of dials, looked up and said, "He's lying. From that I would infer that he understands the stellar drive."

"What?" gasped Emil.

With a sinking heart Jon Saxon realized that the blond man had not been expecting such luck. They had thought that he might be able to give them some clue to the stellar drive, but not that he actually could reproduce it.

"What's his torture coefficient?" Emil shot at the N.P.A.

Georg adjusted several dials. The tingling became livid fire coursing up Saxon's spine. His eyes closed, he crushed his lips between his teeth until a trickle of blood coursed down his chin.

The room swayed sickeningly. Sweat burst from his pores, made his sick white face glisten in the indirect lighting.

Then as sudden as it came, the fire smoldered and died out of his spine.

He heard the N.P.A. speak in an awed voice, "His torture coefficient is below his will to live. He'll die first."

**E**MIL began to stride nervously back and forth before the lounge. He swung suddenly on Saxon, saying, "Look, that post on General Atomic's research bureau is still open. I can promise you three times your present salary, and a bonus besides."

"Liar," replied Saxon without hesitation. "I don't need a machine to tell you're lying." He laughed shortly.

The N.P.A.'s plump face looked puzzled. He made rapid adjustments on the machine, bent over the dials again.

"He's not lying," he said in a queer voice. "He knows you intend to kill him as soon as you squeeze him dry of information."

Saxon caught sight of Ileth's white, strained face and grinned at her. She had been as surprised, he read her thoughts, as himself at Emil's opportune entrance. Obviously, Emil had not been supposed to put in an appearance until she had a try at him first.

It was all verification that General Atomic was trying to steal the stellar drive. But Saxon had been able to catch only the scantiest of details from Emil's mind.

General Atomic not only wanted the drive, he sensed, but a monopoly on it. That meant killing or buying off everyone in Government's Bureau of Research who knew the secret of the drive.

Emil said to Saxon, "Suppose I contact General Atomic and put it up to them. I'll confess my orders were to question you, then dispose of you. Frankly, Ileth's reports have convinced us that you couldn't be bought."

"What makes you think that I can now? Anyway, what guarantee have I that their promises aren't as empty as yours?" he asked sceptically.

Georg, the neuro-psychoanalyst, pursed thick lips and interjected himself into the conversation. "General Atomic abides by its contracts," he pointed out.

"Yes. When it's to their advantage."

Emil's eyes blazed; red stained his pale cheek. "Do you mean to imply, sir, that General Atomic is treacherous?"

"Exactly."

"Emil!" said the plump N.P.A., sharply.

Slowly the flush receded from Emil's cheeks, but he held himself stiff as a ramrod and his eyes were angry.

The N.P.A. turned back to Saxon. "At least, you admit that General Atomic abides by its contracts as long as it's to their advantage."

Saxon nodded, seeing already what was coming.

"Then," pursued Georg. "It certainly would be to their advantage to preserve you alive until you could build a stellar drive. After that . . ." He shrugged. "You're an intelligent man, Saxon. Rated one of the best physicists in the Empire, in fact. It seems to me that you could easily convince General Atomic that it would be of advantage to them to keep you alive indefinitely. What would you say to a hundred thousand credits a year?"

"Not enough."

"Two hundred thousand?"

"One or two..." Saxon began, then paused in consternation. He had been tricked!

There was a self-satisfied smile on the neuro-psychoanalyst's pudgy features. He had not spoken aloud the words, "Two hundred thousand," but had thought them at Saxon!

"He's a telepath!" said the N.P.A., and

began to disconnect the discs from Saxon's body and stow them back in the case.

"A telepath!" Emil ejaculated. "He's a telepath?"

"Exactly," agreed the N.P.A. in dry tones. "I suspected it from the first, but frankly I couldn't believe it. I've never encountered a true telepath before. I didn't think there were any. Individuals who are unusually canny at reading expression, yes. But never any true telepaths. I'm going to request General Atomic to let me perform an autopsy after he's been disposed of. Possibly he's a mutant."

"Disposed of?" ejaculated the blond Emil. "But great stars, Georg! He's invaluable to us. Not only does he possess the secret of the stellar drive, but he can..."

"You're the executive!" retorted Georg sharply, "but I advise you to shoot him now! This second!"

"What do you mean?"

"You're not stupid, man! How much information has he picked from our brains already? If he should escape, the plan would have to be sacrificed. Everything might be lost." Then, sharply, "And don't think about the plan! Shoot him!"

Saxon could read growing conviction in the blond man's mind. He saw Emil's hand, holding the dart gun, begin to rise.

"Look out, Emil!" shrieked Ileth suddenly.

But Saxon had already snatched the plump N.P.A. off his feet, yanking him between himself and Emil. He heard a sharp pop. The N.P.A.'s body quivered as it intercepted Emil's poisoned dart. Saxon realized he was holding aloft a dead man.

The muscles in his burly naked shoulders hunched. He hurled the dead N.P.A. at the blond man who went down, bowled over backwards by the body.

Emil's head struck the plastic floor with a sickening crunch. Saxon caught a painful mental flash as unconsciousness gripped the blond man.

Without a pause, he leaped for Ileth. The girl was fumbling at her waist, where her gun's muzzle had become entangled. Only the fact that the muzzle had caught in her waist band saved him.

She flinched back as Saxon's hand closed on the gun, tore it loose from her grip.

There was a rip of cloth and the dart gun came away. Ileth's skirt, freed of its supporting waistband, slid down about her ankles.

Saxon leaped backward, threatening the N.P.A.'s flabbergasted assistant as well as the girl.

"Don't move! Either of you."

The N.P.A.'s assistant was obviously terrified and had no intention of budging.

"Oh, my skirt!" Ileth's wild thought came clear as a bell to Saxon, and the girl rolled her eyes toward her feet, where the cloth lay in a black ring. But she didn't move.

Saxon grinned. "Obviously," he said, "you haven't any weapon concealed about yourself. You can pick up your skirt, Ileth."

She snatched it about her waist again, holding the foot long tear together with her hand.

"I'm leaving," he said, "but remember, I can read your thoughts. If either of you make a move towards that audio during the next ten minutes, I'll pop back in and fill you as full of darts as a porcupine."

And he backed, still grinning, through the door.

### III

THE HUGE STRUCTURE, housing Government's Bureau of Research, was aflame with light when Saxon climbed from the robot cab and approached the entrance. The shadowy figure of a guard challenged him.

Saxon produced his papers, submitted to a fingerprint test.

"So, it's you, all right," the guard growled. "Where the hell have you been? The T.I.S. has been scouring the city for you."

Saxon asked, "Is Villainowski in? I want to see him."

"Not half as bad," said the guard, "as he wants to see you." He stuck his head inside the guardroom, yelled, "Hey, Webb, come relieve me. That missing physicist has shown up. I've got to take him up to the chief."

"I can find my way," Saxon assured him dryly.

"I've got my orders," retorted the man, "to escort you, and escorted you'll be."

As they took the lift, Saxon probed

gently into the guard's mind. He was thinking about a Venusian dancer performing at the Sun Palace on Greater Broadway. Either he didn't know why Villainowski wanted him, or he was more interested in the dancer.

Saxon sighed in resignation.

Chief Villainowski was a small wiry man of Polish descent who had led none too reputable a life, although it was not generally known. Jon Saxon, regarding him across the polished desk, read suspicion and wonder in the chief's mind. Villainowski was never able to reconcile Saxon's appearance with his indisputable scientific attainments.

*"Looks like a plug ugly,"* Villainowski was thinking although he was far from a beauty himself. *"Ought to be a prize fighter instead of a physicist!"*

"Will you pray tell me," he asked aloud of the amused Saxon, "what the hell possessed you to sneak out the night before we leave?"

Saxon grinned like a mastiff. "It was that General Atomic affair. I haven't told you, but I met one of their agents, a girl by the name of Ileth Urban, about a month ago."

"Black-headed girl?" asked the third man in the room. He had his chair leaned against the wall. A tall, angular, sandy-haired man with pale blue eyes like gimlets. "Does she have bazel-green eyes, small delicate features? Ears peaked like an animals..."

"I hadn't noticed the ears," Saxon confessed, swinging toward the sandy-haired man.

Gavin Murdock, T.I.S. agent, had been assigned as T.I.S. representative to this first expedition beyond the Solar System. He said, "No, I guess not. She wears her hair in a page-boy bob."

Villainowski interrupted: "Well, damn it, man, who gave you permission to horn in on the T.I.S.'s work?"

"I knew her. She'd been set to pump me dry of information by General Atomic. If anyone could get anything out of her, I could."

"You don't fancy yourself much," the chief grunted with a touch of asperity. "What did you find out?"

Saxon related events just as they had transpired, omitting only the alien tele-

paths in the street and his own telepathic ability.

"By Pluto!" exploded Villainowski when he had concluded. "We can grab the lot of them."

"Not so fast," Murdock interrupted from his chair against the wall. "What proof have you? Only Saxon's word. It won't hold in a court of law."

"But the girl!" Villainowski protested. "She's General Atomic's representative on the expedition. You don't intend to let her—"

"It's better to have her where we can watch her," the T.I.S. agent returned. "Saxon can keep an eye on her. He seems to be able to pry more out of her than any of my agents have. If he can persuade her that he hasn't told us about the fracas in her apartment..."

"I can convince her of that, I think," said Saxon. "But she doesn't know anything..."

"Except," Murdock interrupted again, "that she's to take orders from an agent known as Q62. At least, she should lead us to him." He paused, regarded Saxon with his penetrating pale blue eyes. "What the devil did you do to her, man, to get that information out of her? Stick darts under her finger nails?"

In both Murdock's and Villainowski's mind Saxon read a cold determination to keep him under surveillance as well as the girl.

**VILLAINOWSKI**, he knew, hated the corporations in general, but it was nothing to the black flame of hatred that consumed the man whenever he thought of General Atomic. It was almost psychopathic. He had never forgotten or forgiven General Atomic, Saxon knew, for stealing his first three discoveries and then disgracing him.

It was a queer friendship that existed between the two men questioning Saxon—the gaunt cold-blooded manhunter, who had sent a girl with whom he was infatuated to the Lunar Penal Colony, and Villainowski, the small wiry scientist, ex-Jovian slaver, and at present head of the first expedition into deep space.

"Well," the sandy-haired Murdock repeated inexorably, "how did she happen to tell you about Q62?"

"It was a slip," explained Saxon. "I followed it up."

"She's not given to making slips," Murdock pointed out. "Not Ileth Urban."

When Saxon didn't reply, the T.I.S. agent said, "Saxon, we've investigated your past pretty thoroughly. We did the same with every man and woman connected with this expedition. We encountered a strange thing. Saxon, who are your parents?"

Jon Saxon could feel his stomach contract. "I don't know. I haven't any recollection before my eleventh year." He could feel Murdock's probing blue eyes, sense his scepticism.

"You've a convenient memory, because we've been unable to find any trace of your parents or birth prior to your enrollment in the Institute. A thousand years ago your case would have been unusual, but it could have happened. But today, with our universal system of records, it's impossible. I've never encountered a parallel case to yours."

"I'm sorry," said Saxon dryly, "but I do seem to have been born, don't I? And somehow escaped the census."

Murdock smiled a wintry smile. "There were funds deposited at the Institute for your education. We haven't been able to trace those funds either. In fact, every way we've turned, we've run into a blank wall."

"I'm sorry," said Saxon again, "but I can't help you. I have absolutely no memory before I was eleven. Don't think it hasn't worried me. I asked the T.I.S. to investigate it years ago. They couldn't find anything then. It's not surprising they haven't found anything this time."

"You won't object to being examined by our N.P.A.?"

"No," replied Saxon.

Villainowski spoke into an inter-communicating audio, "Send in the N.P.A."

The neuro-psychoanalyst must have been waiting outside because he entered immediately. Saxon regarded him curiously. Government's N.P.A. was a lean Cassius-like individual with an ingratiating smile. Saxon had taken an immediate dislike to him when he had first seen him prowling about the corridors of the research building, but he knew the man was a brilliant psychologist.

2—Planet Stories—Spring

The N.P.A. approached Saxon rubbing his hands together and smiling. "So this is the subject. How are you, Jon? There's no need to ask questions. I've studied your record. No question but what there's a mental block, is there? Hope we can break it. Sit here, if you don't mind."

