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# IPOMOEA

JOHN RACKHAM

Science is never neutral—  
and neither are the stars!





“Now you hear me, Hutten, about what Ipomoea does to people. One dose is enough—the addict loses all sense of responsibility—and then, after about a year, the addict switches off altogether—no reaction, no intellect. And here’s the deadly part, Hutten, they don’t die—they don’t even show signs of getting old—we’re stuck with them, thousands and thousands of immortal vegetables, brainless bodies swamping the world, spreading this Happy Sugar to others.”

Hutten shoved back in his chair, breathed deeply. “It sounds like somebody’s trying to wipe out Earth.”

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**JOHN RACKHAM**  
**IPOMOEA**

**AN ACE BOOK**

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THE BRASS DRAGON

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## I

DRIFTING THROUGH the noisy mosaic of conversing groups, Sam Hutten came across a youthful and somewhat anxious face, all alone. He paused, put on a mild grin.

"New here, aren't you?" he asked, pitching his voice expertly through the sea-roar of surrounding voices.

"Throckmorton," the younger man said. "David Throckmorton. Yes, I've only been here a few weeks. Not had the chance to meet everyone on campus, not even all the faculty. But you're Dr. Hutten. I couldn't very well not recognize you, sir."

Sam shrugged easily, casting aside whatever fame might accrue to his skill in holding a class, his knack for putting across thickly abstruse stuff in simple words that conveyed understanding. "Just a knack," he disclaimed, and, enlarging, "Comes from a determination not to be overawed by the topic. Trouble with teachers is that they begin to believe, very early on in professional life, that their subject is all-important. It is, to them. But to the pupil, the poor bedeviled scholar, it's just one more course he has to take for the credits. Sociology?"

It wasn't much of a guess. The whole room was full of sociologists, gathered this afternoon for what could have been called a farewell party, end-of-term jollification, but which was, in fact, just a convenient excuse for airing all sorts of grievances to understanding ears. One didn't get much chance, these days, to talk to an audience of one's peers.

"General, at the moment," Throckmorton confirmed. "My first year. But I intend to take your subject, sir, if I can, and specialize. Social history."

"Not through a desire to imitate, I hope. It might be the sincerest form of flattery, but it's a very poor principle on which to base a career. Can't think why you young fellows want to get into sociology anyway. It's the world's worst subject right now, and getting worse all the time!"

Throckmorton tried a grin, reassured by Sam's easygoing manner. He turned the question around. "Why did you take it up, sir?"

"Only thing I was ever any good at. And don't try school-book methods on me, David. I meant what I said about the subject. It's rough!"

"It doesn't seem to have affected you, sir."

Sam widened his grin just a little, made a gesture, gently, with the hand that held the glass. "Let's make it look as if we're mingling, at least. No, I don't want a refill. I don't guzzle. I carry mine on the outside, for the look of the thing." He resumed his drift, the younger man falling in with him but finding it deceptively difficult to match. This large room, the faculty dining room, had been converted for this one afternoon by the simple process of stacking all the tables and chairs around the walls. On the open floor were gathered almost a hundred teachers, grouped and bunched like so many bacteria on a culture plate, knotted in hot conversations. Hutten managed to steer a course through without giving the impression of avoidance.

"Chance to learn," he murmured, still with that trick of voice that came through clearly over the hubbub. "Sociology has to be the only thing for me because I am, by temperament, one of life's spectators. It's not a good thing, in itself. It means, on analysis, that I am largely indifferent to my fellow man and his problems. Plenty of curiosity, but no involvement. So ideally situated to observe, study and understand. Would you say the same is true of you?"

"Hardly!" Throckmorton sounded slightly shocked. "I see it as the only real hope for mankind. Something crucially worthwhile. I mean"—he dodged an arm-waving enthusiast from one group and made a quick double-shuffle to get Hutten's ear again—"the physical sciences, now, are acting as a brake, a barrier against ultimate disaster. It was being predicted half a century ago, in the nineteen sixties and seventies, that somehow human understanding had to catch up with technology, or we'd all be blown to blazes in a planet-wide holocaust."

"But it didn't," Sam pointed out. "The understanding, I mean."

"No, it hasn't. Not yet. But it will. It must, because science is holding the fort from the wrong approach, by clamping down on everything and anything, crying 'Danger' all the time. Waiting for the breakthrough. And the pressure is building up."



"And you think sociology has the key?"

"If it hasn't, nothing has. You see"—Throckmorton became intense—"I'm not against the experimental side, or the taxonomical approach. We have to have both. Field trials of theories, collection of data; that's necessary. But what we lack is someone with the vision, or the good fortune, to spot the underlying pattern. An Einstein-type. I'm not claiming that I'm it," he disclaimed pinkly. "But if it is coming, it will come through a grasp of the history, the broad pattern."

"Extrapolation," Hutten murmured, and nodded. "It's a belief that dies hard, that you can see where we've been, where we are now, and predict where we're going. Hold it just a moment; let's listen to Cleeman. He is about to deliver his regular complaint. Does it every term."

"Twenty years!" Cleeman declared bitterly. "Twenty blistering geometrically explosive years since Mankind took off for the stars, and what are we celebrating? What are *we* celebrating? For all the rest of the machine-minders, the so-called teachers, it's a glorious anniversary of a great day. Science triumphant. But for us?" The speaker paused to let his audience grunt and shuffle in sympathy. Similar farewell parties were in progress all over the widespread campus of what had once been M.I.T., but was now just one specialized cell in the Pan-American Televisual Educational Network. The others may have been jolly, but in this particular room the atmosphere was abrasive, the by-product of a killing pace.

"From the beginning of time it has been the business of the teacher to try to instruct the young as to the shape and form of social patterns, to help them to fit into that vast world out there. No matter what the ostensible subject matter, that has been the underlying theme: to provide data and guidance about the world of people so that the network of man-in-society shall continue to hang together somehow. And look at it! In this year of grace, twenty-nineteen, we have gotten far enough to realize that social science, instead of being an incidental, has to be counted as a subject in itself. But our subject matter, the stuff we are supposed to teach, has run wild into so many different disciplines and directions that *we* can't keep track of it all, much less teach it to anyone else. There *is* no underlying pattern!"

"How's that for an answer?" Hutten murmured to his young companion.

"But there must be some common ground to being human, otherwise the word doesn't mean anything."

"You have a point. Try thinking along that line some time. Meanwhile, there's Gosforth. He has a different bee in his bonnet. Listen."

"We should have seen it twenty years ago, it was so obvious but the vast mass of people can't even see it now! Quite simply, the Japanese are the chosen race. No, it's not funny. I dare say they don't like it any more than we do, but you can't dodge the visible facts!"

"They aren't planning any world conquest, Gossy!" The comment came from one of his audience, a specialist in family dynamics.

"They don't have to. I said they probably don't like it. But some have greatness thrust upon them. Look at the record." The speaker splayed a handful of fingers and proceeded to enumerate on them. "Who invented the inertia-null drive that made the whole hegira possible? It's called the Yashi-Matsu Drive, isn't it? You need more? You know, and I know, everybody knows, that the drive would be nothing more than a laboratory curiosity without some way of storing up electrical power in gross lots. And that can't be done. As of twenty years ago, you and me and everybody else knew that, and we were wrong. They went right ahead and invented a way of doing it, by stripping plasma and bottling it under pressure just like any other gas. And it comes out like Jovian thunderbolts. And they call it the Mishi-Moto power-store!"

"So they had a couple of breakthroughs!" Conyers of socio-politics threw in the disclaimer and Gosforth sneered at him.

"A couple? They have had hundreds. Do I have to draw you a diagram? All right, I will."

Hutten nudged his young companion. "Listen closely, and try to find the hole in the reasoning. I warn you, it's not easy."

"Generalizations, of course," Gosforth started. "But all the same . . . Now, science had its first flicker in Ancient Greece, right? The intrigue of ideas, of finding rational causes for things. But in a slave-state, so no pressure to try the ideas in practice. Then came the Romans, who were red-hot on practice but lousy on theory. So, after a while, stagnation. There came a small flicker in Florence, with Leonardo, but he needed technology to make the ideas work, and technology needs a lot of people, not just one lone pioneer. The delicate flame shifted to Arabia. They revived the Greek idea, they milked it, they came up with some new tools for thought, like mathematical notation. But practical they were not. So we pass, fast, to the European continent, to Germany and France,

and then Britain and the Industrial Revolution. And then to the United Americas.”

“So what went wrong?” Conyers demanded, making it clear by his tone that he thought *nothing* had gone wrong. Gosforth beamed.

“Let me tell you. Here you have the flowering of a notion, that there are rational effects, reasons, methods, better ways of doing things—and that the rules, laws, methods and tricks can be found out. Good? It certainly was. We had a technological culture in short order. And we rode it at full gallop, right up to the cliff-edge of disaster. It’s a matter of opinion, right now, whether we have actually stopped in time. And why? Why the disaster? I will tell you that also. Because we included a couple of notions that have nothing whatever to do with science. One is the use of scientific-technological know-how in order to achieve domination over others. The Soviets latched on to that one fast. So, too, did Red China. The other is the use of know-how to make a profit, to make money-symbols, to become a boss. We swallowed that one right down to the gut. Science to be used, to the greater glory of Leninism, or the almighty dollar. That’s where we went all wrong. That’s why I tell you the Japanese are the first truly scientific nation, the chosen race.”

“I don’t see your point.” Throckmorton spoke up, nervously but driven. “What’s wrong with *using* science? Isn’t that what it’s for?”

“Exactly. That’s the way we still think. Old thought-patterns die very hard. The Greeks investigated ideas for the sheer thrill of it, but the Romans took over and used what the Greeks left to implement the Roman way of life. The Industrial Age used science to create social values, to prop up *their* way of life. The Soviets used it to prove their way is better, we use it to promote *our* values, and so on. We do not enthusiastically welcome that part of science which runs counter to the things we believe in. Ask the eugenicists some time. The Soviets ignore those aspects of science which cut across Marx-Lenin dogma. And so on. Now, please, observe Nippon.”

Gosforth had his audience now, Hutten noticed. Even young Throckmorton, still in position, was listening intently. The speaker took a breath. “You will remember,” he said, “the cheap transistor radio. Then the portable T.V., and in color yet. Cheap. The cheap but good optical systems, like telescopes, cameras, projectors? Grab at that word ‘cheap’ and hold it. They made their stuff cheap *not* in competition, *not*

to undercut anyone else, but simply because it could be made cheap. Industrial theory says 'Price your output as high as the market will bear.' The Japanese work quite differently: 'Price is just a little more than it is actually worth, to show a return.' Everyone else uses science and technology to prove something, to prop up some existing value. The Japanese do things the rational, scientific, better way, just for the sake of it. Anything. Everything. Efficiency for its own sake!"

"I can't agree with that." Throckmorton tried again. "They are promoting their own national interest, if nothing else!"

Gosforth took time now to look closely at his interrogator. "New man aren't you? All right, don't take my word for it. Check with the experts; ask them if Japan is bent on any kind of world domination you can define. They will tell you no. I can tell you why. They tried it once, by force of arms. And it didn't work. They studied the history books, and they saw that it never has worked, not for any nation. World domination will not work, not by force or persuasion. Machiavelli knew it. No government can long persist against the will of the governed. And there is no technique, nor yet any prospect of any, that will bring all Mankind into one frame of mind, to agree. If and when such a miracle does come, it will be worldwide anarchy, not any government. So, I repeat, world domination by any one faction or nation is a non-workable proposition. That has been obvious for a long time. The Japanese tried it, learned the hard way, took a strong look at the historical evidence—and abandoned the idea. Because it won't work. They *learned*. That's more than any other people before them ever managed to do, to learn from history and decide rationally. You ask Sam."

Hutten made a gesture and grin, took Throckmorton gently by the arm and led him away. "Learn when you're licked," he advised. "You're too young and green to launch into battle with Gossy."

"You agree with him, then?"

"I am indifferent, David. No theories, no campaigns, no ardent causes. I told you, I am by nature an observer. As I warned you, social science in general is a very rough subject right now. I doubt if it is ever going to get any better, either. With any other science you care to name, it is possible to be unbiased, scientific, to accept the evidence as it comes. In social science you yourself are part of the experiment, part of the evidence, and with a built-in bias. Think it over. That's why I am in, and intend to stay firmly in, social history. At least I have my subject matter pinned down—until some

clown invents a time-machine so that he can go back and alter the past. Excuse me." He broke off as the pager in his vest pocket started to beep. "Who the blazes wants me at this time of day, this day?"

He made his way to the dining room visor-phone, shut the sound proof door after him, and dialed central. Automatic mechanisms switched him to his caller, and he frowned wonderingly to see President White's lean old face appear on the screen.

"Ah, Dr. Hutten. Sorry to drag you from the revelry, but I have just received in your name a high-priority sub-ethergram." White enunciated the syllables carefully. A sub-ethergram was a rarity, even for an institutional president. "It's extremely brief and enigmatic. Shall I read it to you, or would you rather I held it up?"

"Go ahead and read it, sir."

"It is from your father, is registered as point-of-origin Verdun, system Tau-Ceti; sender Rex Hutten. It just says, 'I need you.' Does that mean anything to you, Hutten?"

"It does, yes. Quite a lot. May I call on you, sir? This needs a little explaining."

"I shall be interested to hear it. Five minutes?"

Hutten made it with a few seconds to spare. President White could have lived in a reasonably luxurious apartment off-campus, but, being by nature and inclination an austere man, he chose to inhabit a small suite placed handily central to the close-packed sprawl of educational buildings, and the transport system between them all was highly efficient. It had to be. Only a comparative few privileged students actually attended lectures in person, playing a kind of guinea pig role for the millions who attended by means of television-link, and when they had to move from one studio-classroom to another in the breaks, it had to be fast or they'd risk losing the distant audience to outside distractions. White was still holding the space-gram photostat as he rose from his desk to greet Hutten.

"I trust this is not bad news?" he said immediately.

"Depends on your point of view," Hutten replied. "I'll be flattered if you're suggesting that losing me will be bad news for you."

"It will, and no flattery, Dr. Hutten. You will be very difficult to replace. It is rare to find anyone who can preserve the proper amount of impartial judgment in our most explosive subject. But I am being selfish. Is this bad news for you?"

"That's difficult to say, sir. You see, my father is a highly

opinionated man. Some might say he has earned the right. He has certainly earned a lot of money and power."

"An empire, so I have heard it described." White nodded gravely in agreement. "The sort of person about whom one has to be tactful. After all, this institution is in debt to him many times over for generous financial assistance. Very generous."

"And tax deductible." Sam grinned. "I don't have to be tactful. He's my father, and ever since I was old enough to have an opinion of my own we have never agreed on anything. With respect, of course, but utterly opposed. He's a born conquistador, always was. The world as an oyster-bed. Some of those oysters have pearls. The pearls go to whoever is fastest on the grab and has the strongest clutch. That about sums it."

"Inelegant, but substantially true of many people. He made it work."

"He certainly did. I don't know how much he is worth. I doubt if he knows himself, or cares much, so long as he is in charge of what happens. This planet Verdan is extremely rich in natural resources such as fertile soil and clement climate, plus oil and fuel stocks enough to provide energy. My father never was a farmer. Not the type at all. But he can organize. He now owns just about everything on Verdan, the entire planet, which supplies bulk protein and carbohydrate food basics to the other two planets of that system, and quite a big spillover back here to Earth of valuable by-products."

"And yet, according to this, he needs you?"

"Well, now." Sam grinned ruefully. "This is old history. Years ago, when I was just feeling my way into the maze of social science, because I have always had this intense curiosity about people as seen from outside, he and I had a ferocious argument. I lost it, as I recall, simply because he didn't want to know, but that is neither here nor there. The point I tried to make to him—and I could make it a little sharper now—was that people as a mass should be regarded as a natural force. We say—and we can prove—that it is technology which changes the world. We quote Henry Ford in transport, Marconi in radio, and so on. It's all true, but it's not the whole truth. It's like"—Hutten scowled as he searched for an analogy—"like the key principle in cybernation. You apply a small controllable energy to take charge of and manipulate a massive one. Amplification. The energy of a finger-movement on a switch can control mil-

lions of horsepower. That kind of thing. My point was that technology is not itself the moving force, merely the means of amplification. The real moving force is people-in-the-mass."

"I doubt if any of us here would question that," White murmured. "It happens to be our unenviable task to discover something more specific about that mass-force."

"Exactly. That's what I tried to tell him. 'You,' I said, 'are manipulating people, successfully, it's true, but without really knowing what you are handling. Someday you are going to need me, or someone like me, to get you out of a horrible snarl-up, when the day comes that the raw material you are pushing around backs up and decides not to be pushed any more.' He never forgot that. He didn't accept it for one moment. Rex Hutten couldn't. But he remembered it. I haven't seen him in five years, since the last time he was back on Earth and called in to see me. But he hadn't forgotten. He said it again, as he said it before: 'Anytime, Sam, that I feel I need *you*, I will say so!' Of course, he intended it to mean that it would never happen. But now . . ."

President White took up the photostat from where he had dropped it, and wrinkled his brow as he studied it.

"That certainly throws a new light on this. From what I know of your father at first hand, and by repute, I would assume that it cost him a great deal, and not just in money, to send this message. It is either an admission of defeat, of failure, or a cry for help. Or possibly all of those combined. And so it is bad news after all. I'm sorry."

"So am I." Sam sighed. "At the very least, it means I have to go out there, and I would much rather not. I've never even been off-planet, much less out into the wide blue, but I can't see what else there is to do!"

"You can't very well ignore it. As I said, Hutten, I shall be sorry to lose you, but you really must respond. After all, you're his only son, his heir. Aren't you?"

"That's the last thing to concern me. The old man gave me a good education, a start in life for which I am eternally grateful, but ever since then I have lived off my own earnings. I want no part of his empire, his millions, and he knows that. It's a point of respect between us. But this—I incline to read it as a call for help. In that sense I must go. The devil of it is, what can I do? Whatever sort of mess he is in, what can I do?"

## II

HUTTEN CONTINUED to worry about what he could hope to do all the way to Kennedy Spaceport. The small practical aspects of packing and traveling bothered him very little. He was above all a practical man. He packed the very minimum, sensibly assuming that money could buy anything he might need en route, and just as sensibly arranging to draw cash on the credit that had stood in his name all these years without being touched. After all, he was traveling on Rex Hutten's business, and there was no reason at all why she shouldn't pay for it.

None of the chores was important enough to distract him from the main problem. It had been all very well in the first flush of youthful enthusiasm to claim that a social scientist would be needed to put right some manipulative error, but Sam was now twenty-eight and a good deal wiser than he had been when he made the claim. He knew what every honest social scientist knew, that there were dozens of theories but only a pitifully small handful of hard techniques. Certainly nothing solid enough for a man to stand on while repairing a planetary disaster. Already Sam was thinking in terms of disaster. He could imagine nothing less that would have bent his father's craggy-minded confidence in himself to the point where he would bawl for help. To the other point delicately hinted at by President White he paid little or no attention. Truly he was the old man's heir, but that didn't become effective until the old man was dead. It had to happen some time, of course, but Sam already had arranged a nebulous notion in his mind for that. If and when the moment came he would solicit expert advice, set up a ruling committee to take charge of the enterprise, and he, Sam Hutten, would sit well back, acting like a rubber stamp.

He managed to clarify one thing in his mind by the time the inspecting officials at Kennedy had checked him out as fit to board the ship for Mars. He needed data, a lot more data, all he could get hold of about the Tau-Ceti Colony System. Anyone else, he mused ruefully, would have sent an ethergram blasting back there demanding to know what the trouble was. He didn't, because he knew his father that well. If old Rex had wanted him to know the details they would have been sent. For all the opposition in viewpoint



between father and son, there was genuine regard and respect for each other and they had two things in common. One, a solid and abiding respect for hard facts and the courage to look right at them. The other, an avoidance of any kind of emotional blackmail. So Sam knew he was going to have to get his data for himself, and that he would be told more about the situation only when he arrived at his destination.

For a brief while his attention was distracted by the seemingly endless minutiae that had to be gone through before he could take his place on the ship. The physical check was extreme and thorough, yet for all that he was carefully advised that he would be examined again, en route, yet again at Star-Jump Base, Canalopolis; and anywhere in between if and when any medical authority thought it necessary. And, should he fail any of the checks, he was liable to be sent back home without the option.

"Is this special for me because I'm a first-timer?" he asked the attractive young lady who had the task of briefing him on this.

"No, sir," she assured him, and because, for all his homeliness and self-effacement, Sam Hutten had an attraction that he, fortunately, never suspected of himself, she proceeded to explain in some detail. "You see, there are conditions, once you leave Earth, that cannot be duplicated or measured here, so there is no way of telling, for certain, how you will react to them."

"Gravity I know about," he said. "It gets less, or greater, according to the drive-rate. Zero-G. Free fall. But what are the others?"

"Radiation is one. We only know the kind of radiation that manages to get here through the atmosphere in any amount. There are all sorts of others that we know very little about, possibly a whole lot more that we can't even detect yet. And there's danger. Danger in space is utterly different from any kind we are familiar with on Earth, is contrary to all our instincts. In danger the reflex instinct is to run, to hide, or to fight, to resist."

"Adrenaline stimulus."

"That's right." She beamed on him. She was really very attractive. "In space, however, that's fatal. In hazard it is essential either that you know exactly what to do, and do it, or have the sanity to accept expert instructions from those who do know. You see? But the most baffling of all the new conditions is a thing we call space-cafard, an intense depression that seems to be the result, simply, of being away

from Earth. It's one of those crazy things, like agoraphobia."

Sam grinned at her, and never knew how she was to remember that big homely grin for months to come. "You make it sound like quite an accomplishment just to get into the ship!"

"It's not that. This is all just routine. We check as far as we can, everything we can. Then, if anything does go wrong, we are in the clear. That's all it is. I'm sure you're going to be all right, Mr. Hutten—I'm sorry, Dr. Hutten!"

"Forget the trimmings. Just a social scientist, is all. I had better be all right. If I get the screaming jim-jams halfway there and have to be sent back, I'll never live it down!"

It wasn't until after he had started out on the stroll across to the gangway that she came out of her roseate daze long enough to scan his data-card, to see that he had written *Rex Hutten. Verdan. Tau-Ceti System* as his next of kin.

"That Hutten!" she sighed. "Oh, I hope I'm on duty when he comes back, if he comes back, that is."

Despite his banter Sam really did feel he had achieved something just by getting to sit in the takeoff lounge, until a dear little old lady by his side confided in him that this was her eighteenth trip.

"Only as far as Mars and back, mind you," she admitted. "I go once every six months or so, just for the ride. It beats any sight-seeing tour on Earth that I know of. You'll like it."

Sam thanked her politely, assured her that he would try to enjoy it, and knew himself thoroughly deflated. It left his mind open again for wondering what his father wanted him for, and mild irritation with himself for wasting time on such unprofitable speculations. The routine of takeoff presented him with a small distraction. It was, he soon realized, just that, just routine. It lasted about half an hour. At no time was the thrust excessive, touching three-G only once, and that very briefly. The view from the portholes was spectacular in its way, and he appreciated it, but he had spoken truthfully when he had said he was intensely interested in people. Material events left him unmoved, largely because he didn't understand them very well. With stability and the end of jockeying for course, the intercom system came to life with words of cheer from the captain, who named himself as Bates, and went on:

"Course attitude is now established and passengers are free to leave their seats and move at will about the ship. You will find the number of your reserved cabin clearly marked on the top right-hand corner of your flight-card. During the

course of the next two hours the thrust-gravity effect will be reduced by gradual decrements, and will be stabilized at standard one-fourth Earth-normal, which will persist for the remainder of the journey. This will give you ample time to adjust to it. You will also be given ample warning in time to return to your reaction-seats and strap down preparatory to landing, which will be in approximately forty-eight hours.

“Meanwhile there are the bars, observation rooms, teleplays and book-machines for your entertainment and diversion. There are also my two co-pilots, three hostesses—and, of course, myself—always at your service in any way. I wish you a very pleasant journey. Thank you.”

Hutten freed himself from his seat, made his excuses to the veteran old lady, and went exploring to find P. thirty-eight, the designation embossed on his card. Now that the flight was actually in progress his trained mind brought back to him a flow of data on the phenomena involved. He could expect quarter-G to be a unique thrill, worth the trip in itself, something you couldn't get on Earth. Indeed, much of the attraction about space-flight was the unique opportunity it offered to escape the cloying omnipresence of convention, although the little old lady would have been shocked had he told her that. Sam smiled to himself. Social scientists could never be popular. They had an unforgivable habit of seeing the real basic urges which drove people, and discounting the euphemistic rationalizations those same people erected in their own minds to cover those same urges.

Mankind was still fighting the one war that had gone on vigorously ever since the cave: the conflict between convention and kicks, the instinctive need for security and the equally instinctive urge for excitement and thrills. Both inherent in the human pattern, both are polar opposites. Now, in a world where work was almost a forgotten word, where you had a profession or nothing, and were little worse off either way, where everything had a price and almost nothing had value any longer, space-flight alone offered two unique thrills. Reduced gravity—the lifting away of age-old weight, the too too solid flesh that Shakespeare's Hamlet had complained of, and the chance, only on a ship in space, to really feel free of the overpowering presence of multi-million-headed society. In a manner exactly analogous to the old-time sea-surface ship-voyages—now no more than a historical footnote—to embark on a small-community trip far away from the madding crowd for an extensive period of time, that in itself was an exciting, daring, romantic thing. And only possible in

space. No place on Earth, now, was more than four hours from any other place.

Sam found his cabin, small but reasonably comfortable, and sat a while to let the thoughts circle and simmer in his mind. All around he could hear the slowly growing babble of voices and movement, the occasional squeal of delight as his fellow passengers began to let their hair down. Fun for them, he thought, and with a sigh remembered that this was hardly a pleasure-jaupt for him. He took charge of his idling thoughts and scanned carefully over what little he knew about the Tau-Ceti System.

It was the first and so far the biggest plum to be pulled out of the pie made possible by the Yashi-Matsu Drive. Seventeen planets in all, and the second, third and fourth out from the primary were all well within living-tolerance limits. But colony ships cost money, a *lot* of money, so a planet had to be something better than just livable; it had to show returns, to be worth the trouble. Innermost Ophir was hot, arid, mostly sand and rock, with only a tough and tenacious vegetation for life. Water was present as fast-vanishing morning dew, or deep down below if you cared to dig for it. At first blush, not a promising prospect. But Ophir had wealth. Its surface abounded in rare-earth ores and oxides, mostly hafnium and the halogen-metal compounds. And sun-stones, which were prized equally as gems and for their rare and unique electronic properties. So Ophir was worth it.

So, too, was Zera, the outermost of the three. Chill and bleak as any Tibetan plateau, and constantly lashed with storms, Zera had set the cosmologists a puzzle they had so far been unable to solve. Although all the signs indicated that Zera had always been bleak and cold, the manifold layers of its upper mantle were thick and rich in hydrocarbons, oils, gases, tars and petroleum sources. Nowhere on the surface had life progressed any further than moss and lichen. The carboniferous deposits should not have been there. Yet there they were, and while the theoreticians argued with each other, the diggers moved in with the rigs and machinery, and the wealth began to move out in plastics, polymers and power-fuels of all kinds. Both planets were worth it as they stood, but what had made the whole system into a platinum-mine was Verdán, right in the middle.

Here was an Earth-size, Earth-type planet with neither axial tilt nor perturbing satellite. It had lush topsoil, equable climate, and no opposition in the shape of sitting tenants. Life on Verdán, apparently, had gone a parallel trail with Earth,

up as far as a minor tarsioid form, but there it had run into some kind of blind alley. Verdan was there for the taking. And the first colonists had taken, with giant-sized grabs. A small, hard-minded group of men masterminded each planet. All were rich in terms that baffled imagination to grasp. Of the three Verdan was richest; of them all, Rex Hutten was the acknowledged top, appropriately named Rex. King of the heap. And he was in some kind of trouble, enough to send a peremptory message to his son for help. Sam Hutten sighed again, and felt inadequate.

He rose from his bunk-bed restlessly and moved about the small cabin, idly reading the notices that were pasted up for his information. More routine, he thought wryly. Precautions against the million-to-one chance. He sensed a slight lessening of weight. It was pleasant, made him feel youthful.

SPACE SUIT. The heading caught his attention, in bold print above a notice stuck on the door of an upright coffin-like locker. He read halfway down the instructions, then gave way to impulse, opened the door and hauled out the floppy rubberized mass. After studying it for a few moments he thought he had the hang of it, slid his feet in the legs, pulled the rest of it up to his waist, and checked with the guidance again. Arms in there, heave up to shoulders, secure wrist-lock on each wrist then zip up the front all the way to the neck, making sure the zipper-slide is locked at the end position. He did that. He was now totally enclosed up to his chin, and peering over the rim of a high collar.

“Take the helmet in both hands,” he read aloud, “holding it so that the transparent visor is looking toward your left shoulder. Lower over head, press firmly down over collar and then rotate until visor is forward, until you hear contact-click. A small red light will switch on immediately above your eyebrows. This is all you have to do. Automatic devices will seal the helmet and suit, will activate the air-maintenance unit, and activate your talk-and-listen circuits to and from the outside. To the right of your chin is a brush-switch which will put you into radio-contact with other suits. You are now totally self-contained for twenty-four hours.’

“Just like that,” he mused. “Everything on a plate.” He studied the inside of the helmet, noting the positioning of the indicator lamp and the chin-switch and then holding the whole thing over his head in the proper manner. “What happened to all the high adventure?” He lowered the helmet. It slid smoothly into place, produced the appropriate click, and the red glow. Sound-values altered subtly. The ever-present

hum of engine-power was almost inaudible now, but the distant squeal and chatter of the other passengers still came, warped tinnily into higher frequencies. And there was a rubbery smell, reminding him of his few experiences with scuba.

"Wouldn't like to be stuck in this thing for long," he muttered, revolving slowly and clumsily to study the cabin through the face-piece. He was just raising his hands to twist the helmet off again when he noticed a winking red light. It was over there by the bunk, set into what looked like a curved section of separate paneling. He frowned at it. He didn't recall having seen it before. As he stared the light stopped flickering, came on and stayed on. There came the sudden climbing howl of a siren of some kind. Then there was a whip-like crack, a puff-burst of some smoky vapor; the curved panel-piece vanished, became a velvet-black nothingness. The smoky stuff whisked away fast. The cellular-fleece blanket from his bunk gathered itself and shot out through that black hole. He felt the shock-slam as his cabin door crashed shut. The siren wail faded out. For one awful moment an invisible hand seemed to grab him and urge him toward that awful hole. It was gone in a flash, that tugging, but fear remained as he heard his suit squeak and pop.