Saxon took the chair indicated, the N.P.A. facing him.

"Take one of these." He held out a box of hypno-pills.

Saxon selected one, gulped it down. He made no effort to read the minds of Murdock, Villainowski or the N.P.A.

The neuro-psychoanalyst was wearing a revolving mirror about an inch in diameter on a band about his forehead. He set the mirror in motion which caught the room light, alternately darkening and flashing.

"Look into the light, Jon," he said in a calm, sure voice. "Relax and watch the light. You are going to sleep when I count three. You can feel the effect of the hypno-pill already. When I count three you sleep, sleep... One." A pause. "Two." Pause. "Three..."

**A**FTER half an hour the N.P.A.'s voice wasn't so sure. He had given Jon three more pills, had tried all the devices at the command of the largest neural-clinic in the Empire without the slightest effect. Jon Saxon continued to regard the N.P.A. with a half hidden gleam of amusement in his dark gray eyes.

The neuro-psychoanalyst sat back, mopped his perspiring face with his handkerchief. "It's no use!" he said in a strained voice. "He can't be hypnotized!"

"I could have told you that," replied Saxon. "Do you think I haven't tried to have the block broken before?"

The N.P.A. swore and got to his feet. "Well, why didn't you say so?" he shouted. It was the first time Saxon had ever seen him lose his temper.

"Because these gentlemen have been suspicious of me." He indicated Murdock and Villainowski. "If I had offered any objections to being hypnotized, they'd have been sure that I was afraid to."

All at once, Saxon experienced the peculiar tingling in scalp and skin that warned him the alien creatures, whom he had met in the street, were present. He couldn't possibly be mistaken. Once having experi-

enced that peculiar inhuman feel it was not to be forgotten or confused.

Not only were they invisible, but neither doors nor walls seemed to offer any resistance to them.

"Who are you?" he concentrated, but his thought met that strange mental barrier. There was no answer.

He realized that the three men were watching him with a curious tenseness.

Suddenly the N.P.A.'s jaw dropped. An expression of complete astonishment lit up his face. "I've got it! I've got it!" he cried.

"Got what?" growled Villainowski, moving uneasily behind his massive desk.

"Saxon! Saxon, that's who! My Lord, why didn't it occur to me before. He's a—"

The words died suddenly on the N.P.A.'s lips. An expression of fright crossed his lean features. Then, without a sound, he crumpled to the carpet.

Jon Saxon, staring in horror, realized that the tingling of his skin was diminishing. The telepaths were withdrawing.

At the same instant Murdock's chair hit the floor as he leaped across the room, dropped to his knee beside the prone figure of the N.P.A. For a moment he was bent over the body like a bronze statue, then he turned his face up to Villainowski.

Saxon, who had read his thoughts, was amazed at Murdock's passionless expression.

"He's dead," the T.I.S. agent said in a toneless voice. "I wouldn't have believed it, if I hadn't seen it happen, but he's deader than the moon."

#### IV

**B**ONG! BONG! BONG! BONG!  
rang the warning gong, reverberating through the launching pit.

Mustapha IX had shaken hands for the last time with Villainowski and hurried down the gangplank. The ports were all sealed; crew at their stations. Outside the pits, the frenzied crowd was delirious with excitement. Wasn't it man's first attempt to reach the stars?

Bong! Bong! Bong! Bong!

On the last stroke the *Shooting Star* fell silent except for the muffled roar of her tubes warming. At the same instant the crowd grew impossibly still.

The raw fear, which had made itself felt in spite of the festivities, rode to the surface. The strange psychological dread of deep space.

A woman in the relatives' stand suddenly buried her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking with violent sobs. She was the wife of the master mechanic on the third's watch. A gray-faced man moved towards the woman, patted her shoulders.

Just then a continuous violent explosion shook the frail stand like an earth tremor. The *Shooting Star* burst from the pits, trailing a comet-tail of orange flame.

"Oh, my husband!" wailed the woman, "oh, my husband!" but her voice was drowned in the roar.

**J**ON SAXON threw off his safety belt, glanced across at the strained white face of Ieth Urban in the next acceleration chair. "Buck up," he grinned. "It's too late to change your mind now."

The girl nervously tucked a curl in place, smiled uncertainly. "Heaven help me! Are we going to share all my thoughts during the rest of the voyage?"

"Hell, no," said Saxon. "I want to preserve some of my illusions." He leaned towards her. "I'll strike a bargain with you, though. If you don't mention that I'm a telepath, I'll not report our—er—experience last night."

"You mean you haven't said anything?"

"No," said Saxon. "Why should I? I didn't have proof. Who'd want to tackle General Atomic without cast-iron evidence? On second thought, who'd want to tackle General Atomic at all? No one would believe me, anyway. Just like they won't believe you if you tell them I'm a telepath."

Saxon could see the girl reach a decision. "Oh, I wouldn't say that," he broke in before she could voice her thought. "You've lots of other courses. You could snub me or spread tales behind my back."

"I didn't say it!" she retorted hotly. "I thought it. My Lord, I can't even call my thoughts my own!"

"Then it's a bargain."

"I didn't say so."

"No. But you've decided to..."

She stamped her feet. "That's what I mean! That's what I mean!"

"Calm down," he said. "Half the staff is staring at you."

Ileth drew a deep breath, shrugged. A grim smile flashed across her pretty patrician features.

"If you can stand it," she replied with an unexpected twinkle in her hazel-green eyes, "I suppose I can too."

He stood up. "Like to meet the rest of the staff? Fine. You're all settled in your cabin, aren't you? No? Then I'll give you a hand as soon as we finish our tour of introduction."

Ileth's eyes had grown darker and darker.

"Now don't lose your temper," he said hastily.

"I haven't said a damn word. At least let me get my answers out of my mouth."

Saxon laughed, taking her arm. "Come along. We're accelerating at one G constant. We'll have no trouble moving around." He hesitated, then asked in an off hand manner, "Has Q62 identified himself yet?"

Ileth looked startled, frightened. She tried to draw away but Saxon held onto her arm. "No. No, he hasn't. Please let go. You're hurting me, Jon."

But he didn't release her. "Is he aboard the ship?"

"No. I don't know. General Atomic didn't notify me that he would be." Abruptly, Ileth didn't seem confused any longer. She raised her chin, looked Saxon nakedly in the eyes making no effort to conceal her thoughts. "I think he is," she said simply. "But I don't know. He hasn't identified himself, if he is. I—I haven't seen anyone aboard that I know. I think I'm the only General Atomic agent aboard, and I'm an accredited representative."

Saxon regarded her a moment without speaking. The girl was telling the truth as far as she knew. There could be no doubt about that.

**S**AXON introduced Ileth to Brand, Government's bio-chemist, to Mercedes, the gray-haired middle-aged woman who was Government's authority in anthropology. He made the circuit of the lounge with her, letting her chat with ethnologists and semantics experts, psycho-historians and zoologists—all of Government's brilliant array of specialists. And all the while he kept his mind open and alert, sifting their varied thought patterns for a betraying sign.

He didn't intercept a single suspicious thought.

They all seemed to be just exactly what they were supposed to be, each one an expert in his field, eager and enthusiastic investigators beginning an unparalleled adventure. Saxon could discover no evidences that any of them had sold out to General Atomic.

If Q62 or any General Atomic agent were among Government's staff, they were perfect in dissembling their thoughts.

From the lounge, Saxon showed Ileth about the ship. He could see it was an experience for the girl.

The *Shooting Star* had been built along the general design of a cruiser, heavily armed and armored against the possibilities of hostile races inhabiting the planets of the Alpha Centaurian suns.

Her crew was small. Government's staff of scientists numbered fourteen; and only four of the corporations were represented: General Atomic, Tri-World, Amalgamated Plastic and United Spaceways. In spite of the mass of equipment and a year's emergency ration of fuel and supplies, they were not crowded.

Saxon led Ileth through the control room, the officer's mess, the engine room and observation deck. Everywhere they went, Saxon probed the brains of crew and officers.

At the end of two hours, he still had found exactly nothing. Apparently Q62 was not aboard. Ileth asked slyly, "Did you find him?"

They had entered the deck on which the cabins were located and were passing the closed door of number seven.

"Q62?" said Saxon with a puzzled frown. "No—" He halted abruptly, seizing the girl's arm.

"Jon! What is it?"

"Be quiet!"

Saxon's scalp was tingling as if minute electrical shocks were coursing through the roots of his hair.

The Aliens?

The feel was unmistakable to his extra-human sixth sense. And it was emanating from Cabin Seven!

Like a cat he reached the door in one silent bound, pressed the button. The panel slid back noiselessly. Except for a blade of light lancing into the cabin from the



lighted passage, only darkness lurked beyond the doorway.

The alien inhuman feel was suddenly so strong that it was like a cold draft pouring through the blackened entrance, sending chills rippling up his spine.

Ileth's eyes were enormous. Saxon could hear her frightened erratic breathing. Her fear-thoughts beat at his brain. "*What is it? What has he found? What's wrong?*"

In spite of himself, Saxon could feel the blood drain out of his cheeks. He wanted suddenly to slam the door and run blindly down the corridor, away from that strange creature lurking in the dark of Cabin Seven.

He controlled himself, reached noiselessly inside the door, pressed the switch. Light flooded the cabin.

"Why, it's just a girl!" said Ileth, who was peering wide-eyed over Saxon's shoulder. She giggled nervously.

Saxon stared at the occupant of the cabin, scarcely crediting his eyes. It was a girl right enough, a flaxen haired girl sleeping easily on her back in the narrow bunk.

A thin flexoplas coverlet was thrown across her. One slim bare leg dangled over the edge of the bunk. Her face, Saxon saw, was heart shaped, the closed eyelids delicately blue.

At Ileth's giggle, the creature opened her eyes, sat upright with a half-suppressed scream. Ileth backed out of the doorway in embarrassment, but Saxon stood as if turned to stone.

The tingling sensation was sending goose flesh racing over his skin. The alien emanations were streaming straight from the girl on the bunk.

He recovered himself, thought violently, angrily, "*Who are you?*"

The girl stared at him without making a sound. Saxon realized that her eyes were amber as topaz, large and strangely lambent. Then a faint smile twitched the corners of her lips. She made no move to escape, not even to cover her breasts and shoulder.

"*You!*" the thought reached Saxon tinged with amusement. "*It would be you who discovered me!*"

She touched a tiny instrument strapped to her wrist, which Saxon noticed for the first time.

"*Who are you?*" he thought again, then

narrowed his eyes with crazed disbelief.

He could see the bulkhead through the girl. She gave a low laugh. The flexoplas coverlet, which had lain so lightly over her lap, collapsed slowly.

The girl was gone, dissolved. Only her throaty laugh lingered in the still air.

Saxon rubbed his eyes. He felt Ileth trembling against him as if she had a chill. Setting his jaw, he stepped up to the bunk, felt the sheets. They were warm and still held the impression of the girl's body.

He straightened, realized that the tingling in his scalp had ceased. The alien telepath was gone. But where?

"Let's get the hell out of here," Ileth said vehemently.

Saxon followed her into the passage, switched off the lights, closed the door softly behind him.

"I don't believe it!" said Ileth. "I don't want to believe it." Her fine patrician features were paper white, making her black lashes and eyebrows stand out like heavy strokes of a crayon. Her lips were bloodless.

Saxon shook his head in bewilderment. "Couldn't you read her mind?" asked Ileth.

"She had the most perfect mental barrier I've ever encountered. I couldn't read a thing. Only..."

"Only what?"

"Nothing," he said abruptly, shaking his massive shoulders as if to free them from a burden. "Nothing. I think we'd better keep our mouths shut about this too. If we went around telling what we've seen, they'd throw us in the psychopathic ward."

Ileth shuddered.

"Maybe it was an hallucination," she suggested. "Maybe we're nutty as a fruit cake, I hope."

## V

**YOU'VE BEEN THROUGH THE** Little Death before," said Saxon. He and Murdock, the T.I.S. agent, were in the control room, Murdock's eye glued to the scanner. "What's it like, Murdock?"

The gaunt, frosty T.I.S. agent took his eyes from the scanner, faced Saxon.

"Not so bad," he replied laconically.

"I've heard it's a pretty rugged experience."