He knew, now, that he was surrounded by hard vacuum. That knowledge froze him absolutely rigid for a long moment, then he began edging back and away from that yawning hole. It was black, and there were stars out there, but he had no desire to get closer and look. Common sense tried to tell him that there was no further danger of being dragged out, that all the air had gone in that one swoop, but instinct insisted on fear, and he felt it sickly in his mouth. He wanted the door to open, to get through and be among people again. He reached it, wrenched at the handle. It was solid. Panic swelled in him and he wrenched again, grunting with the effort, but he might as well have tried to pull the entire door away from the bulkhead. Nothing!

Sweating profusely, he screwed down on his panic, made himself see reason. Of course the door wouldn't open. There was full atmospheric pressure on that side, vacuum on this. And even if he could open it, he would by that action release that atmosphere out through this ruptured cabin, and most probably be swept out himself in the draft, to say nothing of what it might do to the rest of the ship!

But he had to get out somehow! Panic bubbled up again, and this time he had no argument against it. What made

it more dreadful was the utter lack of sound, the silence. He was totally cut off. No one would know. How could they? Rationality snatched at that one, fast. That panel, whatever it was for, was designed to do that. Presumably it would register somewhere in the form of an alarm. Most likely in the control room. They would see it, would immediately think—he abandoned that line of thought hastily, went back to something else. Communicate! How? And he remembered the chin-switch, moved it urgently. An angrily tense voice spoke right by his ear.

“Hey, Ramon? Up off your duff and get up here fast. Some cluck has just blown an M-X. Cabin P. thirty-eight.”

“On my way. Hell, Skipper, you suppose he’s still in there?”

“Act your age! Does it matter now? Point is, you’re going to have to suit up and go out; there’s no other way. And hurry it up, before somebody gets curious and starts an alarm.”

“Right. Me for the starboard air lock. Out.”

“Corinne? You hear that?”

“I heard, Skipper.” This a crisp but feminine voice.

“Check P. thirty-eight, will you? On the list, I mean. . . .”

“Hey!” Sam Hutten found his voice with an effort. “Can you hear me? Is that the captain?”

“Who the hell is that?”

“The passenger in P. thirty-eight. I never touched that M-X thing at all. It just blew; I was watching it!”

There was a long and roaring silence, then the first voice demanded unsteadily, “Where are you speaking from, mister?”

“I’m in a suit.”

“A suit?”

“That’s right. I was just trying it on when that panel blew out. I’m all right. I think.”

“You think? Mister, when it comes my turn I should hope to be so lucky. Wait. Stay there. Ramon, you read me?”

“Right, Skipper, just buttoning up.”

“Hold it and listen. Mister—what did you say your name was?”

“I didn’t. I’m Sam Hutten.”

“That checks, Skipper.” Corinne’s voice again.

“All right, Mr. Hutten, listen close. You can’t get out of that cabin, and we can’t get in, until the door is closed. It’s an emergency exit, what I’ve been calling M-X. Right?”

Nothing can be done until it is shut again. And you can do that. I'll tell you how. It's easy. Go over to the opening."

"Do I have to?" Sam stared uneasily at the blackness and sighed. "All right, I'm going."

He shuffled across the cabin to the bunk, edged around it with the backs of his knees pressing against its far edge. The black rectangle loomed enormously. He got his left shoulder solidly against the firmness of the bulkhead and tried not to look down.

"Now what?"

"Look out. You will see the panel standing out at right-angles to the hull. In the middle of it is a black box bearing a knob. See it?"

Sam gulped, looked and mumbled, "I see it."

"Right. Reach out and get hold, turn that knob clockwise. That's all you have to do. At its present setting that door is designed to open outward at zero pressure. When you turn that knob—clockwise, remember—it will cycle shut by itself. Right? Go ahead, now."

Sam stared, felt dry and wobbly, shifted delicately until he could get a rubber-fingered grip on the edge of the bunk, and then leaned nauseatingly out, reaching for the knob. He almost forgot which way was clockwise. He turned, and the panel started smoothly and slowly back toward him. He edged back from it. The gaping blackness and stars went away. He sat.

"What now?" he mumbled. "The red light is still on."

"That's all right. That's the pressure-drop alarm. I will start air-inflow manually from here. The light will go out as soon as your pressure is back up to normal. You'll be all right, but keep that suit on until I say. Be about ten minutes. By that time one of us will be along with the proper equipment to fix that door."

Sam sagged on his bunk. He felt wet now, and shivery. And sick. He could hardly breathe. "I don't like this suit," he said uneasily. "It stinks, and it's giving me a thick head."

"That's mostly imagination, Mr. Hutten. You'll be all right."

Imagination or not, Sam grew sicker. His face-plate fogged up until he couldn't see the red light. Bands grew around his chest. There came a sizzling sound in his ears. And then everything seemed to go blurred and dreamy.



### III

HUTTEN came back to consciousness in the most pleasant way possible, opening his eyes to the concerned gaze of a very pretty girl, her bright blue eyes lighting in a smile as he blinked at her.

"Very good," she said, as if he had done something clever. "Are you feeling better now, Dr. Hutten?"

"I think so." He tried to sit up but she put a flat hand on his chest and pressed him back.

"Not just yet. You've had a hard time. Better let the doctor talk to you first. Dr. Yoshawi?"

A brown-faced Japanese came, calm and quiet, his hands and movements deft and sure. Hutten frowned, then remembered.

"You're a passenger, Doctor, aren't you? I'm sorry to have intruded my business into your leisure."

"Quite all right. And, happy to say, so are you. For a while you had symptoms of acute cyanosis, but all gone now. Rest for a while, but you can get up when you feel good enough."

"Cyanosis?"

"Shortage of oxygen for breathing. Similar to suffocation. Possibly you did something wrong in your space suit. All right now. Happy to have been of service."

He went away and the blue eyes came back, still smiling. Hutten dug back into his memory, recalling the oppressive smell, the tight-band sensation around his chest and head. He had a dream-like memory of someone lifting him up, unscrewing his helmet, of muttering "Good grief, what a stench!" But he was certain he had done everything just so, in that suit. Blue-eyes had said something and he had missed it.

"Sorry, what was that?"

"I said you can sit up. I'll get some coffee along. But you mustn't try anything ambitious yet. Anyway, Captain Bates wants to talk to you, so you'd better stay here for a while."

Hutten sat up, swung his legs over the side of the cot, and was aware of lightness, a pleasant insubstantiality. He took in the room, the white walls, the other three trim beds, the cabinet of bottles and instruments.

"Sick bay?" he queried.

"We don't get to use it much, except as a place to hide in when the wolves howl too hard." She widened her smile as if to assure him that he was excluded from the class of undesirables. "We get the odd passenger feeling nauseous from low G, but that's about all. How do you feel now?"

"Great. I'm getting the feel of the quarter-G. You said something about coffee?"

"I'll order it up right away, and call Captain Bates, too. You just sit still now."

She went across the room to a wall-phone and he had his first chance to really look at her. She was well worth it. Her gossamer-sheer skin-suit in silver shimmer clung to her shape with electro-static intimacy, the currently fashionable way for avoiding the feminine bugbears of wrinkles and sags, and her micro-skirt and bolero jacket were token garments only, not intended to conceal anything. Her curves may not have been sensational on Earth, but they certainly were now, freed from three-fourths of the downward drag of gravity. Fascinated, he watched the lazy flutter of her hair, the syrupy flow of folds around the hem of her brief skirt, and the engrossing way in which resilient curves surged and bounced, rippling and contra-rotating—and he began to feel light-headed. He had heard it said by others that the first experience of low-G was like a glorious binge—but without the visual blur, and he could now appreciate what the speaker had meant.

Finishing her message, she turned and came undulating back to him, to halt and stare a little as she caught the look on his face.

"Captain Bates will be right down. Are you all right, Mr. Hutten?"

"Apart from a slight case of blood-pressure, I'm fine. Miss . . . ?"

"Vandy. Norma Vandy." She came closer, put the back of a cool hand to his brow, and it felt like ice.

"Don't come too near," he warned. "I think I have been confined to the cloisters far too long. Tell me"—he sought hurriedly for something safe to think about—"I was given to understand that I would be liable to medical examination at any time, possibly during the journey, so how come you had to rope in a civilian doctor just now? Don't you carry one?"

"We're all trained, all the staff, up to the specified limits. We called Dr. Yoshawi because he happened to be handy and because we wanted a second opinion, just in case. Nobody should suffocate in a space suit!" She stood back a

pace or two and he averted his eyes firmly. "Do you have a powerful imagination, Mr. Hutten?"

The click of the door announced Bates, just in time to rescue Sam from a hopeless situation. The senior pilot looked grim as he came across and sat on a low stool by the bunk.

"If you're fit for it, Mr. Hutten, I'd like a full explanation. How the hell—you'll excuse me—did you gimmick that M-X?"

"Don't *you* know what happened?"

"We've examined the pressure-switch, yes, but I'd like to hear your account first. Go ahead."

"Very well." Sam thought carefully, repeated all he could remember, and Bates looked grimmer with every word, made him repeat the moment where he had seen the brief puff of vapor. "At a guess I'd say it was some kind of explosive charge, wouldn't you?"

"I like this less the more I think of it," Bates growled, twisting his cap in his hands. Miss Vandy interrupted them with coffee and then sat herself at the end of the bunk to listen.

"There is no explosive content of any kind to that door switch, as designed, Mr. Hutten. It's part of our job to know all that side of the ship like a book. I've checked out that lock along with a co-pilot, and it has both of us baffled. The nearest we can guess is that some ham-fisted technician left a bit of loose wire sculling, and it just happened to shift and drop in such a way as to short out the whole works."

"I'd be prepared to accept that, Captain."

"You might, but I wouldn't. Our technical staff doesn't do things like that. Everything is double-checked before we leave ground. And that switch-gear is designed as near as possible to be absolutely foolproof."

"Lucky I happened to be wearing that suit, then."

"Lucky isn't the word for it. That's what made me curious, Mr. Hutten. Look, without being too technical, let me explain this much. For a ship to get holed enough to lose atmosphere is itself a rarity. Most impacts are absorbed by the outer skin. If a chunk of something is big enough to get all the way into a cabin our detectors would show it anyway. And it would make a small hole, and a slow leak. That switch-gear is designed to handle just that. Any drop in pressure triggers off the alarm, in your cabin and on my bridge, and there's time enough to warn you to suit up and stay put. Because the cabin door automatically seals, and isolates the holed region from the rest of the ship. Then,

when the pressure is at zero, the emergency-exit circuit flips the door open and either you come out or we come in and get you—and the rest of the ship stays safe. But there is no sudden decompression, no whoosh out like you describe. The thing just can't work like that. But it did. And I have to believe you, Mr. Hutten, after examining the interior of that switch-gear."

"All right, so it was an accident."

Bates twisted his cap more. "We've checked back on you, Mr. Hutten. You can't be too careful, these days. But you're a big man. You could buy and sell this spaceline with your small change. One wrong word from you and we would all be out of a job."

"Me?" Sam frowned, and then slowly realized that the captain was right, in his way. The only son of Rex Hutten would be regarded as a power figure. He didn't feel it, but that was his own side of it. Other people felt it strongly. "I'm quite prepared to accept that it was an accident."

"Yeah. Well, all right. But a sub-etheric will go back to the spaceport, and it will crackle, believe me. There will be an inquisition. Whoever serviced this flight had better have his walking-boots ready. No spaceline can afford a name for accidents like that."

"That's your business." Sam shrugged uncomfortably. "I have no desire to make trouble, I assure you. I was extremely lucky. But there is just one more thing I ought to mention."

"What?"

"The suit. The way I reacted in there might give somebody the idea that I'm not fit, space-wise. And it is important that I get to Tau-Ceti. So I maintain that it was not nerves or imagination on my part, that there is something wrong with that suit, too."

Bates showed by his face that he didn't care for the suggestion, but he nodded. Then Miss Vandy murmured her bit of additional evidence, reporting what the doctor had said about suffocation.

"All right," the captain growled. "Come to think of it, Ramon did say something about a stink when he opened you up. And you weren't in there any more than fifteen minutes. All right, it will be checked. Don't you worry, Mr. Hutten, I personally will check every damned nut and bolt on this ship. And headquarters is going to hear about this, you can believe me!"

He went away angrily. Miss Vandy stood, put on a resolute smile.

"Lunch is being served right now, Mr. Hutten, if you feel up to it. Out of here you turn sharp right and follow the corridor. Or I can have something sent in, if you'd prefer that?"

Her words plunged Sam into a completely new kind of dilemma for him. On the one hand was this extremely attractive young woman, and the prospect of sharing lunch with her, talking to her, getting used to the overpowering proximity of devastating females, because he was acute enough to realize that this was merely a foretaste of what he could expect as the journey developed. It was experience that he badly needed, a distinct change from academic life. On the other hand he was also acute enough to give heed to his logical faculties. One accident could be just that. But two together smelled the same way the suit had. He had to await the official checkout, but he was certain in his own mind that the suit had been in some way defective. And that pointed to only one thing. No accident, but a deliberate attempt to kill him.

And that thought was so utterly outrageous that his mind just couldn't wear it for a long while. He had to assemble evidence to convince himself. First the enigmatic ethergram from his father. Then Bates pointing out that he, Sam Hutten, was a big man in the eyes of the outside world. The old man must be well-off for enemies, but that aspect had never before occurred to him. It did now, with such force that he put it to Miss Vandy.

"Why would anyone want to kill me?"

Her smile faltered, enough to assure him that the same thought had already struck her. "You mustn't think that," she cautioned.

"Why not? Miss Vandy, I'm not the kind of stuff they use to make heroes, nor am I designed for intrigue, but I can think. I can add up the obvious. And this is obvious: somebody tried to kill me. What I do not understand is why. Can you suggest anything?"

"I suggest you stay right here and I'll have your lunch sent in." Miss Vandy firmed up her smile and started to move away to the communicator. "After all, if someone is trying to kill you, you'll be safer in here."

"Doesn't necessarily follow," he disagreed. "Whatever technician fixed the gadgetry did it on Earth and is not here now. *That* danger is past. I think I will go to lunch."

It was a new experience, just walking in low-G, and he appreciated it, but he was pleased with himself more for having applied ruthless logic to a personal problem. It would have been easy, and pleasant, to hide in the sick bay with delectable company. But he had overcome that temptation, and his fear, by simple reasoning. And he felt strengthened thereby as he made his way to the dining room space. He even managed to look tolerantly on the antics of the younger people who were making spectacular fun out of the diminished gravity. Walking was difficult. To get from one place to another in slow-flying leaps was easier, if not so decorous. And it provided ample excuse for squealing collisions and clutchings, and the ideal excuse for maximum exposure. The travelers were making the most of it. Sam settled himself at a side-table, punched the dispenser for something simple and light, and watched his fellow passengers making spectacles of themselves. Just across from him a party of four was becoming hilarious over a wine game. In one-fourth-G it was possible, with care, to pour and drink wine. They thought it a lot more fun to throw it, a small glassful at a time, at each other, the trick being to catch the slow-forming, wobbling globe of liquid on the end of a straw and drink it before it escaped.

He watched one of the girls, blonde and giggling, wriggle herself to be right under one slow-dropping pink globule, aim the straw up at it, and then break into helpless giggles just when she should have started sucking, so that the globe of wine broke and ran, syrupy-slow, along the straw, all over her chin, and then down her front. As she was wearing nothing but a wisp-sheer nylon allover, with a few embroidered flowers here and there, the pink stuff flowed and melted into a skin-gleam effect. Hutten looked away. And he had thought the hostess's outfit outrageous? This, he mused, was the modern equivalent of what had once been known as the jet-set. He believed they called themselves outers, but wasn't sure. That was the trouble with social history: you could never catch up on it. As fast as you learned your material, so it went twisting away in some other direction. He had a theory about all that, something nebulous at the moment but which he hoped to work up into a thesis someday.