Murdock allowed himself a tight smile. "That depends on how active a social consciousness you have. You're a non-Newtonian physicist. You know the Pachner conception of the space-time continuum better than I do. Villainowski's stellar drive inverts the Newtonian concept that a vehicle travels through space during a passage of time. It operates through time during a passage of space.

"Yes, yes," Saxon interrupted impatiently. "But the effects of the time field... What do you experience while the ship is in the time field?"

"That's the Little Death," replied Murdock in a dry voice, "though the name is misleading. Actually you experience a segment of your own life, either the past, the future, or the present. As Villainowski would explain it, time is co-existent, while in the time field our lives are spread out around us, but because we're equipped with three dimensional sense organs we're restricted to a single series of episodes anywhere along our life span."

Saxon frowned and said, "In other words, it's just as if we returned to the past and relived some incident that occurred to us before?"

"Right. Or into the future and experienced something that hasn't happened yet."

Saxon's frown deepened. "But what's so rugged about that?"

"Nothing," rejoined Murdock dryly, "if you've lived an exemplary life. It's not pleasant, though, to live over and over again a period when you committed murder say, or were terribly frightened, or even did some little thing that you've been trying your best to forget since."

Saxon caught a brief mental flash from the T.I.S. agent, as he shoved the picture of a girl with pretty Slavic features out of his mind.

"I'm not looking forward to the Little Death!" Murdock said dryly, and returned his eye to the scanner.

Saxon leaned back in the acceleration chair. The captain was bending over the three-dimensional space-charts along with the third mate. A spaceman stood at the robot pilot. Another, whom Murdock had replaced at the scanner, was reclining in a second acceleration chair.

There was an air of tension in the control room. Saxon realized suddenly that the

captain was checking the robot controls.

That could mean only one thing. It was hearing time for Villainowski to switch the *Shooting Star* onto the stellar drive. They would be going into the Little Death any moment. Saxon sat up abruptly. "How long before we switch over, Captain?"

The captain looked up from the charts. "We've attained minimum velocity. Villainowski's in the engine room now. I'm expecting orders to turn her over right away."

Murdock turned from the scanner again, fixed Saxon with his pale blue eyes.

"By the way, Jon, you've been prowling the ship from stem to stern the past three days." His voice was pitched too low to reach the officers checking the star maps and robot controls. "Have you a line on Q62 yet?"

Saxon could read suspicion in the T.I.S. agent's mind. "No," he admitted, "and I'm more puzzled than you. Ieth doesn't know who Q62 is, or even if he's aboard, although she's been commanded by General Atomic to take her orders from him."

"You're sure of that?"

"Yes. I'm sure of it."

There was a pause, each man busy with his own thoughts.

"I'd swear," Saxon broke the silence, "that Q62 isn't aboard, nor any other General Atomic agents."

Murdock regarded him speculatively and Saxon caught his thought, "*What the hell makes him so damned sure?*"

**S**URE? Saxon thought to himself. He wasn't sure about anything. The alien stowaway was still aboard. His sixth sense had warned him of her nearness a hundred times during his sporadic jaunts about the ship. But he had been unable to establish contact with her.

He had kept his mind open to the wash of thoughts from crew and staff, but, so far as he had been able to learn, they were all loyal to Government. Not even in their secret innermost thoughts had he discovered any evidence that a traitor was aboard.

Murdock interrupted his reflections, asking, "Have you any idea what that N.P.A. had discovered before he died?"

Saxon started, looked at the T.I.S. agent uncomfortably. Murdock's irrelevant question had conjured a vivid picture in his

mind of the death of the N.P.A. in Villainowski's office.

"I don't know," he said miserably, beginning to understand how uncomfortable the Little Death might be. "I would give a lot to know. He may have had a clue to what I am."

Murdock's cold blue eyes narrowed, and he regarded Saxon with a peculiar intensity. "*That's a devilish odd way for him to put it,*" the T.I.S. agent was thinking. "*What he is! Now why the hell would he say that?*"

Saxon realized with chagrin that he had made a slip. He should have said, "Who I am," not "What I am." No human ever doubted that he was a genuine specimen of *homo sapiens*.

The engine room telegraph buzzed suddenly, and when the captain answered, Villainowski's voice reached the two men.

"Sound the general alarm, Captain. Turn the ship over to the robot control. We're going into the Little Death."

"Right," said the captain. He looked pale and worn and older. He snapped off the telegraph, turned to the third. "Sound the general alarm and turn on the public address system, then go to your cabin." The third nodded, reached for the switch.

An ugly clangor broke through the *Shooting Star* from stem to stern, followed immediately by a harsh metallic voice issuing from strategically placed audios.

"All officers, members of unlicensed personnel and staff report to your quarters at once and lie on your bunks."

There was a series of clicks as the ship went smoothly over to the robot controls.

The command ordering everyone to their cabins was repeated three more times.

Saxon realized there was no one in the control room, but himself, Murdock, and the captain.

"Coming?" asked the captain from the doorway.

"In a minute," Murdock replied.

The captain departed hastily, and Saxon followed the T.I.S. agent across the deck to the control board, where a single dial was marked off in parsecs.

"I'm damned curious about this four dimensional drive," Murdock confessed, as he dropped into an acceleration chair before the dial. "I've been through it before. But I'd like to follow its operation here in

the control room as long as possible before we blank out. Are you game?"

"Sure," Saxon's voice was eager. He took a seat beside Murdock, staring at the dial marked off in parsecs with fascination.

He became conscious of a sobering silence. The robot controls had cut off the jets. A giddy feeling of weightlessness possessed him.

Suddenly the radiograph began to click off a message. He saw Murdock frown, tear off the tape, read it.

"Good Lord!" the T.I.S. agent burst out. "Read it! We've got to get to Villainowski before we go onto the stellar drive!" He leaped to his feet, went soaring in the air, a pained expression on his face. Murdock had forgotten their weightless condition now that the jets were off.

Saxon who had snatched the strip of paper, flashed his eye over the words.

IMPERIAL HEADQUARTERS:

TO CHIEF J. VILLAINOWSKI, URGENT. ORDERS CANCELLED. TURN BACK TO EARTH WITHOUT DELAY. ALL FIVE COPIES OF STELLAR DRIVE STOLEN. GOVERNMENT CANNOT RISK YOUR LIFE IN DEEP SPACE UNTIL YOU CAN REPLACE PLANS.

MUSTAPHA IX.

Saxon realized the machine was still clicking off the message over and over again.

Murdock had pushed himself to the bulkhead, where he kicked off, gliding through the door. Saxon followed cautiously, conscious of a yellow mist collecting in the control room.

The T.I.S. agent got just beyond the doorway when he floated unconscious to the deck.

Saxon made it to the head of the ladder. Then he, too, lost control over his muscles.

The mist was like soup, thick yellow pea soup.

His last conscious thought was, "So this is the Little Death!"

**H**ERE! Why are you crying?" asked the big white giant. His voice was gentle, compassionate, and he was naked except for a kilt of a strange gleaming material like woven light.

"But I don't want to go," Saxon pro-

tested in a reedy, childish tone. He realized in dismay that the giant wasn't a giant at all, but normal and man-sized. "I don't want to go," he heard himself tearfully repeating.

They were in a room, the little boy that had been Saxon and the big white man, and a door across the room was opening. The little boy that was Saxon shrank against the man.

A woman appeared in the doorway. She was tall and beautiful and dressed like the man in a gleaming kilt. She smiled at Saxon, but he was not reassured. He hung back from crossing the threshold.

Saxon saw a troubled look pass between the two. Then the man steeled himself, picked up the squirming boy, carried him through the doorway.

It was a strange sensation that possessed the mature Saxon, stretched on the cold deck at the head of the ladder to the engine room. He wasn't dreaming. He was the little boy, and yet he seemed to be outside himself, watching his own actions, appraising himself like the detached half of a dual personality.

He was in the time field, Saxon realized. That was it! He was reliving a segment of his life span that had taken place before he was eleven!

His heart leaped spasmodically. At last the curtain was being raised on those blank years of childhood!

The room into which the man carried him, Saxon saw, was larger than the ante-room and cluttered with strange machinery, ugly machinery. The far wall was a solid bank of windows, through which he could see a green meadow rolling gently away to blue foothills in the distance. Light poured through the windows from a blazing sun high overhead and a second orange sun was just rising.

The man deposited him in a chair. Saxon quit thrashing, as the woman fitted a skull-cap over his head, making minute adjustments. A cable led from the peak of the skull-cap to a frightening machine which the woman bent over next, and set in operation.

Saxon could feel a rush of thought pouring into his brain. Queer thoughts couched in semantically obscure words.

One stood out. "*Earth*." It was repeated many times before he began to comprehend

the import of the alien symbols. "*Earth is the third planet of a star known to its inhabitants as Sol!*"

With a feeling of strangeness the Saxon who observed realized that the boy was being taught to speak English!

**S**AXON shook his head groggily, pushed himself to his hands and knees and found himself floating six feet in the air. He had forgotten that the jet drive was still off.

It came back with a suddenness that flung Saxon to the metal deck.

He scrambled to his feet, his mind in a whirl. Forgotten temporarily were the emergency orders commanding them to return to Earth. If Villainowski had been right, then Saxon had actually relived an event which had transpired before he was eleven.

Then who the hell was he?

He returned to the control room, stepping over the unconscious body of Murdock, who had not yet recovered from the effects of the time field.

The dial on the control board read 1.3 parsecs!

He jumped for the scanner, clamped his eye to the aperture, and immediately jumped back!

Dead ahead was a huge blazing sun!

It looked so close that the *Shooting Star* appeared to be falling straight into the maw of erupting atomic energy.

But reason returned, and he knew they must still be millions of miles away. He went back to the scanner, spotting first a second sun not so close, then a third, small and red like a fiery coin.

The ternary system of Alpha Centauri! They were out of the Solar System!

"Please," said a girl's voice behind him. "Stand back from the scanner! Don't try for your gun, Saxon, or I will be forced to shoot!"

Saxon whirled around.

Ileth Urban stood in the doorway, a dart gun leveled at his stomach. Behind her, he saw the shame-faced Murdock surrounded by the crew. Murdock was helpless, his arms in the air.

"The crew have mutinied," said Ileth. "The ship is now under the control of General Atomic."

Saxon's jaw sagged. He said, "So you

are Q62" It wasn't so much a question as a statement. He knew. He could read it in her thoughts. But why hadn't he been able to see it there before?

It wasn't possible, but there could be no doubt. Ileth Urban was Q62.

Then the thoughts of the men in the corridor made themselves felt. Every man jack of them had gone over to General Atomic, not recently, but weeks and months ago, before they had ever left Earth.

He dropped into a chair, his head in his hands. How had they been able to disguise their thoughts all this time?

He looked at Ileth in her chartreuse green short-waisted jacket. She held the dart gun leveled at his chest. Her patrician features were set in grim unhappy lines.

"Something!" Saxon thought wildly, "Something has gone terribly wrong!"

## VI

THE T.I.S. AGENT, HIS BONY fingers locked beneath his head, was stretched face up on his bunk. There were five of them in the ship's brig—Saxon, Murdock and Villainowski, Mercedes, the anthropologist and Brand, the bio-chemist.

"Jon, that girl's crazy about you."

"What?" Jon Saxon swung up his head, regarded Murdock coldly.

Without moving, the T.I.S. agent repeated, "She's in love with you, Jon. Though what Ileth can find to love in that ugly granite mug of yours is beyond comprehension."

Saxon said, "So what?" Everyone was watching him speculatively.

They had been cooped together for nine days now, the four men and the woman. Yesterday the ship had landed. But none of them knew where.

"So what?" Murdock echoed breaking the silence. "My Lord, man, play up to her. She's eating her heart out for you. Can't you see it's our only chance?"

"No," said Saxon stiffly and blocked out their thoughts. "No, I don't. You know as well as I do, that the crew and the officers, even the staff, except Mercedes and Brand here sold out to General Atomic. Suppose I did persuade Ileth to let us out. Suppose she comes over to our side—which I tell you right now she won't—but suppose she did. What possible chance would the five

of us have against sixty armed desperate men and women? Hell, Murdock, we couldn't even get the ship back to Earth by ourselves!" He hesitated. "Besides it strikes me as a contemptible stunt..."