For countless generations now, the pattern had always been that the older people deplored the decay of moral values in the young, using the term "decay" to mean "different." Philosophers had been ready and willing to point

out that there could be no such thing as any absolute standard of moral behavior, that the whole structure of ethical-moral values emerged from the social environment, changing as it changed. It sounded rational, but Hutten had long had his suspicions about it. Why, he had asked himself, have a set of ethical-moral standards at all? The threefold answer was well known to freshman students of sociology. A value-code serves (a) to reassure the individual that he is doing "the right thing," (b) to keep society functioning as a coherent system, and (c) to serve as protection against the irrational and mysterious section of the environment, the magical or supernatural side.

Which was fine, he mused, until you went on from there into a fully permissive outlook like today, where anything and everything was "right" so long as it didn't harm anyone else; where society was increasingly held together by mechanism rather than individual choice; and where there was diminishingly less of the magical element. In such circumstances the whole concept of right and proper was itself obsolete. He came out of his reverie with a start as Captain Bates halted by his table and sat.

"You were right about the suit," he said abruptly. "Sabotaged in exactly the same way. The pressure-sensor had been bollixed. It didn't come on when the outside pressure fell off, so you had no air-supply system at all. And in seven years experience I have never known that to happen before."

"That can only mean one thing, can't it?"

"Right. Same type of sabotage points to one man doing both, makes it a deliberate attempt against you, Mr. Hutten. The information has already been relayed back, and Earthside security will get on to it. With any luck they ought to be able to catch the guy who did it. If you want to notify your legal representatives . . . ?"

"What for? The thing is over and done with. I'm sure your security people will do a good job on it. In the meantime, what about my cabin arrangements?"

"That's all fixed. Your stuff has been transferred to one of the director suites, on the upper level by the bridge. That's the least we can do. Corinne will fix you up. That's Corinne Eklund, the Swedish ice-goddess type, looks statuesque and cold, but she's quite a girl when you get to know her. I'll ask her to come and collect you, show you where the suite is." Bates stood, his square-planed face struggling with unusual emotions. "Mr. Hutten, I don't know how to

say this, but I hope this isn't going to bounce back on us. You know what I mean? Man like you is bound to have enemies, and you may be used to the notion, but in all the years I've been flying I've never had any cases of violence. High spirits, sure, but nothing to cause a stink. That's one kind of publicity we don't want."

"Publicity? Captain, I have not the slightest intention of making a public issue of this, believe me. And please understand something else. Rex Hutten is my father, true, but I'm just a doctor of sociology, no financial tycoon. I have no enemies that I know of, and this whole business is a complete mystery to me. I haven't the ghost of a clue why anyone would want to kill me."

"You know your own business best, but if what you say is true then how do you explain this?" And he drew out a flimsy slip of paper from his tunic and handed it over. Hutten unfolded and read, wide-eyed:

*Origin Interplanetary Security Bureau: Geneva: Via Bates. G. C/O Earth-Mars shuttle Martian Three: To Dr. Sam Hutten: Our agent meeting u Canalopolis. Will be responsible your safety. Code Ipomoea. Strongly advise utmost discretion.* For signature, there was only the cryptic scribble *Director, P/C*. Hutten read it again, and it still didn't make sense.

"I know there is an Interplanetary Security Bureau," he admitted; "I've heard of it. But why should they send some agent or other to meet me? And what's this at the bottom?"

"I don't know that one either." Bates shrugged. "But I have instructions to render all possible cooperation to anyone with authorization from *that!* I believe that is true of all ship captains. Anyway, that came for me personal and in code. Nobody else knows about it except you and whoever sent it. You say you don't understand it?"

"That's not strictly true," Sam murmured. "Obviously my father has stirred up some kind of agitation. He's in a position to do just that. And I'm involved, like it or not. And I do not like it. I don't get involved in things, dammit! I'm a scholar, not a secret agent! So I'm being mixed up in something—and my only hope is that this agent, whoever he is, will be able to explain. But please understand, Captain, this is none of my doing, and, if it is within my power, nothing of this will be used to create publicity about this ship, or the shipping line."

"All right." Bates sighed. "If you say so. Hah, there's Corinne now. If you've finished . . . ?"



"Ready whenever you like. I could do with somewhere quiet to sit and think for a while."

Bates made a signal and the hostess came swooping through the frolic of passengers. Hutten took one good look and realized that Bates had understated the facts. Miss Eklund was of a shape and design to make even the most blasé of the outer males turn and enjoy a second glance. Her silver suit fitted like a layer of paint over curves that stopped just a breath short of impossible. Silver-blond hair hugged her head in a mass of curls. Ice-blue eyes looked incuriously at him and then at Bates.

"Corinne, this is Dr. Hutten, the chap who nearly blew it in P. thirty-eight. Will you show him to his new cabin, please?"

"That's D. three," she said, nodding. "I've just come from there. It's all ready for you, Dr. Hutten. This way."

She led him from the lounge and up two companionways and to the top deck, then to a cabin-suite three times as large as the one he had originally been allocated. His minimum hand-luggage was already there. She waited for him to look around, then asked, "Is there anything I can get you, sir?"

"Not now, but you can explain something, perhaps. Captain Bates seems to be unduly sensitive in the matter of adverse publicity. Why?"

"That's very simple. Competition is fierce for shipping lines, and this line is one of the top five. Captain Bates has quite a lot of his savings invested in shares, and is in line for retirement from flying duties—hoping to be promoted to the directorial board. A black mark against our reputation could make all the difference to him."

"I see." He sat on the bunk and reflected. Miss Eklund came nearer.

"If there's anything you want, anything at all . . ."

He looked up, understood her meaning and looked away again. "All part of the service, I suppose?"

"Not quite, but one is supposed to make special efforts for special passengers. I have an hour." Her fingers moved to the hairline zipper at her throat, and he shook his head.

"No reflection on you, miss, but I have other things to think about. Tell me, why would anyone want to kill me? Why me?"

"That's simple too, basically. To stop you from getting to Verdun, of course. You will call me if you need me, won't you?"

## IV

NO DOUBT the Dome-Cities of Canalopolis were worth the trip just to see, Sam Hutten reflected moodily, as he sat at his solitary table, sipping a drink he didn't want and waiting for this mysterious agent to show up. In the academic sense he knew a great deal about this sprawling establishment of geodesic domes, vast insubstantial shells held in place by a few-ounce difference in air pressure between Earth-normal inside and Martian attenuation outside. He knew about the opportunities for vice and dissipation of all kinds which flourished here, outside the jurisdiction of any law, frowned on from afar by the outraged majority, but surviving simply because one had to be reasonably wealthy even to get this far, and wealthy people, always, are apt to take a poor view of legislators who get overly ambitious to cut down their pleasures.

Many legislative bodies of many countries had tried, often, to bring Mars within some standard frame of jurisdiction, and had failed. The planet was just not worth the time, trouble and money it would have cost to remake it into a living area for ordinary people. It was chilly, arid, storm-scraped and devoid of almost anything of commercial value. The soil, if you could call it that, wouldn't grow anything worth planting. There was water, if you cared to dig deep enough, or had power to waste in blasting it out of composition. A long drawn-out and much haggled over scheme was in operation, and had been operational for ten years, on a shoestring budget, to peel off the unlimited store of ice-berg asteroids to be found in the Belt, and to send them plummeting down, one at a time, into the dusty atmosphere of the Red Planet. In another two decades, perhaps, the effect would be visible. In a century, possibly, the planet might begin to bloom. *If* the Rainmaker Project kept going that long.

Meanwhile Mars was dusty, drab and dead, useful only for the ideal Star-Jump Base. Sam knew the factors involved in that, too. Lesser gravity pull counted, of course, but had that been the only consideration, Luna would have served.

Unfortunately, Earth's moon, like Earth herself, was too deep within the solar plasma to make it practical. To twist any object as massive as a ship into the uniqueness of the Yashi-Matsu subspace state involved not only an immense number of highly delicate calculations, but an enormous investment of energy. To try it within the swirling storm of high-energy particles and fields of the solar plasma wind was asking for disaster, and several test-objects had met just that in the early experimental days. It needed somewhere sufficiently free of stray energies, yet not impractically distant, somewhere solid to form a base, somewhere reachable, where a base *could* be established. It needed Mars.

So Star-Jump Base itself had been forced into being by hard necessity, and was kept in being by economic need. Ships came here from Earth to drop passengers and to take them back. Ships leaped off from here to all parts of the explored galaxy. The base itself was interplanetary territory. But there had been astute people only too quick to see other possibilities. People in transit need something to entertain them while waiting. People who travel to the stars have money in quantity. Ships have crews. Crews have money too, and entertainment needs, diversions, something to amuse them. Sam knew all this, and, in any other circumstances, he would have welcomed this opportunity to exercise his favorite pastime, observing other people with their hair down. But somebody had tried to kill him, and that thought made a difference. It made all the difference, now that it had had time to grow.

He was angry as well as fearful. The situation was unfair. He had spent most of his adult life steadfastly refusing to get involved in any power-play, denying his father's heritage, devoting himself simply to the peaceful pursuit of his chosen profession. And now! He watched a stubby cylindrical robot trundle past and disappear into the base of a nearby upright column. It carried food and drinks at the bidding of some party or other up there at a balcony table. The interior of this dome was full of towering tubes, with balcony-rings arranged at fifteen-foot intervals all the way up to the curved roof. People rode up the center elevator to whichever table-floor they had chosen, the service-robots shot up by one or other of the hoist-tubes which ringed the center, and the place buzzed with activity, with chatter, with the hum of the little trundling things.

Anthill, he mused. All dashing to and fro in pursuit of something they can't define, to satisfy some appetite or other.

Robots all, just a lot of stimulus-response mechanisms. Where the devil was that agent? Was this the right dome, anyway? There were others, offering more exotic ways of passing the time, possibly more interesting but hopeless from the point of view of being singled out and met. He drained his glass, an unimaginative vodka-and-lime, and wondered whether to order again. Here, on the ground-level and quite close to the beltway from the base, he could see people coming and going, but it would have made more sense had he known whom to look for.

"Dr. Hutten?"

Sam looked up, startled, to see a tall, smooth-faced man standing by his table. A big man. A man totally devoid of any expression, like a flesh-colored statue, all in black well-fitting plastic.

"I'm Dr. Hutten, yes. Who're you?"

"Will you come with me, please. My master wishes to speak to you."

"Your what?" Sam stared. "Master? Who's he?"

"Dr. Orbert Venner. Column three, second level. Will you follow me, please." The imperturbable giant wheeled and paced away, managing to be very steady and sure over the expanded-foam floor. Sam scrambled to his feet and followed not nearly so gracefully. One-third-G and an eighteen-inch thick layer of resilient foam made a treacherous combination for walking, but most of the confusion was in his mind. He had heard of Venner, presiding genius of Venelec, one of the biggest electronic specialists of the Northern Hemisphere. It was said that Venelec had either originated or contributed to every major advance in solid-state physics in the past ten years, and that to work for Venner was a full order of magnitude more imposing than any parchment degree. Once in the elevator compartment, Sam scowled at his guide and wanted to ask questions but was deterred by the utter indifference of this big man. Some kind of valet, possibly. Or bodyguard. Six foot six, solidly made, machine-like calm, and handsome as the devil, if you admired stone-carving styles. And the suit, a simple blouse-and-pants combination, never came from any auto-fab clothier, but had been cut and built by a master-craftsman. But who, in this day and age, called any other man *master*?

There was only one table on the semicircular balcony, and one man seated at it. Sam Hutten took a good look and stared again, for if this was the master he was just as eccentric, in a completely different way, as his massive servant.

An old man, small and rotund, with wild spikes of white hair fringing a bald pate, a jutting white goatee beard, and all the apple-cheek wrinkles to make him a goblin, but for the fact that, unlike any gnome Sam had ever heard of, this one chewed on a stump of cigar. And grinned with gleaming white teeth as he waved a hand.

"Dr. Hutten! Good of you to come. Sit. Joe, order up. What'll you have, Doctor?"

"Make mine orange. I don't hold much in the way of alcohol, and I have already had one."

"That's fine. Make that two, Joe, one for yourself. I'll stick with what I have here. Allow me, Dr. Hutten. I'm Orbert Venner."

"So your man told me. Will you make this brief, Mr. Venner. I'm here to meet someone."

Venner chuckled, brought his hand out from a baggy pocket and dropped three tiny black things on the polished tabletop. "Take a close look," he invited. "Know what they are?"

"Seeds of some kind?" Sam hazarded, and the old man chuckled again.

"Right. Seeds of a small flowering plant allied to the convolvulus family. If those seeds had come from the Earth-grown variety I would be in order to call them Morning Glory. But they didn't grow on Earth. I don't know—nor does anyone, yet—whether they are Earth natives transplanted, or a similar plant but native to where those were found. So, for the present, I'll use the scientific name, and call them *Ipomoea*."

"Hah?" Sam blinked as the word rang a faint bell. Then he remembered. It had been mentioned in that cryptic ethergram. *Code Ipomoea*. Venner, his bright old eyes not missing a thing, nodded slowly.

"That's right, Dr. Hutten. You've been met."

"You—you are an agent of—"

"Don't say it. Let me." Venner was very quick. "You had an ethergram from I.S.B., and it mentioned an agent, me, and a code word. That ought to be enough to establish my identity, right? Ah, Joe. Just put them down here a moment. Now, pay attention, Joe. Don't look now, but there's a young woman on the second level of the next column, back of me, who is paying far too much attention to us to be honest. Vivid black hair and red cape. And she has what looks like a shotgun mike on us, too, or my eyes are failing me. Go get her, will you? Bring her here."

Speechless, Sam stared over the old man's shoulder and saw the woman in question. She was about fifteen feet away, leaning with apparent negligence on the balcony rail, one hand to her temple to prop up her head as if in reverie, but now that his attention had been called to it, there was something in that hand, something metallic. And she was, even at that long range, vividly attractive. Joe departed silently.

"If she is snooping," Sam pointed out, "then she just heard you, and can hear me, or read my lips, or something."

"Nobody can read lips at this distance without magnification, son. And her mike won't tell her a thing either. Soon as I suspected she was getting too interested I switched on a squealer. In my pocket here. You can't hear it, but that mike can, and all she hears is a scrambled buzz, just enough to be frustrating, but not enough to let her know she has been stymied. Routine precaution for me. You'd be surprised at the number of people who want to know what I'm talking about at times."

"She's getting a pair of micro-glasses now," Sam reported. "What do I do? I have a thousand questions to ask, but I don't want to say anything I shouldn't."

"You catch on fast. I like that. Helps. Joe will fix her in a minute or two. Meanwhile, I can talk freely enough. You ever hear of Happy Sugar?"

"Of course. I've heard of it, and what it's supposed to do, but I'm afraid I don't really know anything *about* it. Why?"

"I bet I know a lot more about it than you do, Hutten, but even I do not know nearly enough. Let's hear you, though."

"Well." Sam reflected, gathered his data accurately by long habit, and delivered it. "Happy Sugar is the common name given to the latest in a long line of psychedelic chemicals. That's fact; the rest is informed conjecture. The discernible effects are to produce in the subject a state of relaxed bliss and satisfaction that does not, so far as can be seen, impair in any way the affective or motor capabilities. So far as is known there are no deleterious physical effects. The many casualties attributable to the drug have been found to be due to its encouragement of innate tendencies. By that I mean, suppose somebody was suicide-bent but lacking the confidence to go ahead and do it. The drug would give him the confidence to do what he had wanted to do all along. The state of mind is describable as not

giving a damn. So far as I know, no one knows where the stuff comes from, what it is chemically, or who, if anybody, is producing it. Those who get hooked on it won't talk. It is only guesswork that it is passed in the form of adulterated sugar, hence the name. That's about it, I think."

"Sounds to me like you halfway approve of the stuff!"

"I didn't say that."

"No." Venner chewed his cigar aside and grimaced. "But the tone of voice didn't register offense. It should have."

"Why?" Sam demanded. "I don't take drugs myself, at all, but that is my good fortune, nothing else. I can well understand anyone who wants to get away from reality. Even you, Mr. Venner. And that stuff." Sam pointed to the glass. "Alcohol, no matter how you dress it up, is the basic stuff in all drinks-for-pleasure, and its effect is to depress the critical faculties, is a blurring of reality. I don't have that need. It's not something for me to be proud of, just a fact of circumstance. But it doesn't give me the right to condemn anyone else. If you want to stun your faculties with alcohol it's up to you. If somebody wants to be happy—or should I say happier?—with some drug or other, who am I to point a finger?"

"Hmm!" Venner gnawed his cigar savagely. "You ivory-tower boys can always make a good case. Trouble is, you don't know enough. You can feel easy in your mind about paper data, but you wouldn't, if you could see the human wreckage at first hand."

"You seem to know who I am," Sam retorted stiffly. "You should know, therefore, that I am a social scientist. I am acquainted with the raw material that you speak of. I think I can claim to know as much about people as ever you do, sir!"

"Scientist?" Venner growled it irritably. "You sociologists like to think you have a science, but what have you really got, apart from a few ineffective and opinionated guesses?"

"Don't argue science with me, Mr. Venner," Sam warned. "You'll come out knotted. I've met your kind before."

"Hah!" The old man's grin was now definitely gnomish. "Science is neutral—has to be, by definition. And how can it be neutral when the experimental matter is human beings, huh? Science! You don't know what you're talking about!"

"Indeed!" Sam felt suddenly easy and calm. He sat back. "Do me the favor of keeping quiet for just a few minutes, sir, and I will have the decided pleasure of showing you

that you are a stupid old fool. A pleasure, because you have asked for it—and because it is seldom that I get the chance to put a thick-skulled diehard through the mill. No that it will achieve anything, because a man your age is far too old to change his mental habits, but it might just give you something to think about. Well?”

Venner's apple-cheeks flushed with color, his sharp eye glittered, and the cigar twitched as he bit on it. “Put me through the mill? I'm a thick-skulled diehard, am I? Why you—”

Sam reached out and raised his palm, close to the table surface, his gaze intent over the old man's shoulder. “That's served its purpose, sir,” he said. “Your man is just approaching the lady now. She'll do no more snooping for a while.”

“Huh?” Venner froze, then whipped a hand into his pocket and brought out a flat slim box, touched it, laid it on the table. They both heard the big man's voice, still serenely calm

“—along with me, please. My master wishes to speak with you.”

“Your master?” The astonished reply was in a clear, slightly strident tone. “What is this, some kind of gag?”

“Quite a routine, that.” The old man chuckled. “Always gets them. She will be along, you'll see. Meanwhile”—and he touched the eavesdropper into silence—“we will take up that other matter. You were going to show me, Hutten, that I am a stupid old fool, I think?”

“That also was a routine, sir. To give her some intriguing conversation to listen to, just in case. Of course, if you really want me to take you apart, philosophically speaking, I'd be happy to oblige. But surely you have something more important to discuss, else why the ethergram.”

Venner was puzzled now, his jutting white brows coming hard down over his eyes. “Playing games with me, eh?”

“Matching you, sir, nothing more. You are playing some game that involves masquerading as an agent of the Interplanetary Security Bureau. Fun for you, I dare say. For me it isn't quite so amusing. Someone made a hard try at killing me just a few hours ago. I'm in no mood for humor.”

“We'll talk about that in a while, soon as we have disposed of the long-eared female. Right now you'd better get this. I am an agent of ISB, no game about that, but genuine. Think a bit. Who better to wander freely all over creation, with nobody to ask why, or interfere, than a man in my position?”

“Head of a busy and thriving electronics industry?”



“Hah! I pick my staff from people who can be relied on to get along by themselves. I show my face every once in a while, just to ginger them up a bit, and I keep in touch. But most of the time I travel. The story is that I have to keep track of developments all over. And I do, too. But I do a lot of other things on the side, and Security stuff is one of them. Happy Sugar, and those seeds, and you and your father—are all tied up and part of my business. Probably involved in the attempt to kill you, too, but that’s to be seen. So I am not playing games, Hutten. Bear it in mind. As they used to say in the old dramas, this is a matter of life and death. Meanwhile, however, and just to entertain our lady snoop, and me, would you kindly go ahead with your promise to take me apart and see what makes me tick!”

“If you insist.” Sam shrugged and then rose politely to his feet as the massive manservant came, escorting the lady from the distant balcony. At close hand she was just as vivid as when seen at a distance, but now the fine detail lent additional interest. Her hair, so black as to yield blue highlights in its gloss, was piled high on her head yet arranged to show the shape of her forehead and ears. A broad brow, smooth over snapping dark eyes, a chiseled nose, a mouth that could have been sensuous but was now set in hard determination that matched her chin’s, all went well with her movements, lithe and aggressive. Her elbow-length cape, bright scarlet, was caught at her throat with a bronze buckle to match the pseudo-bronze belt that held her brief frill of skirt. That scanty swirl about her hips, and the skin-close tights she wore, were all in bronze-sparkle red stuff, against which her glow-tan skin gleamed like oiled silk.

“My name,” she declared strongly, “is Louise Martinez, and I don’t know what kind of game you think you’re playing, but it had better be good. I am not exactly a naïve innocent, I warn you.”

“Sit down, Miss Martinez. I’m Orbert Venner. This is Dr. Hutten, and that’s Joe. Naïve or not, I’m going to want to hear why you were spying on me and Dr. Hutten, here. *Your* explanation had better be good. Don’t try to deny it, or I’ll have Joe search you and destroy any recordings you may have made. Remember, in case it had slipped your mind, that this area is outside the law. But we’ll get to you later. Right now Dr. Hutten is going to show me that I am a fool. A stupid old fool and a thick-skulled diehard. I am looking forward to it.”

Sam flicked a glance at the impassive manservant, looking for possible opposition, but the giant was just as indif-

ferent as ever. He sat back, took a moment to gather his thoughts, to decide whether or not to let the old man have it hot and strong. If he *was* an agent of ISB, and a possible source of help . . . ? But no, he had asked for it.

"Very well," he said, as he would have addressed a troublesome pupil. "You stated, categorically, two stupid opinions. Several others arising from them we can ignore. The two will suffice. In one you claimed to have more authority than I to speak of and about science, implying that you are a scientist and I am not. In the other you claimed that science is neutral. Do you wish to modify either of those positions now?"

"I'll stand on those. Science is neutral, has got to be. And if you are a scientist, how come none of your stuff works?"

"Very well. You, sir, are not a scientist, and never were. Science is the organized attempt of mankind to discover how things work. The operative term is 'discover how', in that phrase. You, and the firm you manage, make things work. There is a difference. You may call yourself a technician, an engineer, a gadgeteer even, but not a scientist. You may, from time to time, wonder how or why a thing works, but that is only part of the time. Your main interest is in making something work—*not* in explaining it.

"On the other hand I *am* a scientist, in that my only pre-occupation is to find out how things work, to explain them in some coherent and consistent manner. In my case the subject matter happens to be people and societies, and my task to understand and explain. Not to manipulate. *That* is for technicians to do. The technicians in this instance are statesmen, politicians, economists, advertisers, salesmen, propagandists of all kinds. Their rate of success is about on a level with the old-time alchemists' in chemistry, but that is up to them, not me. You could never have driven a theory into the old school of alchemy because the practitioners themselves believed that what they were doing was mysterious, magical and non-logical. Modern people-controllers still think this way. They talk about personal magnetism, and inspirational power and so on. Which disposes of your first statement.

"Science is *not* neutral. All decisions affecting any proposed course of action are valueless unless based on a precise awareness of the forces involved, and that requires science. Science is just as emotional, as passionate as any other human activity. It differs only in what it seeks to do. It is *not* concerned with making money, creating power, achieving fame, rescuing the underdog, nor in producing beauty or harmony in sound, image or form. It is concerned simply with finding

out how things work. And that can be the hardest thing in the world. But positive. Not neutral!"

"My stuff works. Yours doesn't!" Venner retorted. "You explain that, if you can, Hutten."

"That is very simple, sir, When you put together a solid-state circuit, for example, it either works the way you want it to, or you scrap it. It does not argue with you. It does not claim to know more about how it should work than you do. The layman may fear, and even actively oppose, the laboratory scientist, but he has to give in to the fact that he does not know, most of the time, what the lab scientist is doing, or talking about. In social science, on the other hand, he believes he knows as much about it, if not more about it, than any so-called scientist. The subject matter is himself, you see. And he knows himself, he thinks. He is quite mistaken, just as mistaken as you are, but is just as unable to see it, because, to him 'believe' and 'know' are the same thing."

"I'll oppose you there," Miss Martinez put in. "You are not going to tell me you know more about me than I do myself."

"You see?" Sam sighed. "Miss Martinez, you know-believe quite a lot of things that are just not so. But, to step away from possible offense, look at society-at-large, and the thing called moral and social codes of action. Defined, this is: 'Those things which that society believes and declares to be right and proper.' Now inspect that same society and you discover it doing, saying and thinking quite otherwise, in fact. But if you try to tell that society in plain words that it is not good, honest, ethical and decent, as it defines those terms, you'll be in bad trouble. And so, social science does not work in practice, simply because society wants to be told that all its ills are the fault of someone else, or something else. If you're too fat, the only cure is to eat less, but how many people will thank you for that?"

"He is perfectly right, sir," said Joe, quietly and with authority.

## V

SAM LOOKED UP in surprise at the impassive servant, then in astonishment at Venner, who grunted, "All right, Joe, you told me, and I am not about to argue with *you*. Fair enough,

Hutten, you win. But remind me to take it up again with you some other time. Now, young woman, it's your turn. And just in case you still have some idea of denying anything let me remind you that my business is manufacturing the kind of gadget you were using. Right? Now talk. Start by telling us who you're working for."

Hutten shelved other interesting questions for the moment and devoted his attention to studying her. She was, he thought, a truly attractive woman, not just merely pretty like so many others, but with a dynamic quality, a restless intensity of purpose. He saw a dozen conflicting impulses pass over her mobile features in as many seconds. Apprehension? Calculation? It was impossible to tell.

"I don't like him," she said abruptly, jerking her head up and back to indicate Joe. "The strong silent man type has never gone with me. And I don't know that I like you too much either, Mr. Hutten. Nothing personal, just an indication of how we stand. But you"—she leveled her vivid brown eyes on Venner—"I *know* you. Know about you, anyway. You're rich, and you're eccentric, and that adds up to news in any language. So who do I work for? Stellar Press, that's who."

"You'll have to prove it," Venner growled. "I won't claim to know all the S.P. boys, but I do know most of 'em, and you don't look the type. You have an ident-card?"

She put thumbs to the edges of her scarlet cape, swirled it back and clear of her shoulders, then dipped into an interior cache to produce the card he was asking for. Sam watched as he studied it swiftly and passed it back. She returned it to its slot.

"Satisfied? Or are you now wondering why a gossip-digger and social chit-chat expert should be intrigued by the doings of Dr. Orbert Venner?"

"You said I am rich and eccentric. That's enough, isn't it? That's all you're going to get, anyway. You can go, Miss Martinez."

"Now just a minute!" Her face set immediately into belligerence, and Hutten was fascinated. She was utterly unlike any woman he had so far met, neither overawed by male company, nor, seemingly, aware of her considerable attractiveness. Even her voice, which could have been pleasant had it been cared for, was aggressively hard. "You sent your slave here to drag me on to the carpet before you. I came. I am entitled to say my piece, and I'm going to. Gossip I can get any time, but this is something bigger, and I want in."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Who's trying to deny things now? Dr. Hutten—" She swung her stare abruptly, and Sam blinked. "I've just managed to place you. *Sam* Hutten, and your old man is Rex Hutten, right? And you two are nose to nose about something. Something big." She laid her palms flat on the table and seemed to go through another spasm of conflicting emotions. Sam watched her, the smilk-smooth gloss of her shoulders and bosom, the oily gleam intriguing him. Some new hormone-cream fad, his memory served up for him, that was supposed to preserve the compexion and banish the telltale saggings of age. Even in this day and age, when fasion as such had ceased to exercise authority over what anyone wore, there was still this desire to improve on nature. And it was always those who didn't need it who went for it. Or was it a case, as he had once read, that if you waited until you need it, you were too late by far? Anyway, Miss Martinez had no need of any artifice. Seemingly something akin to that crossed her mind now, for she relaxed, all at once.

"Look, I'll give it you straight. In the presence of a trained sociologist, maybe it's the only way. Anyway, look at me, will you? Latin-American mostly, and it shows. There's a bit of Irish in there, too. And what does it add up to? I have a pretty face, a large bust, hips that wiggle and legs that catch the eye. But I also have a brain, only no one will let me use it! My editor, damn his hide always says, 'The brain doesn't show, darling; the rest does. With what you've got, who needs brains? Just keep the copy coming in, you know the kind of thing I want!' And I do. Who is interested in who and doing what, and when? What new combination of plastic and paint is the current rave? Sneaky bits about the latest tri-di stars. Stuff like that. I make this trip, Earth-to Mars, about once a month. The rest of the time I trail around the other flesh-pots. And I am sick of it, up to here!"

She sat back now, hooked thumbs in her belt and snorted. Venner sat quite still, almost as impassive as his manservant.

"I know," she resumed, "that I am on the edge of a big story. I know. Call it intuition, guesswork, whatever you like, but I know. And I'm wasting my time, even if you two break down and tell me everything you're up to."

"Why would it be a waste of time?" Sam asked.

"Because," she told him, "I would cable it back to Earth, and my darling editor would say 'Thank you very much, Louise, I'll get somebody on it right away!' And that would put me outside in the cold again. But at least I would have lived with the real thing for just a moment. A story!"

"You seem to have answered your own problem," Venner muttered, and Sam frowned. He could understand, dimly, what it must be like to be frustrated in something like this.

"Wouldn't you follow it through on your own initiative?"

"Using what for expenses?" she demanded instantly. "Look, I have a Stellar Press visa-card, but if I used it on my own hook to follow you two wherever you're going, Hymie would bounce the account so fast—and I'd be sunk, out of a job, and probably in debt for several years!"

"But you are still going to cable the tip back to your head-office?" Venner suggested in a low rumble.

"Rules of the game." She smiled, baring only her teeth and with no humor at all. "A story is a story, and this one is something."

"Hmml!" Venner chewed on his cigar a moment, then, "Would you listen to a proposition?"

"Depends."

"Like this. Be my guest, Miss Martinez. Our guest. Be in on everything that happens, provided you do not release anything until I give you leave. With my guarantee that when you get it, you'll get it all."

She was torn, that much was obvious from her face. Venner studied her and added a further condition: "You'd have to inform your head office that you're after a story of some kind, naturally, but I put it to you not to drop any real clues, else there'll be somebody else horning in to take it away from you. Can you do that?"