Murdock's cold blue eyes flashed. He sat up, swinging his feet to the deck. "Do you think we're playing a game?"

Mercedes, the gray-haired woman, interrupted, "Don't nag him, Murdock. Everyone isn't a cold-blooded monster like you."

The T.I.S. agent grunted his disgust, lay back down and rolled to his stomach.

Mercedes was a pleasant-faced, middle-aged woman with bright black eyes like a parrot.

"I don't see yet," she continued imperceptibly, "how General Atomic could contact everyone before we sailed." She smoothed her skirts, sitting primly on the brig's only chair, and cast a sly look at Murdock. "Not with the vaunted T.I.S. on guard."

"Humph!" came Murdock's muffled voice from the pillow. "What's so damned impossible about that? We couldn't watch the beggars all the time." He rolled back and sat up again.

"No. What bothers me is why they didn't give themselves away. They were investigated. All of them were reputable Government men, their fathers Government men before 'em."

"It's hard to refuse a million credits," Saxon pointed out.

Murdock's pale blue eyes jerked to Saxon. "How do you know?"

Before Saxon could reply, Mercedes said, "General Atomic offered us all a million credits. They did to me and Brand, I know. We reported it to the T.I.S."

"Yeah," said Murdock with a frown. "Yeah, and we questioned them with the lie-detector. Not once, but everytime they left the building. They were psychoanalyzed and searched. And every damned one of them was certified loyal to Government. They never gave a sign that they'd sold out to General Atomic, not a sign. Why, the bums acted as if they didn't know it themselves."

"They didn't!" put in Saxon.

Their eyes swung back to the burly nuclear physicist. He read scepticism, doubt, curiosity in their minds.

"What do you mean?" Murdock exploded.

"I mean just what I said. They actually didn't know that they had sold out to General Atomic until after the Little Death. It's simple enough. I'm surprised no one's thought of it before. Ever since Charcot back in the nineteenth century..."

"Hypnotism!" Villainowski burst out. "That's it, of course! Post-hypnotic commands!"

Saxon nodded. "I wasn't sure. I'm not sure even yet." But he was. He had known it the moment he had looked into Ileth's mind the day of the mutiny.

Murdock frowned, said "Post-hypnotic commands? I don't follow you."

"There's nothing mysterious about it, actually," explained Saxon. "When the men sold out to General Atomic they must have submitted to being hypnotized by GA's neuro-psychoanalyst. They could be given orders while in the hypnotic state, then commanded to forget them, forget in fact that they had sold out to General Atomic until after the Little Death. The Little Death was to act as a post-hypnotic command, recalling their memories and instructions."

"By Pluto!" ejaculated Murdock. "I believe you've hit it!" He regarded Saxon with increased respect.

The slight, homely Villainowski rubbed a nine day's growth of beard, musing, "It was a beautiful scheme. Then men couldn't betray themselves. They couldn't be tripped up by the lie-detector because they honestly believed they were still loyal to Government."

Again Saxon nodded. "I was trying to find Q62," he said, "when Ileth was Q62 all the time, although she didn't know it until she woke up from the Little Death."

**B**RAND, the bio-chemist, who had been lying on an upper bunk silently listening, broke into the conversation. "But why did General Atomic wait until after the Little Death before having their men seize the ship? It doesn't make sense. I should think they'd want to get the drive to one of their laboratories, where it could be examined as soon as possible."

It was Murdock who replied. "That's not difficult to explain either. General Atomic couldn't afford to take a chance.

If they'd grabbed the *Shooting Star* within reach of Government's space navy, they would have been apprehended sure. Remember, every observatory in the System had us in view until we went into the time field.

"No one but Villainowski knows how to use the stellar drive, so they couldn't have used that to escape. But after we reached Alpha Centauri we were beyond reach of the electronic telescope on Luna, even beyond radio contact. Their engineers would have a chance to examine the drive and learn enough to operate it, at least. They could return then. Nothing can catch the *Shooting Star* when she's operating in the Little Death."

Saxon listened with somber eyes to the T.I.S. agent's explanation. It was right, he felt, as far as it went. But it didn't account for the aliens, nor for Saxon's strange experiences during the Little Death, nor the death of that N.P.A. before they sailed.

He heard the door to the brig click and glanced up just as it slid aside.

Ileth Urban stood in the entrance.

Ileth's green jodphur-like trousers emphasized her long legs and slim waist. Her black shoulder length hair had been pushed back, disclosing small peaked ears.

She came inside, with a look of determination, and the guard closed the door behind her, but didn't lock it.

"I..." she began, caught Saxon's eyes and blushed furiously. Unconsciously her chin went up and she squared her shoulders. "I don't know how to say what I've come to tell you." Again she hesitated, biting her lip. "I think it'll be good news..."

"Good news?" echoed Murdock sarcastically. "Have the crew been massacred by Centaurians?"

"There's no sign of living Centaurians yet," she replied. "Not on this planet anyway."

"Living Centaurians?" asked Murdock. "What do you mean 'living' Centaurians? What have you found?"

The silence was alive. Saxon could feel the intangible fear of deep space grip every one of them. There was, he realized, a decided pathologic quality about it, as if every one of them were not quite sane on the subject.

"A city," said Ileth in a suppressed voice. There was a quick intake of breaths.

"Yes," she went on, "a city. About twenty-five kilometers northeast of here. A perfectly huge city without a single inhabitant."

"What planet is this?" Villainowski asked suddenly.

"There's no harm in telling you, I suppose," said Ileth. "because we haven't the faintest notion. Our astronomer says that it belongs to Alpha Centauri A, although he hasn't figured its period yet. He says it's about midway between Alpha Centauri A and Alpha Centauri B. It's a little larger than Earth but not so dense. Gravity is about four fifths what it is at home." Her face sobered at the word "home." "Oxygen content a little high, but not much. The rest of the atmosphere is composed principally of non-poisonous inert gases. Now you know as much as we do."

Jon Saxon became aware of a thought emanating from Murdock: "*Seize the girl. Dictate terms to the others.*" The same thought, Saxon realized, was forming in their bio-chemist's mind as well.

Ileth must have suspected something, because her hand crept up to her small high breasts and she said, "Before I go on, you'd better know that I'm not so unprotected as I look. We were all hypnotized back on Earth and our orders given to us in that condition. Then we were commanded to forget them until after the Little Death. I'm telling you this so you'll understand."

The prisoners exchanged glances.

"General Atomic," Ileth continued hurriedly, "prepared for any eventuality. If anything happens to me, Q63 will take over. I don't know who he is, and he doesn't know it himself, but any accident befalling me will be the post-hypnotic signal for him to remember. There's also a Q64, Q65—all the way to Q70. So you see it's useless to think that by doing anything to me you can get the upper hand."

"Rather like queen bees," suggested Saxon. "Secret order with a vengeance."

"*Even from you, darling!*" he caught Ileth's irritating thought.

**H**E SAW Murdock relax on his bunk, intercepted his furious frustration. The T.I.S. agent, he realized, was like cold flame on the inside.

"But that's not my news," Ileth said. "I've come to offer you your freedom—within limits, of course."

"Eh?" said Villainowski in surprise, and the rest tensed expectantly.

Ileth said, "General Atomic believed that it would be to their advantage to go ahead with the expedition as soon as we got control of the ship. We would be on the spot, and any information relating to Alpha Centauri's planetary systems, natural resources, inhabitants (if any), possibilities of colonization and trade—that sort of thing—is of the utmost importance.

I feel..." She hesitated, and Saxon caught a glimpse again of that same intolerable fear gnawing at her mind.

"I feel that we should stick together—while we're here at least. If we're fighting among ourselves. . . ."

"In other words," Murdock interrupted in a voice without inflection, "you're asking us to go on with the expedition as if nothing's happened?"

"Only while we're here," she hastened to assure him. "You won't be given arms, of course. There are only five of you. What earthly chance would you have against the entire crew and the rest of the staff? And this way you won't have to stay locked in the brig. You can carry on with your investigations. We—we don't know what alien form of life inhabits this planet. But the city. . . ."

She bit her lip again. "The city was peculiar."

A short uncomfortable silence greeted her statement; then Mercedes, the gray-haired anthropologist asked, "What do you mean, child?"

"I don't know how to define it. Wait until you see it."

But Saxon had intercepted an image in Ileth's mind—a distorted glimpse of a vast beautiful city stretching for kilometer after kilometer without a soul anywhere. A sobering chill prickled up his spine. He said, "I, for my part, am willing to call a truce, Ileth."

The girl glanced at him gratefully. Saxon became aware of a passionate thought: "*Oh, the darling stiffnecked bear!*" The girl's color heightened suddenly. She began to think furiously: "*To times two is four; three times two is six; four times two is eight. . . .*"

Saxon grinned at her knowingly, to her added confusion.

"I hate you!" she thought

Villainowski jumped to his feet, saying, "Of course we accept. We all accept. But let me warn you, young woman, aliens or no aliens, I don't care if we spend the rest of our lives in the Centaurian system, I'm not going to explain my stellar drive to your scoundrels!"

Ileth turned to him almost gratefully. "Oh, that doesn't matter. Our engineers are examining it. They've assured me that they can take us back to Earth."

Villainowski looked crestfallen.

"Tomorrow," said Ileth in a firm voice, "we're starting to investigate the city. Mercedes is the anthropologist. I particularly wanted her and Saxon along."

"What about the rest of us?" Brand the bio-chemist, asked.

Ileth ticked them off on her fingers. "Dr. Villainowski is an astro-physicist, I believe. We have the telescope mounted. He and our men are to locate any other planets in the system. You, Dr. Brand, are to go with Loar, the Martian, on an expedition into the hills to the south. Mr. Murdock will be stationed temporarily with the emergency crew aboard the *Shooting Star*."

Saxon realized that she had cleverly separated them. At the same moment he recognized that leap of fear in Ileth whenever she thought about outside. It was pathologic.

"My Lord!" he thought, "was their fear of deep space driving them insane?"

Ileth was saying, "You can have your old cabins back. I won't see you again until tomorrow. We—we're still on Earth time because of the peculiar daylight hours. Until tomorrow."

She turned, head bent and hurried abruptly through the door.

The prisoners looked at each other in vague alarm, unconsciously drawing closer together. In each of their minds, Saxon read the same thing—the blind unspoken terror of deep space!

THE helicopter whispered scarcely a hundred feet above the rolling plain, while Saxon stared hungrily out of the windows, unable to satisfy his eyes.

Alpha Centauri A, a scintillating yellow orb like Sol, stood in mid-sky. The orange

disc that was Alpha Centauri B, the second half of the binary, was just rising. Proxima was not in sight.

Directly below he could see a flock of plants that looked like tumble weeds except that they were a weirdly mottled yellow and green. They rolled along in a herd pausing to nibble at new shoots of the pale green grass. "Cannibal Plants," their botanist had named them because of their feeding habits.

Herbivorous plants!

Their botanist, Saxon thought, was going quietly insane trying to classify the staggering complexity of utterly alien forms of plant growth.

"Weird, isn't it?" A woman's rich husky voice addressed Saxon. "It sends goose flesh up my spine." Saxon tore his eyes away from the window.

The person sitting beside him was Clo-Javel, a black-eyed woman with cadmium-yellow hair. There was a sleek disturbing fullness to her breasts and hips that was echoed in her red lips and magnificent eyes. She must be thirty-five but no one except possibly the T.I.S. knew her exact age.

Clo-Javel's first passion was archaeology, Saxon knew. Her second was men. He asked, "How many pieces of silver did General Atomic give you?"

Clo-Javel regarded him with an amused tolerant smile. "Don't be rude, Jon."

Saxon, looking into the woman's mind, realized that his thrust hadn't disturbed her in the least. Clo-Javel apparently had no more honor than morals.

There was no question, though, about her archaeological ability. Her reconstruction of the New York skyscrapers, which had perished early in the Atom Age, were famous.

Saxon was appalled. He had expected to uncover a sense of shame among the crew and staff for their treachery. But, if they felt any remorse, they never let it rise into the realms of conscious thought. He had probed their minds one after another, his hope of persuading some of them to return to the Government fold diminished with each one.

At one stroke they had received wealth and better positions with General Atomic's research bureau. They were determined not to lose them. Furthermore, to a man



they were convinced that General Atomic would be the next government.