"You leave that to me." She rose urgently then hesitated. "You're not trying to put something over on me, are you?"

"In the presence of Dr. Hutten?"

"Yes. Well, all right. How much time have I got?"

Venner glanced up at his man. Joe said, carefully, "The flight lifts off in forty-five minutes. You should have your gear aboard *Venner Three* by that time, miss."

As soon as she was out of hearing range Sam demanded, "What was that for? Do we want a newswoman hanging around our necks?"

"You'll be my guest also, Hutten." the old man leaned back and took up his drink, scowling horribly. "You're in this, like it or not, and we don't want any more publicity than we can handle. She will be where we can keep an eye on her. Better the devil we know, eh? Meantime, there are a few things you need to know. . . ."

"Just a minute. If I'm to be your guest—and thank you

for that—what about my things? Hadn't I better transfer them?"

"That will not be necessary." Joe came in again quietly. "Your baggage will have been transferred automatically to the *Ceti Queen*. I can collect it later, when we are in flight."

"We were talking about Happy Sugar." Venner brushed aside the interruption impatiently. "For your information, listen. We think we can identify the mischief molecule. We do that by checking blood samples from known addicts. Consider that they have never been seen to commit any crime, nor is there any civilized way of getting them to talk, nor do they sell the stuff, so far as we can find—they *give* it away—and you get hooked permanently on just one dosage—think of that and realize what we are up against, but we think we can identify the molecule. From ultra-delicate analyses of blood serum of known addicts. And the only other place we have ever been able to find the thing is in those seeds I showed you. And *that* was by accident."

"Can't you get at it a bit faster?" Sam complained and the old man scowled again, maltreating his cigar.

"I just want you to know how hard the job is and on what slim clues we are operating. It took system-analysis to unearth a pattern in the distribution of the stuff. As I've just said, it is not sold; it is given away. None of the people we have been able to catch, or interrogate, will talk, nor is there anything we can do to them that will make them talk. They just don't care. So, the only common factor we have been able to find among all of them, and there are several thousands, by this time, is sugar. Just ordinary common white granulated sugar, done up in individual plastic packs, such as you'd get in any café or eating house. No label on the packs, that's the only difference. And that's how the name got around. Some nosy newsman found out. But we have analyzed every sugar-packet found. We've done everything to that stuff except split its atoms. And—nothing!"

"Then it's not the sugar after all?"

"Who knows? What we do know is this: the distribution spread shows that the stuff is coming from three centers, and each center is a spaceport. So the logical conclusion is that it is coming in from outside the solar system. That opens the field pretty wide, but this is where the lucky chance came in. Field naturalists are thorough people. They observe everything, test everything, especially exotic plants. Those seeds were found on Verdan. They yield the only other source of that damned chemical."

"So?" Sam tightened up inside.

"So we have checked this even further. That plant grows only in the wheat fields of Verdun. Nowhere else on the planet. And your father is the wheat king of the planet—as well as being the uncrowned overlord of the whole three-planet financial empire!"

"Now wait!" Sam set his jaw angrily. "There is a great big hole in your theory so far. My father is a businessman, not a farmer. He is in—whatever he is in—because it pays. And you say that the people who are pushing this filthy drug are *giving* it away? Quite apart from any moral judgments about my father, that does not add up, sir!"

"It's a pleasure to talk to a man who can cut through to the heart of a matter." Venner grinned ferociously. "But how many ordinary people can? We have a link between this stuff and Rex Hutten. Once let that get into the headlines and what good will intelligent appraisal do anybody? Now do you see why I wanted Miss Martinez under my wing? And you too? This is a thing we have to handle with gloves, until we can get some more hard facts."

"But it doesn't make sense. This is my field, Dr. Venner, and I assure you that people or organizations do not push drugs unless there is some financial reward involved. Even when there are religious or mystical implications, you'll always find some commercial interest involved somewhere. One does not give this kind of thing away."

"So there are reasons we do not yet know about. But the facts are there, and hard. And there are more, somewhat dubious but worth considering. The addict, for instance, is the one who carries the stuff and spreads it—and that is all wrong on normal patterns. You agree?"

"Yes." Sam nodded at that. "The usual thing is that the pusher has the sense to keep himself free of the drug. He merely sells it."

"Right. But these people get hooked, and then hook others. And it takes just one dose. Further doses don't do a thing, make no difference. So the addict, if he has a stock of the stuff, can infect several others. So it could spread like a chain reaction. And, as far as we can tell, the only reason it doesn't is that there is a limit on the amount of the stuff that can be brought in. So far. How long that will last is anybody's guess. Now, there are a few other points. The addict is an instant and total loss to the community. He becomes a bum. And, even if we had everything going for us, I doubt if we could find a cure, because this stuff apparently acts on brain



chemistry to change it permanently. So even if the addict came to the authorities for help, there wouldn't be any. And they don't come. They are quite happy with their state."

"I can appreciate," Sam murmured, "that this must be a source of concern to the authorities, of which you are presumably one, but you have already heard me on drugs. Who am I to point the finger at someone who chooses to opt out, either by chemistry or any other way? As for trying to implicate my father in the racket, that's a different matter, and should be left until we can talk with him face to face. I have no brief on either side."

"I heard you," Venner growled. "Now you hear me a bit more. On what Ipomoea does to people. One dose is enough. The addict loses all sense of responsibility. He also becomes sterile. He, or she. I know, you're going to ask if that's such a disaster. And I will agree it isn't. Better they didn't reproduce *that* kind. All right. But this is the deadly bit, and it is known only to a handful of chosen people. You'll see why when I tell you. After about a year, and we can't pin it down any closer than that, the addict lapses into a totally new condition. He switches off altogether. No reaction. No intellect. He becomes a vegetable. What the doctors call a decerebrate preparation. At a guess, there's some peculiar kind of brain damage that is cumulative up to a point, and then the brain just drops out."

"At a guess? You mean you don't know?"

"We don't know. Even in this permissive day and age we can't do exploratory brain surgery on living people. If you can call them living."

"But what about postmortem surgery?"

"Logical to the last, eh?" Venner grinned, and there was something chilly about his grin now. "Postmortem, as you say. Only we are still waiting for one of them to die. They don't. Strictly between us, Hutten, we have reason to believe that these vegetables are totally immune to any illness, sickness, disease, germs, bacteria, virus—anything. They do not even show signs of getting older. We are stuck with them. We look like being stuck with them forever. And their numbers increase at about a hundred or so a week. That's the latest figure I have."

Hutten shoved back in his chair. All at once the subdued hum and chatter of people, the distant drone of impersonal music, seemed loud and impertinent in his ears. He fought to contain nausea while his mind yielded him a pattern, a terrifying picture of Earth slowly being swamped in a great

mass of immortal vegetables, brainless bodies. Fantasy spoke to him.

"It sounds as if somebody is trying to wipe out Earth," he said, and Venner jerked forward, his little eyes hard-keen.

"You get the picture fast, Hutten. It took me a while to see it."

"Five billion people?"

"Increase the supply, add in the chain-reaction effect and the sterility—and the appeal of the drug—and it doesn't seem all that big or impossible. But imagine what this would do, in headlines."

Sam shivered. "All right, Venner, you've made your point. All I can say is that I'm sure my father isn't involved in any such crazy scheme. But you'd expect me to say that in any case." He tried a formal smile, and then it came back to him with shocking impact. Somebody had tried to kill him. In the light of this queer meeting he had forgotten it altogether! Venner's sharp eyes saw something.

"What's on your mind now?"

Sam told him, in brief but inclusive detail. The old man listened intently, masticating his cigar with restless jaws.

"No accident, that's for sure. And you had all the luck. Now, who was in a position to know, first, that you were traveling?"

"I imagine the ethergram, and my flight reservations, went through all sorts of hands, maybe hundreds."

"You're right, there. Joel!" the old man glanced up at his impassive servant. "How long would it take you to gimmick a suit and an M-X door like that? Roughly?"

"Twenty minutes at the outside, probably less."

"So it could have been somebody on the ship itself, not necessarily on the ground. You didn't see any familiar faces, Hutten?"

"No. Didn't expect to. This is my first time off Earth."

"So. Well, you can rest assured on one thing—nobody will do any tricky gimmicking on my ship. And"—he glanced at his wrist—"we had better be moving out there soon. Time for just one more, Hutten?"

"No thank you. Look here, Venner, just who the devil are you, anyway? I mean, I had an ethergram, and you've established yourself as being in some way connected with Interplanetary Security, but from what little I do know of the ISB, they are more or less a police force. If you'll excuse me, you do not look at all like a policeman!"

"I'm not. You are quite right in describing ISB as a kind

of police body. They operate out in the open, with uniforms and authority and all the rest of it. They do a fine job. But there are some situations where a policeman can't operate efficiently. Here, for instance, where there is no law. Authority has to abide by authority, you know what."

"So what are you? Cloak and dagger? Secret service?"

"Don't knock it, Hutten. I am a member of a small group, strictly non-official and anonymous, who get called in when there's something going on that shouldn't, when certain people are playing tricky games and have to be discouraged, or when there's something making a smell but where the law has no teeth. For want of a name, we call it the Philosophy Corps."

"Outside the law?"

"That's right. No official backing, no status—and no rewards, apart from satisfaction at doing something worthwhile. To operate like that, a man has to be independently rich, sufficiently well-informed to be able to see the big picture, and smart enough to use brains rather than muscle. And the one thing he does not want is publicity."

"But you already have a public image!"

"As myself, sure. And you are on the way to becoming famous as the son of Rex Hutten. That's fine. Anything else is strictly between us, not for the pretty ears of our traveling companion, all right? Right. I think we had better move now. Joe, get us a runner!"

## VI

*Venner Three* was small, with berth room for only six, but luxurious in her appointments. Sam, who only knew a little about spaceships, knew enough to appreciate the luxury, and the gracious ease with which they lifted off and away from Mars under Joe's efficient supervision. The robot-like manservant sat well forward in the control cabin, engrossed with the instruments and controls that he seemed barely to touch. Sam lolled alongside Venner, with Louise on the old man's other side, and watched screens avidly.

"Your first time in space; this is all new to you," Venner said. "But what about you, my dear?"

"Mars is my limit," she told him. "I've never had the chance, nor the spare credits, to get any further than that. I know we go in caravan, but I don't know why. Can't this dinky little ship of yours jump to Ceti on its own?"

"Size has nothing to do with it." Venner rolled his everlasting cigar to one corner of his mouth and snorted. "Don't you ever call this a dinky little ship again, miss. You'll see the swarm come up to join us—there's one now—and just remember, this ship has the legs of anything you're likely to see. As for the caravan system, it's this way." Canalopolis was far away and a tiny thing down there, a tiny white diamond alongside the rainbow-bulk of the domes. Sam saw ships coming up, flame-tailed, to join them.

"The Yashi-Matsu generator, see, is a massive affair. And it creates a globular stress-field that is pretty massive too. That is an inherent effect of the system. Gravity-waves are huge things, big and slow, so the field has to be a certain minimum size, in the same sense that it is impossible to get high-fidelity reproduction of bass notes from a midget speaker. It just can't be done. You can't make a little field, nor a midget generator. So one ship *could* mount a generator, but it would be economic disaster. So we use one generator to englobe a number of ships. Remember railways?"

She made a fluttering sign of indecision. "Only just. Didn't they have steam, and coal, or something?"

"Hah! Anyway, they had one engine at the front, and passenger carriers trailing after. Just one engine—lots of passenger cars. Same as this. The globular field encloses a stress-space where Einsteinian absolutes are modified somewhat. Within that field all these ships will form a loose kind of cluster, and then they will be idle. The warp-master will do all the rest. Far as I know, our schedule calls for a stop at Alpha Centauri, another at Epsilon Indi, and then we're home, Tau-Ceti. Travel time about two weeks."

"Why," she wanted to know, "did it have to be Mars? I mean, why not use Luna as a base to jump from? It's right on our doorstep!"

"Also right in old Sol's plasma field. Too many energetic particles. Matter of fact, we had to get as far as Mars before we could try out the Yashi-Matsu field theory anyway. And it worked precisely as calculated. You have to hand it to the Japanese for that."

"A point." Sam inserted himself into the discussion. "As a sociologist I am of course aware of the Japanese talent for making things work, and I fully expected to see them greatly

in evidence, in space. Yet I've not seen one—correction, only one, a doctor—since leaving Earth. Why is that?"

"Looked in the wrong places," Venner explained promptly. "You should have looked in the repair and maintenance sheds, or anywhere that calls for specialized skills. We'll have one along as warp-master, you can bet, and a few as emergency repair-staff. But you wouldn't expect to see any on a milk run like Earth-Mars, where it's just a matter of pushing the right button."

Miss Martinez was itching to get back into the talk, but before she could speak Joe suddenly flipped a switch or two and Sam stared at the new view on the screen before him. Venner grunted, stabbed with his finger.

"There's somebody in trouble, looks like."

Among the vapor trails arching up from the dark half-disk of the planet, one was ragged. Even as Venner sat back, the trail grew another dogleg, and sunlight gleamed momentarily from the hull of that struggling ship. Joe made fresh movements and the picture shivered and grew huge, picking out the ship in question. At the same moment the radio crackled into life.

"*Ceti Queen* to warp-master. This is Horst Danziger, master of *Ceti Queen*, to warp-master. We seem to have a massive defect in the drive unit and firing control. It's impossible to be certain of the extent of defect without full overhaul, but we must assume it's dangerously unreliable. We'll therefore be unable to join cluster. Returning surface immediately. Over."

"Understand perfectly, Captain Danziger." The reply came promptly, in a gentle murmur of condolence. "Sorry you will not be with us. Earnestly hope you can land safely, that defect is not hazardous."

There was a moment's buzzing silence, then a crackle as Danziger came on again to say, "Thank you. We seem to have the defective drive under reasonable—" The voice cut off abruptly, and in the black of the shadow of Mars there grew a monstrous fireball, billowing out and searing the eyes. The screen darkened as automatic volume controls dimmed the glare. Sam was frozen into horror, hardly able to grasp the fact that a ship and all its crew and passengers had just disintegrated. It seemed a lifetime later that the gentle murmur, now full of command, came back.

"Remaining ships will cluster as scheduled. Cluster as scheduled, please, and then we will await decision from the ground. Proceed as scheduled!"

Venner twisted his head around, his cigar canted at a ferocious tilt. "You have your through-flight card, Hutten?"

"Eh?" Sam shook himself, groped for meaning, then fumbled in his poncho-pocket to get out the card, and stared at it. *Ceti Queen!* Venner took it for just one glance and passed it back.

"Adds up, doesn't it? Somebody definitely does not want you to get as far as Verdan."

"But you can't possibly believe . . . ?"

"I refuse to buy three coincidences in a row, Hutten. What's more, I am now inclined to believe that this is being masterminded from the far end, from our destination, not from Earth."

"I don't see how you can deduce that." Sam argued more for something to say than from any spirit of disagreement. He did not want to think about himself aboard that ship, himself a cloud of radioactive dust. "We are several light-years away from Ceti!"

"Time factor, son. Takes time to fix up sabotage on that scale. Not long to actually do it maybe, but time to find the right people and arrange it. Now, you got an ethergram, and you departed right away, right? So the available time, Earth end, was slight. But whoever sent that gram could have sent instructions—"

"My father sent it!"

"How do you know? Could have been anybody!"

"Not in those words!" Hutten said it harshly and with emphasis. "That was a phrase with meaning only between father and myself. He sent it. And he did not arrange to have me killed. That's out!"