He glanced about the cabin. There were nine of them accompanying Ileth to the deserted city. He allowed their thoughts to wash across his mind, eager, excited, fearful thoughts like half spoken words.

"Look!" Ileth cried suddenly and pointed ahead. She was piloting the helicopter and spoke over her shoulder. "Look! There's the city!"

Saxon saw a maze of towers scintillating like jewels in the combined light of the twin suns. He saw endless avenues and squares and parks. It was all bright and raw like a city seen in a shimmering mirage.

He swallowed a lump in his throat. He felt. . . Why, damn it, he felt as if he were coming home after a long time.

Home?

He thought suddenly of his extra-human senses. Maybe this *was* home! Could it be that he was not of Earth at all? Not a mutant of whom his parents had been ashamed and who had deserted him at the Institute, as he had always believed?

Then Ileth was dropping the helicopter safely into a beautiful square ringed with vari-colored translucent buildings.

Nothing moved. Not the faintest echo of a sound reached Saxon's ears. He found himself holding his breath as the 'copter landed with a faint jar.

Saxon's scalp began to prickle warningly, and such a feel of alienism swept over him, exciting his extra-human sixth sense that he felt giddy.

The city wasn't deserted. It was densely populated.

All around him, everywhere, were aliens. He could sense their movements along the streets, inside the buildings. Hundreds of them.

He heard Ileth's strangely chastened voice. "It's so uncannily deserted. No one. Absolutely no one. What do you suppose happened to the—the things who built this city?"

Saxon had to clench his jaw to keep from shouting, "They're here! You fools, let's get away while we've still got a chance! They're all around us!"

Instead, he kept silent, little beads of perspiration breaking through his prickling skin.

## VII

**JON SAXON WAS THE FIRST** man out of the helicopter. He stood stock-still while the others climbed out, his scalp tingling, his eyes sweeping the magnificent panorama. The faces of buildings like the sheer fracture of tinted ice walled in the square, with here and there a canyon street slicing off from it.

Ileth scrambled out last, asked, "Jon, what's wrong? You're pale as a ghost."

"I don't know." The tingling in his hair roots was becoming less pronounced as his extra-human sixth sense adjusted. He was still aware of the aliens but not uncomfortably so.

"You—you don't feel anything?"

He started. "How did you know I could feel things?"

"I didn't!" Ileth's hazel-green eyes were enormous. "Good Lord, Jon, I only thought you could sense their thoughts, maybe, if anything was around. I didn't. . . Can you feel things? You can, can't you? I should have guessed it."

Saxon's expression had grown grimmer with each word. When Ileth asked, "What are you?" in a hushed voice, he snapped,

"Homo Superior!"

"Homo Superior?" She looked startled, then raised her eyebrows. "You don't fancy yourself much, do you?"

They had drawn gradually away from the others. He looked back. Basil, the geographer, and his helper had set up their instruments. They were taking readings, making swift notations. They had the three dimensional camera recording impressions, and the automatic mapper was beginning to scratch a few tentative lines on its plastic rolls.

"I think we ought to stick together," Saxon volunteered. "I know it'll be impossible to keep the geographers by us, but the rest had better hang together."

Ileth shivered and asked, "Then there is something here?"

The silence was absolute. Not a breath of air stirred anywhere. Saxon hesitated, said at last, "Yes, I think so."

"What?"

"I don't know."

Clo-Javel, approached them, straightening her short kilt-like skirts. The archaeologist's costume was brief and practical,

but of more importance to Clo-Javel's way of thinking, the red skirt disclosed a goodly length of her really remarkable legs. Clo-Javel was even more proud of her legs than of her reconstruction of the New York skyscrapers. She said, "Did you ever see such buildings? What makes them look so weird?"

Saxon wrinkled his brow, his eyes returning to the glittering facade of cliff-like structures as they waited for the rest of their party to come up.

"I think," he said hesitantly, "it's because, it's because everything looks so new. As if the city was only finished yesterday and had never been used."

"That's it," Ileth burst out.

Mercedes joined them. She too, was wearing kilts, but hers were longer than Clo-Javel's and gray and her jacket was a commodious affair with many pockets. "What's that?" she asked catching the tail end of the conversation.

"The city looks as if it has never been lived in," Ileth explained.

Mercedes lit a cigarette, said, "Nonsense, whoever heard of building a city and then not using it."

"No." Clo-Javel agreed with the gray haired Mercedes. "It's not that altogether. Possibly it's built of some material impervious to decay. Saxon's a physicist." She gave him a brilliant smile. "He would know more about that than I do."

Clo-Javel pursed red lips. "It—it looks familiar."

There was a silence, then Mercedes said, "So it does. Though I can't put my finger on it. But that shouldn't be so strange. The creatures who built it might have been very similar to us. If I could lay my hands on some of their bones..." She laughed good humoredly. "I could tell you in a minute what they were like."

"Were?" Saxon thought, but he didn't express it aloud. He was conscious all the time of the presence of the aliens. It was like being in the midst of a crowded city street.

The semantics expert, the psycho-historian, and the ethnologist joined them in a body. They headed for the nearest building, a towering windowless structure of yellow crystal.

Saxon glanced back uneasily.

The helicopter stood silent and deserted

in the center of the square. The geographer and his helper were disappearing down one of the canyon-like streets with their equipment.

"Look!" commanded Ileth pointing toward the face of the yellow structure. "Letters of some sort! There on the building. Maybe it's a sign."

They quickened their pace until they could describe the letters clearly.

Ileth gasped, "Oh!" and stopped uncertainly.

The rest of them came to a confused halt beside her, staring up at the sign in utter bewilderment. Saxon felt a chill creep up his spine. The sign read:

### TIMES SQUARE

FOR as long as it takes to draw a startled breath there was silence; then they all began to babble at once. Clo-Javel made herself heard suddenly above the others. "I recognize it!" she cried in her ringing husky voice.

"What?"

"It's an exact reproduction of New York II! I knew the city looked familiar! I knew it!"

"New York II?" Saxon echoed. He was not strong in history and had only a faint recollection of a city by that name having once occupied the great Manhattan waste lands.

"Yes," Clo-Javel repeated. "It was the world capitol before Adirondaka was built. I had to study it when I was doing the reconstruction of New York I. There's a scale model of it in the Institute's museum. Isn't that right, Rufus?"

The psycho-historian nodded in a bemused fashion.

"Yes," he agreed. "New York II was built over the ruins of New York I which had been destroyed by the first atomic war. The second atomic war completely annihilated New York II as well as all the other big cities on Earth. Cities weren't built after that for almost five hundred years. Not until the Empire, in fact." He paused uncertainly. "I don't understand this."

Ileth asked, "You mean that this city is an exact reproduction of New York II, Clo?"

The woman nodded, her black eyes curiously frightened. "This is the amusement

center. The yellow building housed the Tri-World Theatre."

"But I don't understand..." Ileth gazed helplessly at Saxon. "What is a reproduction of New York II doing here on a planet in the Alpha Centaurian system? We're over four light years from Sol. No one's ever been here before."

Saxon was conscious of bewilderment and fear muddling the girl's thoughts. His own mind couldn't quite grasp the fact that here was an exact replica of a Terran city. It was inexplicable. It didn't make sense. And, more than that, it was impossible!

He could read the same thoughts struggling against the fact in the minds of the others. He said, "Let's see what the buildings are like inside."

"Yes," agreed Ileth. She had edged close to Saxon. "Maybe we can find the answer inside."

They started for the impressive entrance of the Tri-World Theatre, halted again in near-panic as the doors swung wide.

Ileth gasped, clutched at Saxon's arm, hanging onto it in desperation.

Before any of them could say anything, a voice blared forth. "...a thousand Ganymedian natives in the primitive ritualistic orgy of that Weird little satellite. Hamura in the mating dance of the Ganymedians. Seats: three hundred and seventy-five dollars."

Clo-Javel's voice had lost its rich huskiness. It was a frightened quaver when she said, "It's a working model. Automatic, don't you see?" She giggled nervously, and paused.

"But the voice?" protested Ileth.

"Advertising," explained the archaeologist. "It's a mechanical voice, like the doors."

"Well, I'm not sure how much a dollar was," said Mercedes, "but three hundred and seventy-five for a seat seems rather exorbitant."

Rufus, the psycho-historian, was pale as a corpse. He swallowed, managed to splutter, "Inflation that followed the first atomic war. Inflation..." His voice trailed off as he stared beyond the gaping doors into the foyer of the empty theatre.

"Well, I'm not going in that place!" said the ethnologist suddenly. He was a goat-bearded little dandy. It was his first speech in some time.

Rufus, the psycho-historian, said, "I don't think I care to either."

"Nonsense!" exploded Mercedes. "There isn't anything in there. You can see for yourself. I'm going in."

"I think we should explore the city a bit further," Rufus protested. He glanced uneasily toward the helicopter. Basil and his helper were nowhere in sight.

Mercedes said, "Humph," gave her plump shoulders a shake, disappeared with short sturdy steps through the door.

"She shouldn't go in there alone," said Saxon starting after her. Ileth clung to his arm. "I'm coming along." They left the others standing huddled outside, watching them nervously.

**T**HE foyer was carpeted ankle deep in mauve. Life-like, three-dimensional photographs of actors and actresses in every conceivable costume from none at all to the cumbersome furs of Titan lined the walls.

The magnificent foyer gave the startling impression that just the moment before, crowds of theatre goers had been surging across it. Saxon could feel the hair lift on the back of his neck.

"Where's Mercedes?" asked Ileth in a small voice.

Saxon glanced around, realized that the anthropologist wasn't in the foyer. "She must have gone into the theatre." He lifted his voice, called, "Mercedes. Mercedes!"

His voice echoed hollowly. There was no answer. Saxon and Ileth exchanged worried glances.

"Our voices probably don't carry beyond the foyer," Saxon reassured the girl. "The ancients were clever with sound."

They crossed the floor, their steps cushioned noiselessly in the thick mauve carpet. They went through the doors, past the automatic ticket taker and paused.

A vast amphitheatre with curving rows of empty seats fell away below them like the terribly ancient Roman theatre at Pompeii. The walls by some trick of construction trapped the light, shedding it softly over the seats, concentrating it in a glowing pillar of illumination on the stage.

Suddenly, Ileth brought her hand to her mouth, a look of horror springing into her features. "Oh, my Lord!" she whispered. "Look!" and pointed at the floor at their

feet. Saxon glanced down, caught his breath.

A puddle of clothes lay on the floor as if the middle aged, gray-haired anthropologist had just stepped out of them.

Saxon dropped to his knees beside the garments, turned them over. Sturdy leather walking shoes and heavy gray socks. Gray skirt and jacket. A stout brassiere and practical mannish shorts. They were so typically Mercedes, that Saxon felt a lump in his throat.

The socks were still in the shoes, brassiere inside the jacket. He stood up, feeling his palms begin to sweat. It was as if Mercedes had been suddenly dissipated into thin air, her clothes falling in on themselves.

He heard Ileth give a dry sob, realized suddenly that he felt no alien presence. He and the girl were alone in the theatre, alone as they'd been in the street that night in Adirondaka.

Saxon clenched his fist. "Let's get out of here. Quick!"

"But Mercedes?"

"She's gone! We can't help Mercedes now. The others! Hurry!"

They ran through the doorway back across the carpeted foyer, halting at the street.

Four little mounds of clothes met their eyes.

Saxon could feel his stomach knot inside himself. He felt the clothes. They were still warm from contact with the men's bodies. He stirred the brief red kilt that Clo-Javel had been wearing, saw with a macabre flash of humor that where Mercedes' underthings had been eminently practical, Clo-Javel didn't wear any at all.

Ileth suppressed a scream. "The helicopter! Look! It's gone, too!" Saxon glanced up in consternation.

The square was empty. The twin suns riding high in the sky beat down on bare plastic blocks where the helicopter had stood.

"We're hiking back to the ship—*now*," Saxon said to the frightened girl.

"But it's twenty-five kilometers."

"So it's twenty-five kilometers. We can average four an hour or better. That's six hours. How many more hours of daylight have we?"

Ileth bit her lip, studied her chronometer.