"What *is* all this?" Louise demanded, almost dancing with curiosity. She had discarded her cape in the warmth of the ship and now her opulent curves positively quivered as she scented news in a big way. Venner leaned back in his seat, leaving Sam to tell her of his two previous escapes. Her dark eyes burned with interest at the account.

"That rat!" she said explosively, as he fell silent.

"Who? My father?"

"No! Of course not! No, I mean that Captain Bates! There I am, on the same ship—and the times I've sweetened him to let me in on anything worth a mention! And there you are, almost killed—twice! And not so much as a word from him!"

"He said something about adverse publicity. . . ."

Venner roared. "Why are we wasting time on that garbage! Joe, are we stable now? Right, come back here and listen

in. Miss Martinez, if you're only half a newswoman, you have a complete passenger list of that ship. Yes? Let me see it. Joe, look this over, just in case it rings any bells."

"But—" Sam began a protest, and Miss Martinez opened her mouth too, to argue, but the old man was vehement.

"Use your heads, can't you? Somebody gimmicked your suit, and your M-X door on *Martian Three*. And then somebody blew the *Ceti Queen*. Somebody who *knew* that the first two tries had failed. So it's somebody who is right here along with us in this caravan. Obvious? What's more, that somebody probably does not know, yet, that he has failed again."

"You'll have to explain that," Louise suggested. "I was with you as far as—oh, I get it. Whoever fixed that last—thing—would definitely not be on the *Ceti Queen*. And only there would they know that Dr. Hutten did not come aboard."

"You're getting there." The old man approved, then glanced to his assistant. "Anyone significant, Joe?"

"There are only two who seem important enough to consider. One's a mining engineer bound for Zera; the other's a physicist on his way to Ophir to study sun-stones. Both Japanese. The rest are just tourists and sightseers, and a few professionals in business."

"No Japanese villains, Joe. I will defer to your judgment in almost everything else, but not that." Sam watched the interplay curiously. The impassive servant shrugged fractionally, handed the passenger list back to Louise, and waited. He was handsome, Sam thought again, if only he didn't seem so damned mechanical. Venner seemed uncertain, needing to justify himself. He swung on Sam.

"You'll go along with that, Hutten, that a Japanese would never be a party to a power play? Would never take violent action against the lives of other people?"

"It's a bit sweeping." Sam hesitated thoughtfully. "It's always a dangerous thing to generalize about nationalities. I would certainly hate to put the finger on anyone on that kind of basis. I mean, the Japanese may be notorious for know-how but they do not have an exclusive on it. After all, your man, here, claimed to know how to produce the sabotage we were discussing. And you are the boss of a technological industry."

Venner removed his cigar, stared at it darkly, then put it back in his mouth and snorted. "This is like trying to find a black cat in a dark cellar—and we don't even know it's there. . . ."

A warbling from the control panel cut short his delibera-

tions. Joe slid back to his seat, slapped a control, and they heard the warp-master.

"All ships, attention please. We have clearance from base to proceed. Pilots will relinquish control to me, please."

Clustering and warp-out was nothing to watch, Sam thought, as he saw four large ships and a straggle of smaller ones gradually take up a coherent pattern around the warp-ship. Like odd-shaped planets about a sun, they spun slowly around the center, where the warp-ship hung, looking like a silver-plated orange that someone had sat on. Distantly, the darkness was pinpointed with stars and there was the crescent side of Mars itself. And then, all at once, there was nothing but a milky wall in space, a shimmering grayness that met the eye in all directions. It was like being on the inside of a gigantic smoke bubble. There was no sensation. Nor gravity, either.

"Free fall for a while," Venner explained, "until the point has been set up. The aim, I suppose you'd call it. Then the warp-ship will put on an artificial-G for us. This bit is pretty dull."

"I've heard we can get out and move around, just as if we were in atmosphere," Louise said, and the old man nodded.

"That's right. Once we're all hull down on the warp-ship you can step out, go for a walk, fly, swim, do whatever you like. This is a small universe of its own, now."

"What I was thinking," she murmured, "was that I could take a walk around the other ship that's going as far as Ceti, and maybe smell out some suspicious characters."

"*Ceti Princess*. That one, in blue and gold." Joe pointed.

"Plenty of time for that," Venner objected. "Right now we have to figure some way of keeping you anonymous, Hutten."

"That shouldn't be any trouble. I'll just stay here, on the ship. I have no urge to go walking in space, thank you!"

"Maybe not, but I want you to meet and have a talk with the warp-master. You, me, and Joe. You see, to become a warp-master—to be able to understand and control the Yashi-Matsu effects—you have to be pretty good as a philosopher, and it can't do any harm to throw our problems onto the shoulders of a man like that. Who've we got this trip, Joe?"

"It was on the list. Dr. Hakagawa, sir."

"Hah! That clinches it. Hakagawa is an old friend of mine."



"Hey, what about me?" Louise raised her sharp-edged voice in protest. "If you're not going to let me snoop around that other ship, you might at least invite me to talk to the warp-man. You make him sound like somebody important."

"He is. All right, Miss Martinez, just as you please. But first we have to camouflage Hutten here, somehow. This ship is equipped for just about any emergency a man can think of, but we do not carry disguises."

"I can fix that," she declared confidently, and scuffled in her pouch to bring out a pair of glasses. Hutten received them with distaste. They were black-rimmed, built in an arch to swoop around his forehead, and softly resilient so that they would fit almost any head. They made him feel foolish, once he had them on, but the lenses were plain and did not obstruct his field of vision at all.

"Very handy," she explained, "when a girl wants to look intellectual. You just hold still now while I fix you with a moustache."

By the time she had finished snipping short bits from her black hair and sticking them to his top lip with nail polish, the ships had all settled into place on the warp-ship, which now looked like an overloaded pincushion. The familiar feel of one-fourth-G helped them to navigate their way to the air lock and out. The warp-ship itself was a considerable surprise to Hutten. It was bigger, a lot bigger, than he had estimated from a distant view, and the surface was not polished but chased into shimmering grayness. There were hatchways, great oval ports, which gave access to stairways leading down and in. Venner let his servant lead, and, quite irrelevantly, Sam realized he had a touch of faint irritation at the smoothly efficient way this massive man seemed to do everything. He also noticed, couldn't help noticing, the certain familiar gleam in Miss Martinez's eye as she kept pace with Joe. He couldn't blame her at all, but he had to admit to himself that any time a woman gave him that kind of interested look it would be on account of his possible wealth, not for his personality.

"Like an onion," Venner mumbled. "Skin inside of skin all the way in to the core. It has to be like that. You need a certain minimum surface to act as the field matrix, whereas the generator itself is fairly small. So, typical of the Japanese, they make use of all the intervening spaces."

Sam had grasped that much unaided. As they went down more companionways, heading always in to the core, he saw that the various levels were occupied with vending

machines, information booths, souvenir counters, all sorts of amenities that the ships couldn't find room for. And there was already a sprinkling of other passengers roaming among the various attractions. They came to an inner level where there was an impression of power and sound, and the floor spaces were taken up by the block-bulks of enigmatic machinery. Here, too, were sightseers, but they moved slowly or not at all, and they seemed to stare engrossedly at the featureless mechanisms.

"There are always weirdos," Venner rumbled. "See them? You can get a kind of mind-bending kick out of just standing within the primary field of the generators. That's what they're doing. Anything for hallucination!"

The remark was obviously edged at Hutten, and he accepted it. "No society, as far as we know, has ever been completely free of the need to escape from reality, to foster *some* kind of illusions. You might even say it is man's ability to dream that has led to so much of his progress: imagine it first, then go ahead and try to realize it. If that works in even a small percentage of cases, you get a dividend."

"I'll second that," Louise declared unexpectedly. "Life would be dull, wouldn't it, if you couldn't dream a little now and then?"

"There's a difference," Venner argued. "Imagination, yes, but being so hopped up that you can't tell the difference between reality and illusion is something else again. And you can't *live* in a fantasy world, not for long anyway."

"That's not true," Joe said in his ever-calm tones. "Subject to precise definition, fantasy is part of the biological pattern. Under stress the body secretes various chemicals which have the effect of altering perception, reaction and emotion. To a certain degree, everyone lives in a fantasy world. The individual manufactures his own 'reality' by selection, whether consciously or not, simply because one cannot adequately attend to all stimuli at once."

"But that's not the same as deliberately ducking unpleasant facts." Venner stuck to his guns doggedly, but Joe was unmoved.

"Is there any law," he demanded, "which says we *must* endure unpleasant facts, uncomfortable reality? If there is, then we break it every time we employ anesthetics, or take a pill for a headache. That is simply the logical extension of your postulate."

"Hah! I should know better than to argue with you, Joe. Skip it, we seem to have arrived."

They had come face to face with a door of darkly glossy wood, in the center panel of which was a scanner-eye. Joe put his palm over it, and at once there came the softly confident voice they had heard over the radio.

"Who is calling, please?"

Joe removed his hand and, to Sam's amazement, broke into a rapid itchy-atchi stream of Japanese, of which nothing made sense except a phonetic version of his own name, Miss Martinez's and Venner's. There came an immediate response in the same fractured sounds. Sam noted the adulatory gleam in Miss Martinez's eye, and felt renewed irritation. This was ridiculous. All Japanese learned Standard English automatically. There was absolutely no call for this virtuoso display, it was just showing off. The door slid open, Joe stood aside and waved them through. Sam heard Miss Martinez gasp, and he caught his own breath when it came his turn to see.

This was a large cabin, at first glance so undecorated as to seem bleak, like a drink of plain cold water after too much strong coffee and sugar. The floor was glass-smooth redwood, the walls plain ice blue panels. A large rice-straw mat took up one fourth of the floor. There were cushions in profusion and a long, lacquered coffee table. Standing to greet them was a slim, black-haired, lean-faced Japanese of unguessable age and a wide and beautiful smile. His black tunic rustled as he bowed low.

"Miss Martinez. Mr. Hutten. Please be welcome to my establishment. Would you care for *o-cha* and *sake*? I regret I cannot serve you in the old ritual manner, but must ask you to help yourselves. I also ask your pardon for the fact that I must keep my warning-sounder in place. A precaution." Slim fingers went to the gleaming metal band about his brow. Presumably the machinery control was somewhere handy but concealed. Sam couldn't see it. Looking quickly about, he had started a formal phrase of thanks and acceptance when his eye was caught and held by the one really ornamental highlight of the austere chamber.

In a rectangular recess in the wall to the right of their host was a picture. A picture-in-depth. And yet not, he corrected himself again, because it moved. At first glance it was a pictorial scroll, the image of a black and white crane, very lifelike. But it moved. In exquisite slow motion its great wings beat the air. The scroll seemed suspended in front of a deeply distant view of a stream where ferns and lilies nodded in a breeze, but at the same slow pace.

"You like my *tokonoma*, Mr. Hutten?"

"I do. I can't help it. So unexpected, yet so right here."

"Good! That is its purpose, to provide a focal point for the room. The *kakemono*—the scroll-picture—is a family one. The crane flies to remind me that nothing waits, not even time. Please be seated. Miss Martinez here. Dr. Venner, there. You here, Mr. Hutten. And you, my old friend, here in the honor-seat."

Joe hesitated. "Would it be more fitting for someone else?"

"No. I insist. Mr. Hutten, it is our custom that the guest of honor is seated closest to the *tokonoma*. The place would be yours in any other circumstance, but this young man will always be guest-of-honor where I, Koni Hakagawa, am concerned. You understand?"

"All right with me." Sam lowered himself awkwardly to a cushion, glad of the reduced gravity that saved him some agony in his hip-joints. "I hadn't counted on being anybody's honored guest anyway. People seem to get the wrong notions about me very quickly, but I'm surprised it has got this far so fast."

Venner, squatting, took a sip of tea, then replaced his cigar. "Koni and I are old friends, Hutten. He knows I wouldn't bring him a guest unless he was somebody significant. There's this, too. Anything we say in this room won't go any further. Get that good, Miss Martinez."

## VII

THE WARP-MASTER was a good and attentive listener, and Orbert Venner was a pretty good explainer too. For all his eccentric mannerisms, Sam had to admit that his brain functioned efficiently enough.

"Hail" Hakagawa sighed, after the condensed account was ended. "So *desu*. One thing, at least, is immediately apparent. You are in no further danger, Mr. Hutten, until you reach Verdán. You may have *takusan* troubles, many worries on your mind, but not that one. For think—this is a miniature universe here, with no room to escape the consequences of any action. And whoever is threatening you is

no fool. But neither is he one of my people, this I assure you."

"Didn't say he was," Sam protested. "All I say is that all the ways used were technical, which is a straw in the wind."

"Quite so. I ask, have you offended one of my countrymen?"

"Certainly not! Not to my knowledge or intent, anyway."

"It was necessary to ask. You see, Mr. Hutten, my people are not saints. We chafe, we know anger, we take offense, just like anyone else. And we like to balance accounts, to make all square. But this is for individuals. If you approached a Japanese person and suggested, like this, 'I wish you to do thus and so to injure a certain other person. For this I will reward you much,' he would refuse."

"Always? Without exception?"

"There are always exceptions." Hakagawa shrugged fractionally. "But not in the intelligence level we are considering. You see, there is an ethic. We are taught rational pragmatism from our first days, *all* of us. It is, with us, almost a religion. One of the rules tells us this: if one person can hire me to injure another, then some other person can hire yet another to injure me, or pay me more to betray the first. So, very soon, no one is safe, there is no peace of mind to be had. So the original proposition is unworkable. So we do not do it. You see?"

"That's beautiful!" Louise enthused. "Why, if everybody felt like that what a lot of misery would be averted."

"It has a flaw," Hutten got in fast. "It has the defect of its virtue. Like this. If I am more powerful than you, and I'm your enemy, you can't do a thing about it. Right, sir?"

"Quite so." Hakagawa nodded his agreement. "That is why I said we had an ethic. We do not abuse power, nor do we seek it. We do not, for the same reason, seek wealth, or position. Because none of these can be had without causing injury to someone else."

"That's the key issue," Joe pointed out, "in any code. It will only work if everybody agrees to abide by all the rules."

"That is a concept not suited to Western thought," Hakagawa mused, then eyed Sam keenly. "You, Mr. Hutten, are a man of wealth, position *and* power. There, if anywhere lies the root cause of your troubles."

"But I'm not any of those things!"

"You are your father's heir. Had it occurred to you that he sent for you because he is in danger? That he wants to pass some of his burden on to you? That with you removed

he would be alone? That with him also removed, someone else would be able to assume his position?"

"I have no desire to become involved in any power struggle in the Ceti three-world complex!" Sam declared, but Hakagawa shrugged.

"My friend, you are involved, whether you wish it or not."

It was a highly unsatisfactory interview by any standards. Sam gave it considerable thought in the days which followed, and derived no comfort from it. He found it impossible to imagine his father, the craggy-hard old Rex Hutten, in any kind of danger—or crying for help if he was. And he knew little, and didn't want to know more, about the internal power-politics of the Zera-Ophir-Verdan business world. All he was certain of was that someone had gone to inordinate lengths to stop him from getting to Verdan, and that he still had not the faintest idea who, or why. In a vacuum like that, any suspicion comes easily. He tried one on old Venner.

"Louise," he suggested, in a moment when he could be sure that only he and the old man were on the ship. "She doesn't add up. Can a gossip-writer afford to jaunt to Mars regularly? And for what? And she *was* on *Martian Three* along with me. She also recognized me awful fast considering my picture has not been in any newsreels that I know of. I just can't buy that kind of coincidence."