"The days are short. The planet rotates in a little over fourteen hours. Alpha Centauri A sets first, in about an hour, I think. Then Alpha Centauri B about three hours later. Proxima rises about ten minutes after that but it doesn't cast much light."

"Never mind," he said almost roughly. "Come on. We'd better find the geographers quick."

THEY DID, a few minutes later, in one the side canyons. That is, they found implements and two small piles of clothes. "I was afraid of this," said Saxon, his heart lowly sinking into his boots.

Ileth began to cry half in fright, half hysterically.

"None of that!" He shook her shoulders, until she stopped with a hiccup. Turning her loose, he bent over the instruments, secured a compass.

"We're northeast of the ship," he said. "that means if we travel in a southwesterly direction, we should hit it square on the nose. Let's hike!"

But they found it impossible to keep a true southwesterly course through the city. They walked along the deserted, resounding streets, their eyes filled with the fantastically lovely architecture of New York II, the flowing lines and gleaming planes of apartment houses built of a thousand substances from crystal to somber-veined black marble.

"To think," said Saxon, "that a people, any people, could have found it in their hearts to destroy a work like this."

"I'm glad I've seen it," Ileth replied queerly, "even if I did have to come to Alpha Centauri. It's lovely." She shivered.

Saxon said in perplexity, "Why did they let us escape? I don't understand it."

"We were in the foyer, alone, when it must have happened," she suggested. "Maybe they overlooked us."

"Maybe," agreed Saxon doubtfully and paused.

They had come to the end of the city which stopped abruptly as if it had been set down in the middle of the green rolling prairie. Beyond the last building, a herd of cannibal plants rolled by, browsing as they went.

"It's going to be damned tricky keeping a straight course across this," he said.

"There doesn't seem to be a tree on the planet." He sighted the compass, picked out a round hill like the dome of a building, to the southwest. "We'll keep a little to the left of that hill."

ALPHA Centauri A was setting. By the time they had advanced a kilometer across the prairie it was gone. The orange light of Alpha Centauri B lent a queer unearthly complexion to the scene. It became perceptibly cooler, and a breeze sprang up from the east, bringing the faint scent of bitter almonds.

Saxon lengthened his stride. "We're not keeping to schedule," he said; then, "Look at that!"

A fawn colored creature like a large cat but with four pairs of legs, broke from a draw and went undulating across the grass.

"I'm getting tired," said Ileth in a small voice.

He took his eyes from the strange animal, studied the girl. The emotional turmoil which they'd been through had drained her of strength. Her features were white, drawn, her lids drooping over her hazel-green eyes. Her lashes, he thought, were the thickest curliest lashes he'd ever seen and black as her lustrous hair. He felt a tenderness well up inside him and banished it.

"We've got to make the ship. Walk until you drop. Then I'll carry you. But we have to get back as soon as possible."

Her features stiffened at the harshness of his words. He caught a weary flash of anger in her thoughts, then she turned and began to plod again toward the southwest.

"Faster," said Saxon.

Alpha Centauri B was setting when they reached the domed hill which Saxon had lined up with the compass. He left Ileth stretched exhausted at the base and climbed to the summit. His eyes swept the horizons with the last orange rays of the sun, but the *Shooting Star* was still not in sight.

By the time he rejoined Ileth, it was dark. "Did you see it?" the girl asked in a sleepy voice.

"No. We haven't come far enough, I suppose. We'll have to wait until Proxima rises before we can go on. That'll give us a chance to rest. How long before Proxima comes up?"

"Ten or fifteen minutes." She hesitated. "I'm cold."

Saxon put his arms around the shivering girl, pulled her against him. She gave a little sigh, laid her head on his shoulder. He caught her sleepy thoughts, "*Two times two is four. Three times two is six,*" and chuckled to himself.

The darkness was not dispelled very much when Proxima rose above the hills like a sullen red hot drop of metal. The light was red and wavering like the shimmering heat waves above a brush fire. Saxon could not see very well or very far. Nevertheless he wakened Ileth.

She rubbed her eyes, glanced about her in consternation. The change in light had brought about a startling change in the scenery. It looked as if it were bathed in blood.

She said, "Oh, Jon, I wish we were home. I wish we'd never come on this horrible expedition."

He didn't look up from his compass. "The ship can't be much further." He spotted the black gash of a gully a hundred yards ahead. "We'll walk to the gully, then pick out another object."

"I'm still tired. I don't feel as if I'd slept at all."

"You didn't—much. Only about ten minutes. Come on."

They reached the gully and Saxon found a cone-shaped hill looming up redly almost a quarter of a mile further on. They set out for it, Ileth holding his hand.

Their progress was necessarily slower because Saxon had to stop often and consult the compass. Even so, he began to be afraid that they had overshot the ship in the dark.

Slowly Proxima Centauri blazed its blood red path across the night sky.

Not far from Proxima a star twinkled faintly, steadily. It was about in the position that Sol should be. He wondered if it was.

"It's growing lighter," said Ileth.

Saxon glanced toward the east, recognized the graying darkness that heralded the dawn. He said, "Alpha Centauri A's rising. Maybe we can see where we are."

The light was quickening fast with dawn. Saxon climbed to the crest of a ridge, stared off into the southwest.

All at once his heart stood still. He called, "Ileth! Ileth! Come up here!"

The girl ran up the ridge, the urgency in his voice dispelling her weariness. "What is it, Jon?"

He pointed ahead. "Aren't those the hills south of the ship?"

She narrowed her eyes, studying the blue outlines in the dawn light. "Yes. But, Jon, where is the ship?"

He pointed at a blackened circle in the grass not an eighth of a kilometer distant. The circle was almost a thousand yards in diameter.

"That's where our jets burned the grass when we landed. That's where the *Shooting Star* was yesterday!"

In ten minutes they were tramping back and forth across the blackened circle of grass, kicking up little puffs of ashes. The mark of the jets were there, pressed deep in the soft soil. But those and the charred vegetation were the only signs that a ship had ever rested there.

Ileth flung herself dejectedly to the grass at the edge of the circle. "I'm so hungry and bone weary and thirsty and disappointed, I could cry."

Saxon sat down beside her. "I don't understand it," he said for the hundredth time. "I don't understand any of it."

All at once, his scalp began to prickle its warning and Saxon recognized the alien feel. At the same instant Ileth screamed, leaping to her feet. Saxon felt his mouth go dry, his stomach contract as he stumbled erect beside her.

Not ten yards distant, in the path of the rising sun, a naked man was materializing before their eyes. Saxon could see the grass and the hills and a segment of Alpha Centauri A through the man's body.

A thought struck into Saxon's mind. "*So there you are.*" It emanated from the Alien. "*We were afraid you might have gotten clean away.*"

Saxon realized the man was quite solid now, standing with bare feet planted in the pale green grass. There was an instrument like a watch strapped to his wrist. He was holding a small shiny cylinder.

Saxon caught an echo of Ileth's thought. "*Oh Lord, he's naked as a grape!*"

The man levelled the cylinder. There was a brief flash.

Saxon felt an instant's giddiness, a rapid dissolution, then nothing.

## VII

JON SAXON COULDN'T HAVE been unconscious but a fraction of a second because he didn't have time to fall. He came to himself swaying dizzily, nauseated as if with space sickness.

He opened his eyes. He was blind!

The shock left him numb. Then gradually, like a flower unfolding its petals to the light, he felt his extra-human sixth sense assume control.

He became aware of the grass and the sun and the distant hills. Everything registered in varying degrees of grayness. It wasn't grayness exactly, but the word came as near to describing the peculiar impressions that external objects were registering on his sixth sense as his vocabulary could supply.

He didn't picture his environment; he realized it. The burned circle of grass, the naked alien...

A second shock rocked Saxon to his heels. The Alien!

Tentatively, almost timidly, he examined the strange figure confronting him. The man, for man he appeared to be, stood quietly several paces, sizing up Saxon with an equal degree of caution. The analogy to two strange dogs eyeing each other belligerently, but each afraid to make the first move, was so ludicrous that Saxon chuckled although no sound issued from his lips.

He sensed his opponent relax. The fellow was big the way Saxon was big, and the same virility radiated from him like a physical force.

The impressions received via his sixth sense were gaining in vividness. Saxon had never fully appreciated its scope before.

Then with the force of a blow, Ileth's terrified thoughts penetrated sharply to his mind.

*I must be dead! Oh God, I'm dead!*

Saxon could perceive the girl cowering above a small pile of clothes, frightened, helpless, blind. She didn't have his extra-human sixth sense to substitute for sight. She was trembling violently, a slim-naked wraith without substance.

The little pile of clothes at her feet made it suddenly clear what had befallen Mercedes and the crew, what had happened to Ileth and himself. In some fashion, the

Aliens had transmuted them into a space where their three dimensional organs of perception no longer registered.

He moved to the girl, touched her arm.

Saxon was not conscious of a sense of contact, but a vague shock like a weak electric current ran up his arm to his brain. Ileth flinched back in terror.

Again he touched her arm, thinking, "*Ileth, am I getting through? Ileth, am I getting through?*" over and over again.

"Yes," came the unexpected answer. "Yes. Yes. Is it you, Jon? We're dead, you know, Jon."

"No," he thought. "*We're not dead. We've been transmuted but we're not dead.*"

A command rang sharply in his disembodied mind. "*Lead the girl and follow me!*"

Saxon's attention swung back to the Alien, perceived the man threatening him with the cylinder which had blasted them into this indeterminate dimension.

"Suppose I refuse?" he thought.

"*I'm afraid that you underestimate the range of effect of this weapon.*" The Alien brandished the cylinder again. "*Follow me.*"

Saxon capitulated, touched Ileth. "*Keep in contact with me. I'll guide you.*" He began to move after the stranger who was already at a distance.

He didn't know how long they walked. Time had no expression in this state. Alpha Centauri A hung always in the same spot just above the horizon. He thought of Villainowski's inverted formula — "To travel through time during a passage of space." The Little Death must be like this, if one were conscious.

He was still turning it over in his mind when he perceived the station.

The station appeared to be a cubical structure like a large plastic block, except that the matter of which it was formed wasn't matter at all. It was energy, Saxon sensed, pulsating sheets of energy that must not be visible in the normal, three dimensional world.

The Alien stood to one side, motioned them through the shimmering walls.

Saxon was conscious of a throbbing rhythm which swept through him like the hum of a dynamo. He experienced the eerie giddiness for the second time and groped for Ileth before he blanked out.

THIS time Saxon was longer regaining consciousness. He came out from under the effects of the pulsation, feeling his flesh solid again. Air warmed and caressed his skin. He was materialized, he saw, as he leaped to his feet and opened his eyes.

He felt vaguely overwhelmed by the return of his senses. He had never before appreciated their infinite variety. The walls were yellow, lemon yellow; the floor cool and firm underfoot; the air had a faint odor of bitter almonds; and Ileth...

He said, "Open your eyes, Ileth. You'll be able to see better that way."

The girl's eyes popped open. She took one look at Saxon, then at herself. Her eyes grew rounder, her throat flamed.

She gasped, "Oh! You should have let me keep my eyes shut," and whipped her back to him.

She must have realized instantly that the view she presented was no better screened, for she sat down with a thump, saying, "Oh!" again. Then, in an embarrassed voice, "This is just like a dream I had once. Only everyone but me wore clothes in the dream, and there isn't a fig leaf between the three of us."

"The three of us?"

Saxon glanced around, discovered the Alien rummaging in one of the cabinets, from which he produced three of the gleaming kilts, tossed them each one.

"You humans," he said in an amused tone and perfect English, "have odd notions about concealing yourselves. Here."

Saxon gratefully buckled his kilt in place, examined the material. The threads were almost weightless and glowed like strands of light. With a start, he recalled where he had seen them before.

The man and the woman had been wearing kilts like these in his vision during the Little Death. Then...

His mind refused to entertain the possibility. And yet it was a piece of everything else. His inability to remember his childhood. The development of first a sixth sense at twenty-seven, then a seventh at thirty-one.

He strode abruptly to the windows and looked out.

The windows were at an elevation and gave a view of the strangest city he had ever beheld.

There were houses, at least they could be houses, spaced entirely without relation to each other and surrounded by immense park-like grounds. There were no congested areas within his range of vision. Neither was he able to discover roads or sidewalks, fences or walls anywhere.

Alpha Centauri A was still just rising, its orange twin not yet above the hills, which he could see in the distance.

He turned wonderingly back into the room.

Their guard regarded them in amusement. "Sit down," he suggested, indicating a bench.

They seated themselves.

"Ask him what they're going to do with us, Jon." Ileth nudged Saxon in the ribs.

Saxon cleared his throat.

Before he could speak, the guard smiled and said, "I haven't the faintest idea how they plan to dispose of you. Even if I did, that would be for Them to tell you." He nodded toward a closed door on their right. "They'll send for you any moment now."

"Who are 'they'?" Saxon asked.

"The Elders."

"What planet is this?"

"Vark." The guard's voice was pleasant. He smiled faintly when he talked. "The fourth planet of the sun you call Alpha Centauri A. This is the city of Ghibellena." He nodded out the windows.

"How did we get here? Teleportation?"

"Not exactly."

There was a momentary silence while the Alien observed them with that amused gleam in his eye. Then Saxon tried again. "Who are you? Why have you captured us?"

The man nodded briefly again towards the closed door. "You'll learn that in there—if They see fit to tell you."

"Where are the rest of the crew? Dead? In prison?"

"Oh, no. They've been taken to Zara."

"Zara? Where's Zara?"

"Zara is a satellite of the third planet. The one we call Tunis."

"What is that city we saw? The deserted one near the ship?"

Again the man smiled and nodded toward the door. "If They see fit to tell you."

Saxon shrugged burly shoulders. "How do you make yourselves invisible?"

Surprisingly enough the man answered.

"It's a refinement of your stellar drive, an excursion into the time field. In fact, it was discovered almost a hundred of your years ago by a Terran. A Dr. Walter."

Saxon looked disconcerted. Ileth swallowed, her eyes as round as saucers. Suddenly her hand squeezed his arm.

"The door! It's opening!"

"You may go in," said their guard. "They're ready for you."

Saxon had risen uncertainly. He looked at the door which was receding into the wall. Through the portal, he glimpsed a terrace or a balcony, roofless. Beyond and below the terrace was a yellow sea stretching to the horizon, its cadmium waves frothing against a beach of black sand.

"They're expecting you," the guard prompted.

Saxon shrugged. Taking Ileth's arm, he went through the opening. The door slid shut behind them.

THE BALCONY, Saxon saw, was paved checkerboard fashion with green and yellow blocks. At the left, out of sight from the entrance, was a twenty foot table of pale green stone. Seven incredibly old men sat behind the table.

No one said anything.

Saxon took the initiative, advanced to within six feet of the pale green table. His dark gray eyes narrowed. He was vaguely conscious of a flow of thought passing among the seven old men like conversation, but its content escaped him. His jaw jutted angrily.

"Control your anger, my son," said the old man in the center. "Your thoughts should be respectful in the presence of your elders."

Saxon concealed his astonishment, asking, "Might I inquire what this mummery is all about?" He became aware again of the hidden thoughts flowing between them.

Then the old man in the center said, "I am the moderator, my son. Your mind, we have perceived, teems with questions. We have decided that from the psychological angle, certain of these questions can now be answered."

"Psychological angle?" Saxon felt confused. The deviousness of the Aliens, the maddening superiority which they assumed



began to get under his skin. With an effort, he got a grip on himself, returned their curious stares.

The seven old men were wrinkled, emaciated. Once they had been big men like Saxon, but the years had wasted their flesh.

"That's better," approved the Moderator, referring to Saxon's change of tactics. "Now for your questions," and he seemed to look straight into Saxon's mind.

"Very early in our history," began the Moderator after a moment, "we learned that we advanced in the physical sciences by trial and error. A disheartening process, because only so many combinations can be tried in a single lifetime. . ."

"What the hell has this got to do with us?" Saxon interrupted harshly.

"Patience, my son. I'm explaining the relation between our world and the third planet of Sol which you call Earth."

A little muscle began to jump in Saxon's jaw.

"Trial and error," the old man began again. "A slow heartbreaking process, and one which in its nature is inescapable. At least, so we thought until quite recently." He paused, tugged at his lower lip with thumb and forefinger.

Saxon mastered an impulse to shout, "Get to the point!"

"Recently," went on the moderator, "we tried an experiment in our biological laboratories which we hoped would speed up the trial-and-error formula.

"By exposing the germ plasm of a semi-intelligent anthropoid inhabiting the fourth planet of this system to hard radiations, we succeeded in creating a mutant, a biologic sport whose life span was only an instant of time. It matured, mated and died in an incredibly brief period.

"They were startlingly prolific as well; they multiplied like—like—" he groped for a simile—"like guinea pigs or rats.

"Furthermore, they early exhibited the most amazing ingenuity. In twenty generations they had fire; in thirty, crude implement of stone."

Saxon, unable to restrain his impatience longer, cried, "The point, man—get to the point."

The old man gave Saxon a steely look. "We recognized," he went on stiffly, "the significance of our mutation. As soon as

the semi-intelligent sports developed a science, we could expect the trial and error method to be speeded up. A life-time of experiment to them was only a moment to us.

"We isolated them on the fifth planet of our sun. But it soon became apparent that they constituted a dangerous menace even that close. They were so fecund, and their ferocity was appalling. Wars broke out between various tribes. They murdered each other by the thousands."

Gradually Saxon's interest had been caught by the history of the semi-reasoning mutants whose ferocity and proliferation had constituted a menace to their creators. He glanced at Ileth, discovered her spellbound.

The Moderator's voice was growing thinner.

"Luckily," he was saying, "stellar travel was accomplished at this time. We exported several thousand of the creatures to another star system and destroyed the rest.

"The environment on the planet where we transplanted our colony of humanoids was ideal for our purpose—harsh and savage. Several species of bipeds with rudimentary intelligence already inhabited the planet, but our own culture speedily wiped them out and were happily warring among themselves. . ."

A suspicion began to grow in Saxon's mind. He blurted, "On what planet did you introduce this culture?"

The Moderator paused, stared Saxon coolly in the eye.

"Earth!" he said.

**S**XON and Ileth looked at each other incredulously, unable to comprehend the significance of the Moderator's answer.

"Earth?" repeated Saxon. "I don't understand."

The Moderator wrinkled his brow, and said, "I don't know how to put it any more clearly. We transplanted our biological sports to Earth. The two sub-human races which our humanoids exterminated were the Cro-Magnards and the Neanderthals."

Saxon's brain reeled. "Do you mean that man as we know him, homo sapiens, originated in your laboratories as—an experiment?"

He heard Ileth laugh hysterically.

"Precisely," replied the Moderator. "And I might add that the experiment has proven successful. During the last thousand years they have supplied us with hundreds of discoveries and developments. The real nature of the space time continuum, for example.

"The creatures are inordinately clever at the physical sciences—as was to be expected from an emotionally unstable, rationalizing mammal under the pressure of such an antagonistic environment. Our own laboratories have become, for all practical purposes, unnecessary!"

Ileth was staring at the Moderator with wide horrified eyes. "I," she gasped. "I am a humanoid? I don't live but a moment? I'm prolific and savage and—and clever like a monkey? Why, you shriveled up old bag of bones, that's the most stupid pack of lies I've ever heard!"

The Moderator regarded her compassionately. "You haven't changed because I've told you the truth. Your life expectation is no shorter. It's a matter of relativity. To us our ten thousand years seems no longer than your three score and ten does to you."

"Ten thousand years?" exploded Saxon. The sum was so staggering that it was only a figure to him. "Then—" he began, but the Moderator answered before he could speak.

"No. I was not born when the experiment with the humanoids began. They were developed some twenty-five thousand years ago."

Ileth began to laugh crazily, unable to stop. In a moment she would be hysterical. Saxon shook her roughly. "Stop it!"

"I—I—I can't" she giggled. "Either he's mad or I am." Her words ended in a flood of tears.

Saxon put his arm around the girl, turned back to the Moderator. "It was done with hard radiations?"

"Yes. In the resultant mutants their metabolism had been accelerated beyond our wildest expectation. Their life cycle geared to their metabolism passed through its different phases like—like..." again he fished in Saxon's mind for a simile. "Like a meteor. By artificially slowing down their metabolism they returned to their normal life span."

"You've been very curious about the

replica of New York II which you saw when you landed."

Saxon nodded, trying to conceal a thought which had begun to take shape in the back of his mind.

"It's just that. A replica of a city built during the Atomic Age by the humanoids. Their constant implacable wars are so savage that we've found it necessary to duplicate their work here, if we hope to preserve any of it for study."

Saxon narrowed his eyes, asked, "You spoke of the menace of having such savage neighbors. Just how serious was such a threat?"

THE Moderator smiled and glanced at his constituents. Saxon strained to grasp the thoughts flowing between them, but failed utterly.

"Admirable!" the Moderator commented suddenly. "Your reactions, my son, are leading us to hope we may turn in the most optimistic report."

Saxon stared at him as if he were crazy. Ileth's tears had subsided to a snuffle.

"Now for your question," said the Moderator and coughed again.

"The menace was real, not imaginary. We had created a monster that would be either a marvelous scientific instrument, or—the means of our destruction.

"Remember, my son, time is relative. These creatures lived, fought, loved, begat children, carried on scientific research and died, all in seventy short years. They existed at fever intensity. Their metabolism burns them up.

"Our lives are adjusted to a span of ten thousand years. We have a total population of little over a million. We are neither a war-like people, nor a highly-industrialized people.

"In one of their generations the humanoids accomplish almost as much as we do in one of ours. Think, my son, they perform in seventy years what it takes us ten thousand to do.

"If it ever came to hostilities between us we'd be doomed, overwhelmed almost before we realized what was happening."

Saxon listened in astonishment. The thought in the back of his mind kept trying to push to the fore, but he repressed it, afraid that the Aliens might see it.

"Their amazing fecundity," the Modera-

tor was saying, "their short life spans, their ingenuity and ferocity made them a very real menace even isolated outside our stellar system. Fortunately, we also foresaw the inevitable crisis and prepared for it."

"Crisis?" Saxon echoed.

"The time when the humanoids would reach our scientific level and surpass us," said the Moderator in a grim voice. "That time has arrived!"

## IX

**S**OMEWHERE A BELL BEGAN TO ring shrilly. Saxon saw an expression of annoyance pass across the Moderator's wrinkled visage. He pressed a button set in the table top. The bell stopped ringing. A voice began to speak in an alien tongue directly behind Saxon. The burly nuclear physicist spun around in surprise.

He was looking into the control room of a small private space yacht!

The deception was so realistic that Saxon gasped before he noticed the three beams of light converging from lenses in the wall, focusing at a point directly behind him to form the solid appearing image. A three-dimensional television complete with sound!

Then all speculation was driven from his mind as he recognized the figure who was speaking.

Mustapha IX, Supreme Autocrat of the Terran Empire!

The image of Mustapha sat stiffly in an acceleration chair before the control panel of the space yacht. His voice, rattling away in the strange language, was high, tense, frightened.

Saxon, unable to understand, looked over his shoulder at the seven old men. They were all on their feet, staring in disbelief at the three dimensional image. The Moderator's hands began to tremble. He sat down as if his knees had turned to water.

The voice rattled on and on.

At last Mustapha IX quit talking. The Moderator pressed the button. The image dissolved.

A stunned silence followed, as one by one the old men sank back to their seats. Saxon, devoured with curiosity, asked, "What was it?"

The Moderator gave him a level glance. "That was the man you know as Mustapha IX, Supreme Autocrat of the Terran Em-

pire. He was reporting from his private yacht which has just emerged from the time field and is decelerating. It'll be a week before he lands on Vark."

"Mustapha IX?" Saxon burst out. "Here on Vark? But that's impossible. What's he doing—"

"There's been civil war," the Moderator interrupted savagely. "General Atomic has overthrown Government. General Atomic is the Terran Government now!"

"But I don't see . . ." protested Saxon.

"Bah! I spoke of controls. Naturally our first necessity has been to control the humanoid's government. The Supreme Autocrats have all been Varkans, our governors, which we sent to Earth!

"Now Mustapha IX has had to flee for his life. Most of our agents on Earth have been murdered. Only a handful escaped with him!"

The Moderator pressed another button, began to speak rapidly, tonelessly in the alien language into a microphone. The thoughts of the seven old men were flashing back and forth like streaks of light behind their mental barrier. The crisis, Saxon realized, had arrived with a vengeance!

Suddenly the guard came running through the door in answer to a summons by the Moderator. For the first time Saxon intercepted a thought as the Moderator directed the guard to take the prisoners away.

"*Send the girl to Zara,*" he commanded the guard. "*Confine the man here until we can check results!*"

"Come along," said the guard in a tight voice to Saxon and Ieth. He took hold of Ieth's arm. The girl shrank away from him, frightened by the swift and ominous change which had come over their captors.

Saxon's eyes went bleak. The guard jerked back as he caught a glimpse of Saxon's intentions, but he wasn't quick enough.

Saxon's balled fist caught him on his left cheek bone, sent him sprawling to the checkered pavement. Saxon was on him like a wolf. Wrenching the cylinder from the stunned guard's belt, he backed off swinging the unfamiliar weapon in a menacing arc.

He saw the withered faces of the Elders blanch. They pressed stiffly against the back of their chairs, jaws sagging. The guard



*He backed off, swinging the unfamiliar weapon.*

scrambled to his feet. He shook his head groggily but made no move to attack Saxon.

Triumph welled up inside Jon Saxon. He said, "The shoe's on the other foot. I don't know how this damned thing works, but there's a button. Unless you start answering my questions straight we'll see what happens if I press it."

He paused. The seven old men glared at him but said nothing.

"How did General Atomic discover your agents? Why didn't their invisibility protect them?"

The Moderator moistened his lips. "The humanoids devised a machine that detects us. An adaption of the thought projector, which enabled them to detect our telepathic potential. Once they could isolate our thought waves, they were able to trace them to their source by a process similar to locating the source of a radio beam."

Saxon narrowed his eyes, recalling the thought projector which the radiation

branch of Government's Bureau of Research had been experimenting with. So that's how General Atomic had uncovered the Aliens.

"General Atomic," the Moderator was saying, "suspected the existence of mutants, telepaths, ever since an agent of theirs by the name of Emil turned in a report on you!"

Saxon started.

The Moderator's first fright was over, he realized. The old man was regarding him with a faint smile.

Saxon glanced behind him in alarm; but there was nothing there. He clenched his fist until the knuckles whitened. "What other methods did you use to keep the humanoids in check?"

There was a subtle change in the voice of the Moderator when he answered. It was ringing, hard. "As I said, we foresaw this crisis. To discourage stellar travel we planted a pathologic fear of deep space in the humanoid subconscious.

"Certain of their discoveries we have suppressed. Notably, the space-time stellar drive. The Little Death, as you call it, has been discovered three separate times in the past thousand years."

"What?"

"Yes. Are you surprised? Once by an unknown scientist, once by a physicist, Dr. Walter, and lastly by Dr. Villainowski."

Although Saxon still held the alien weapon, he had the uncomfortable sensation that a trap had been sprung and the Moderator was only waiting for it to close on him.

With a suffocating tenseness, he asked, "What am I?"

"You," said the Moderator, "are a test experiment!"

"What?"

"A test experiment. On your psychological reactions will depend the ultimate fate of the humanoids!"

"A test experiment," he repeated dazedly. "What do you mean?"

"Simply this. For some time we've realized that steps must be taken to curb the rapaciousness of the humanoids."

"But me . . ."

The Moderator held up his hand.

"I'm coming to you. If the ruthless savagery of the humanoids was instinctive, part of their heredity, there was little that could be done except destroy them.

"But if, on the other hand, their natures resulted from the pressure of their environment, we might be able to modify that environment and salvage our experiment."

"But what the hell am I? What did you mean when you said I was a test experiment?"

The Moderator seemed to have forgotten the existence of Saxon's weapon. He tugged at his lower lip with thumb and forefinger. "You are not a humanoid. You are one of us, a Varkan. We placed you as a baby on Earth to be raised as a humanoid."

"I was eleven," protested Saxon.

"A mere baby still, with psychological plasticity." The Moderator waved the objection aside. "If your disposition hardened into humanoid characteristics, then we would be safe in assuming that the humanoids, too, were a product of their environment.

"Of course, there were factors we couldn't control. The natural unfolding of your sixth and seventh senses in early childhood—"

Saxon burst out, "But I was twenty-seven when I developed a sixth sense and thirty-one—"

"My son, that's quite true. But you're only in your adolescence now."

"At thirty-eight," said Saxon in disbelief, "I'm an adolescent?"

The Moderator nodded. "And precocious at that!"

Ileth giggled again nervously.

**S**AXON gave a short laugh. He had a feeling that he had been stuffed too full of information. He couldn't digest it. In spite of the suspicions he had entertained concerning his birth, he was unable to really believe that he was an Alien!

He glanced suddenly at Ileth. The girl had shrunk away from him as if he were a leper. Her hazel-green eyes were horrified. All at once, she began to cry.

Saxon tried to pat her shoulder, but she wrenched away. The action drove a needle of pain into his heart. He realized in a numbed fashion how fond he had grown of the girl.

"Fond, hell!" he thought savagely, "I'm in love with her."

"My son," came the hated voice of the Moderator, "she is not for you."

"What do you mean?" Saxon shouted.

The Moderator regarded him a moment, his eyes veiled. Then, "The psychologist is ready to give you his report. As a true human, you have the right to hear it."

A shriveled, wrinkled man at the end of the table began to address Saxon in a dry voice.

"I've been probing your reactions as the truth was revealed to you. You can understand the importance of an accurate judgment, when you know that the fate of our experiment rests on the manner in which you conformed to a humanoid environment."

"Experiment be damned!" Saxon flung out. "What about me?"

The psychologist permitted himself a vague smile. "Your reactions have been typically humanoid.

"You have been bewildered, frightened, angry.

"You tried to think first of some way by which you could destroy us. Failing that, you cast about in your mind for some compromise which would cause us to hold our hand until we could be either conquered or wiped out—preferably wiped out. These are typically humanoid reactions to a dangerous foe.

"Under the circumstances we can preserve our experiment if we can modify the humanoids' environment."

Saxon felt relief. Whatever the Aliens planned, they weren't going to destroy mankind.

The psychologist having delivered his report, the Moderator resumed, "It is unfortunate in a way for you, my son, that the test has been so favorable to the humanoids.

"They live and die so fast that in a few generations we can correct their savage dispositions.

"But you have solidified in the humanoid mould. You will have to undergo a dangerous operation. Our psychologist must induce infantile retrogression in you. When you have been reduced mentally, to the age of eleven, then your re-education can begin.

"I'll be perfectly frank. You have about one chance in ten of retaining your sanity. The danger lies in that retrogression once activated in your brain cells. It cannot always be halted."

Saxon's laugh was a croak. "You forget I've still the weapon."

The Moderator said, "It's time that this nonsense stopped. We've allowed you to retain the cylinder in order to observe your reactions. Look around you!"

Saxon spun around.

Materializing like gray wraiths, a dozen figures were taking substance behind him. They were all armed with shining cylinders.

"Drop it!" commanded the Moderator.

Saxon's weapon clanged against the pavement.

ILETH suppressed a scream, swayed, half fainting. Saxon caught her before she fell. The girl recovered, flung her arms about his neck.

"You can't do it!" she stormed at the Elders. "You can't. I love him. I don't care what he is, I love him, I tell you!"

"Take them away!" the Moderator said imperiously.

The wraiths had grown solid. They began to close in.

Saxon's spine stiffened. He said, "Wait a moment!" in a breathless voice. "Have you overlooked the five sets of plans for Villainowski's stellar drive? The ones that were stolen from Government's Research Building?"

The Moderator's face went gray. For the second time Saxon intercepted a thought flowing between the seven old men.

A fear thought! Pure funk!

Saxon's heart leaped like an arrow as the realization burst on him that the seven old men were terrified of the humanoids. They were so badly frightened that for a moment their guard had relaxed and the fear thought had escaped past their mental barriers.

If only there was a way to exploit their fear. He felt hope surging back through his veins.

"Already," he shouted, "General Atomic must be manufacturing the ships. And you can't stop it. The secret of stellar travel is loose among the humanoids!"

"We know of the loss of the plans. General Atomic is laying the keels of thousands of the new-type ships. But that doesn't affect your fate in the least."

"Doesn't it?" said Saxon harshly. "I'm the only Varkan who can compete with the humanoids. I'm the only one who's been conditioned to the speed of their reflexes."

"You're a dangerous anti-social!" the Moderator snapped. "Your auto-reactions approach the humanoid level because you're still a child with a child's adaptiveness. When you mature you'll appreciate the difference. We wouldn't dare use you even if you could do anything. If worst comes to worst we can destroy our experiment!"

Saxon laughed at him. "And how many generations of humanoids would have passed away before you could wipe out a culture that's spread to all the planets of its solar system? Why, they'll be swarming over Vark from pole to pole before you can prepare to repel them."

The Moderator winced, tried to interrupt, but Saxon was inexorable.

"You might have been able to destroy them while you had them isolated in their own Solar System. But they're free now. Free to expand through the Galaxy!"

Saxon paused. The idea sprouting some

time ago had begun to bear fruit. He pushed it resolutely out of his mind lest they intercept it.

The Moderator asked with narrowed eyes, "You have an idea, haven't you?"

Saxon could feel the Aliens probing at his thoughts like a scalpel laying bare his skull.

"Two times two is four. Three times two is six," he thought hastily and fealized the seven old men were on the verge of apoplexy.

There was a tense moment of silence as their wills clashed. Then the Moderator asked, "What's your price?"

"Freedom for myself and the crew. Hands-off policy for the humanoids."

The silence deepened.

Again Saxon became aware of those flickering baffling thoughts as the seven old men conferred behind their mental shields.

At last, grudgingly, the Moderator spoke, "That depends on your success."

Saxon didn't relax. He had won only if he had guessed the right answer to a question that had been obsessing him. If he was right, he would need no guarantee to hold the Aliens to their promise.

"You said that when the metabolism of the humanoids was slowed they returned to their normal life span. Does that mean that you can actually lengthen their lives to equal yours?"

The Moderator looked puzzled, nodded. "A comparatively simple operation, but . . ."

"But nothing!" Saxon almost shouted. "If their life span is the same as yours, then they'll be on the same time scale. Their fecundity is the direct result of their shortened life cycle. They'll no longer constitute a menace!"

Hope blazed temporarily in the Moderator's eyes, then went out. When he spoke next his voice was cold, dead.

"But that takes time. Before we could effect the change several generations of humanoids would have lived and died. We'd be conquered!"

Saxon laughed outright. "Of course, you people couldn't effect the change quick enough, but other humanoids could. You have Ileth here. She's a General Atomic agent. You have the crew and some of the

best brains on Earth isolated on Zara. They could do it!"

The Moderator drew in his breath sharply. "But would they be willing to cooperate?"

"What a question!" roared Saxon. "Would mankind be willing to increase their life span ten thousand years? They'll jump at it!"

ZARA was a diminutive green little world, held in thrall by the third planet of Alpha Centauri A. A miniature heaven of soft breezes and crystal streams and gravity so slight that Saxon felt buoyant as a bubble.

He said in rare good humor, "So there it is. The Varkans can't slow the metabolic rate of billions of humanoids by force or by themselves in time."

He was surrounded by the members of the expedition, to whom he had just explained the proposal of the Aliens to extend mankind's normal life span to an unthinkable age.

With his arm around Ileth's slim waist, he had watched suspicion give way to hope and hope to wild enthusiasm. Only Villainowski appeared disgruntled.

"It's more than I can stomach," growled the Chief, "to think of perpetuating General Atomic in power practically forever."

Saxon leaned close, said in a lowered voice, "You don't believe that if the people have ten thousand years to contemplate the iniquity of General Atomic, they'll continue to be duped. It'll be the death blow to all the big corporations."

He straightened, returning his arm to Ileth's waist. "There's no reason for you to return to Earth with the rest of them, Villainowski. There's a lot to see here, a lot to learn. Ileth and I are going to spend . . ."

He frowned, called, "Hey, Mercedes. You're the anthropologist. What was that barbaric custom practiced by newly-married couples during the pre-Atom age?"

"The honeymoon." Mercedes chuckled, turned to the faintly pink Ileth, pinched her cheek. "Don't look so frightened, child. The first ten thousand years are the hardest."