"Except that you'd have to explain where she got the technical know-how to do the tricks—how she could gain access to your cabin and the *Ceti Queen*—"

"She has gadgetry, plenty of it. And she is no fool, for all her wide-eyed manner. I've studied people, Venner, and it takes skill to act dim and do it right."

"I'm not disagreeing with you, son, just offering a little contrary thought. Matter of fact I had my suspicions about Louise right from the start, which is why I invited her to fly with us. Where I can keep an eye on her."

"Like now?"

"She is with Joe. At all times, you'll notice, she is with either Joe or myself. Never alone."

"With you, maybe. But Joe? I know he's something of a paragon, but she's all woman, and she's smart, too. Maybe she is genuinely fascinated by him—and I wouldn't blame her—but maybe she is also working on him to suit her own devices."

"That will be the day!" Venner chuckled. "If she is trying to seduce Joe she is wasting her time like no woman ever

did before. Joe is my man. In a highly uncertain world, Hutten, that is one thing you can bank on."

"Not on your say so." Hutten was emphatic now. "People are my field, Venner, and under no circumstances whatever would I bank on anyone. You can call that cynicism if you like. I call it experience."

"Yes." Venner seemed to retreat into a shell of his own, from which he peered out at Sam thoughtfully. Then he sighed, stretched, and shook his head slowly, removed his cigar and laid it aside. There was something highly significant about the gesture.

"I'll tell you about Joe," he said. "It's been a long time, and I've never told anyone outside of the people who were actually involved. And he isn't here."

"Afraid his ego might get jarred?"

"Ego? Hutten, he has no ego. Literally."

"You mean he's some kind of robot, or android?"

"Well now, that would depend on definition, wouldn't it? Let me tell it, and then you decide. This was eleven years ago. I was part of a team of people who were investigating some of the possible side effects of the Yashi-Matsu field. It was pretty new stuff then, and we were trying to anticipate things. Koni Hakagawa was there. He was, then, one of the finest neurosurgeons alive. Just as well, as it turned out, although he was there only as an observer in the first place. I won't tangle you with the technical stuff, except to explain that we knew there were dangers, and we had all sorts of standby precautions ready. What is relevant, for this, is that we had a big tank full of a highly complex fluid. It was quite a brew. And we were lashing it with several different kinds of stress-field waves, to observe what happened. A kind of three-dimensional wind-tunnel, if you follow me? Well now, I was in there. Literally.

"I was cabled and shackled to a midpoint strut, and loaded down with sensor equipment, cameras, recorders, probes, thermo-couples, all kinds of junk. I had four bright young men placed around the perimeter with other gadgetry. And we got a vortex-field going. That was an achievement in itself. And it was lively, for a while. But then—something blew. We never did find out just what. The field-generator ran away, went wild, got right out of control. It shorted out a few thousand volts at one point and instantly killed the man operating it. That was just one thing. Of course, the tank was a maelstrom. I don't recall much about that bit. I was told, later, that the other three men standing by just

jumped to it—no hesitation—they flung themselves into that boiling brew to try to rake me out.” He stopped there, and Sam let out a breath.

“You’re saying they risked their lives to rescue you, right?”

“I doubt if they gave a thought to that angle. We all knew we were treading right on the borders of the unknown, playing with death. We knew the score. Our attitude was that if it had to happen, better it should happen on Earth, in a laboratory, than out in space, with no help. For me, as soon as I felt the field take off I knew I was cooked. I wrote myself right off. As it happened, by one of those freaks, I got away with little more than a shake-up and a blackout. Koni, bless him, had the presence of mind to turn and run the length of the test shed, to the main power-link, and pull the feeder. The whole damn thing shut down, of course. That saved me, but those three boys, well, they were torn to pieces. Literally. I tell you, those field-effects were hellish things to play with, in those days.”

“They were all killed?”

“No. That’s the point. I told you we had special standby measures. A first-class medical team was one of them. Koni was a bonus. We—not me, I was hospitalized for days—got out the bits. I’ve heard the account several times since. Miracles were done that afternoon and night. Call it medicine, surgery, patchwork—whatever you like—but we managed to salvage enough parts to make one whole man. That’s Joe.”

Hutten swallowed, and again, then found his voice. “You’re saying he is a composite? Of three men?”

“That’s one way of putting it. We did him proud. The best. We were salvaging, trying to atone, to pay tribute, doing everything we could. We made him as perfect as we possibly could, as near perfect as any man has ever been. And he lived and we were glad. But he had lost something. That boy, Joe, has health, strength, a genius I.Q. and some very delicate sensibilities, talents, all sorts of things. Except ego, a sense of identity. He has near perfect recall for just about anything, and I have made it my business to see that he has access to everything that could possibly interest anyone. He can wear a personality to order. If I commanded him to be Einstein, Freud, Julius Caesar, Abraham Lincoln—or even Sherlock Holmes, Don Quixote or Tarzan—he would become just that until I told him to stop. Then he would become nobody again. I mean that. Nobody. The one thing



he does have that comes close to being identity is an absolute dependence on me."

"Good Lord!" Sam thought hard, recalling all he could of the massive man's actions and words. He began to see the pattern.

"Come to think of it," he agreed, "I've never heard him express a personal opinion. He always quotes facts."

"That's why I never argue with him. And there's something else. You saw the way Hakagawa honored him? That's not just because of what he did, at all. If you know anything at all about Eastern philosophy you'll know that they have long claimed the pathway to wisdom is to eliminate the self. The self is nothing—you've heard it? Joe is the perfect example, to them. And he is brilliant, no doubt of that."

Sam pondered a little more. "I begin to see why you feel confident about him and Louise."

"Obvious, isn't it? Personal attraction, personal reactions, don't work on Joe. They can't. Even with me—and his whole existence revolves around me—he won't bend a fraction of a datum to satisfy my personal will. If I was fool enough to try, that is."

"Yes." Sam digested that and his mind flew off along another tack. "You're an old man, Venner. What's going to happen to Joe when you're gone?"

"I've provided for that. Not good, but the best I can do."

"You don't think you ought to seek out some suitable woman and sign him over to her? You could, you know. You could instruct him to love, to honor and cherish her—and he would do it!"

"I've thought about it." The old man reached for his cigar again, scowling. "I can't bring myself to it, Hutten. I've never fancied the idea of giving a woman even partial power over me. Why I never married. I just can't see giving one complete control over a man, the way it would be with Joe. Can't see it."

"In his case there would be no conflict." Sam grinned. "And you'd make some woman extremely happy. Still, that's a different problem. I still think Louise will bear watching."

He continued to think so, without doing anything about it, right up until the caravan was twenty-four hours away from break-out in the Ceti system. Then something happened to shunt his suspicions along a different track altogether. It was the nearness of arrival which prompted him to say, idly, "Seeing that I lost my personal gear when the *Ceti*

Queen blew, I suppose I had better provide myself with more. I need a new suit, if nothing else."

Shipboard casualness had imposed no great needs on him, but it would be different once they were aground on Verdan. Louise took him up on it.

"That's an idea. I think my credit card will stretch just a bit, to a new outfit. By all accounts, Verdan is quite a progressive place. I don't want to look like a hag!"

"Be *my* guest, this time," he said promptly. "In fact—and I should have said this a lot sooner; forgive me—I'm sure I speak for my father when I invite all of you to accept his hospitality, once we are down. I'm sure he would want that."

"I'm not too proud to accept," she declared. "Shall we go? The warp-ship galleries will be crowded if we leave it until the last minute."

Joe went with them as a matter of course, using the ready-made excuse that the old man needed a new shirt. Venner favored a traditional style of dress that had gone out around the end of the century, but the machines could cope, even with that. The marketing levels of the warp-ship were well patronized as they arrived but they managed to find one auto-fab machine free. Hutten inserted his card in the slot and invited Louise to go first.

"I'm in no hurry. I'll wait. If you can stand a personal suggestion, I think you'd do well in blue, a dark blue with a sheen."

"Blue? With my complexion?" She was immediately aghast and applied to Joe, who indicated a knob and lens to one side of the auto-fab console.

"Why not try the colorimetric analyzer?"

"Is *that* what that thing is for? What do I do?"

"When you strip for the profile scanner," Joe explained, "if you depress this knob the machine circuits will analyze your dominant color tones and suggest appropriate harmonics."

"I never knew that before. I always pick my own. Maybe I'll try it. You have any hot ideas on design, Sam?"

Thus appealed to, Sam cast his eye over the screen-display of styles and chose one vaguely Greek in effect, a short-fall gown heavily pleated, pendant from one shoulder and corded at the waist. She raised a brow at him.

"Can you really see me in that, in blue?"

"Why not? For an occasion, of course. With your hair up, and wearing sandals, yes. For regular, you can't beat

the standard cape and pants. But try blue. I think you'll be surprised."

She ushered them outside to wait, and he was idly casting his glances over the more outrageous styles for men when his eye was caught and held by an even more outrageous assemblage of curves and lines hovering in front of a candy counter not too far away. He looked again, deliberately, then turned his back and nudged Joe.

"Over there." He jerked his head discreetly. "Don't look now. The silver blonde with the shape."

Joe revolved casually, came back to his original position. "You mean the lady wearing a sun-stone on a necklace?"

"If that fiery red ball is a sun-stone, yes. Listen. She was on *Martian Three* as a stewardess, called herself Corinne Eklund. Now she's here. Suspicious?"

"Very much so. What do you suggest?"

"It's a problem." Sam studied it carefully. "We could do to know a lot more about her, but it had better not be me. She would see through this feeble disguise in nothing flat. And I can't see Louise in the part, can you? Looks like you're booked to play detective. Can you?"

"Of course. Leave it to me. You had better take this." Joe brought out something slim and stick-like, handed it to Sam. "Press the base if you wish to speak to me, then wait until I can manufacture a suitable moment. Otherwise, just listen." He moved off smoothly. Sam edged his way around the auto-fab booth and took a moment to study the thing in his hand. It looked like nothing more exciting than a silver pencil, but even as he was staring at it, wondering which end was the base, he heard Joe's voice, very faint, but clear.

"Excuse me, miss, if I intrude. I just had to speak to you. About that magnificent sun-stone."

"Oh! This, you mean?"

"That's right. I have never seen a specimen cut just like that before, not as a jewel."

"You know something about them?"

"Yes, indeed. I think I can claim to know as much about them as anyone. As gem-stones, that is. I am not now referring to their use as electromagnetic transducers. That is a quite different field. May I ask where you obtained that one?"

Listening intently, Sam recognized her voice readily, but he would never have known Joe's at all, not with that suave politeness in it. He went on now, smoothly affable:

"I'm sorry, I should have introduced myself. Orbert.

Adam Orbert. I have some small reputation as a connoisseur of fine gems, but I don't expect you'll have heard of me."

"I haven't, no. But I'm glad to make your acquaintance just the same. I'm Corinne Eklund. You say this fire-ball is a sun-stone? I didn't know that. All I know is that I had it from Daddy as a birthday gift."

"Your father must be immensely rich."

"He has enough, yes. He's Gunnar Eklund, of Verdan."

"Ah yes." Joe sounded appropriately impressed. "I have heard that name. Isn't he the one they call the Cattle Baron?"

"That's right. Will you be staying long on Verdan, Mr. Orbert?"

"I hadn't planned to. You see, Ophir is really the center for gems. I hadn't anticipated finding many on Verdan."

"Well now." She began to sound arch. "You were wrong, weren't you? And if you really want to know where Daddy got this, you'll have to ask him, won't you?"

"If you feel he wouldn't mind?"

"I'm sure he wouldn't. I will tell him to expect you. Maybe there might be one or two other attractions for you, Mr. Orbert. You'll be very welcome. What ship are you traveling on?"

Sam tensed, but Joe was suavely equal to the situation.

"I'm traveling privately. Thank you for your patience, Miss Eklund, and your kind invitation. It will be my pleasure to call on you and your father just as soon as my business permits."

Louise came out of the booth all in blue cape and pants and with a package under her arm.

"There!" she said. "What d'you think?"

Sam pushed past her, slung the curtain, and dialed himself standard dark gray pants and cape, slinging his travel-weary others into the disposal bin. The communicator was silent for a while, then, as he was wriggling into the newly fabricated garments, he heard Louise demanding, "Where did you go, Joe?"

"Just on an errand."

Sam hurried out in time to divert a rigorous inquisition, and to say, "I heard all that. Is there really a cattle baron called Eklund?"

"Oh yes. Quite genuine."

"Then how come his daughter is working her way through college as a stewardess?"

"One might also ask," Joe responded calmly, "how come Rex Hutten's son is working in college, as a teacher?"

"You have a point," Sam admitted, and Venner agreed, when they got back and told him the tale. He was more interested in the sun-stone.

"You say it was cut as a gem, Joe?"

"Not necessarily. She was wearing it as such, and it was cut into a perfect sphere, suspended by cups. Not a very good cut. She didn't seem to be aware of its value."

"Another coincidence," the old man growled, "and where does it get us? If she's Gunnar Eklund's girl, and a dimwit, she can't be your menace, Hutten. But we'll keep her in mind. Maybe your father will be able to tell us a lot more. I hope so."

## VIII

**AT BREAK-OUT** Verdan hung there against the starred velvet of space like a blue-and-gold fruit.

"We're small and private," Venner said. "We should get down fast. Your father expecting you?"

"He should be. I sent a reply ethergram right away. . . ."

Joe's radio chattered, catching their attention. A tinny voice demanded, "Repeat and confirm you have Samuel deMorgan Hutten aboard, *Venner Three*. Confirm. Our information is the said Samuel deMorgan Hutten deceased in *Ceti Queen* disaster, recent, Mars."

"Hell!" Sam groaned, as Joe sent the confirmation. "There should have been some way of letting the old man know."

"Too late now," Venner muttered. "At any rate he's due for a pleasant surprise once we get down."

The view-screen gave them a picture of a broad continent very similar to Earth's Africa in shape, and Joe took the little ship down smoothly to the landing field located right on the southernmost tip. At close range they saw the nucleus of what could become a sprawling city, but was as yet little more than dockside warehouses, plant and a thin fringe of dwelling complexes. The first flush of breezes as they opened up and went out were hot and scented enough to emphasize the resemblance to Africa, but Sam, worried, wasted

no time in getting to a visor-booth. His credit card cleared him for a call to Hutten House, some five hundred miles to the north, but the face that grew on the screen was unfamiliar. Every bit as rugged and weather-beaten as his father's, but a stranger.

"This is Ken Scott, Chief of Police, Northwheat Sector. You're Sam Hutten?"

"I am. Would you put my father on, please?"

The leathery face hardened. "I can't do that, mister. Better brace yourself for a shock. Rex Hutten's dead. Found him myself, about an hour ago."

Sam went numb, was only vaguely aware of Venner elbowing him firmly to one side and snapping into the receiver, "This is Orbert Venner, representing Interplanetary Security. Hold everything. We'll be there as soon as it's humanly possible."

The next hour was nightmare for Sam, backed by the steady scream of a chartered jet as Joe urged it north, and choked with futile thoughts of guilt and sorrow. It was almost impossible to imagine that craggy, hard-driving old man as still and cold, and on top of that was the acid of guilt, of wishing that he had got word, somehow, to let his father know. It took savagery from Venner to drag him up out of the gloom.

"Damn it, Hutten, I said snap out of it! It's over and done with; you can't call anything back. But you can use your head!"

"For what? To hang my hat on?"

"Come alive! Doesn't Chief of Police spell anything to you?"

"Oh!" Sam groped for it. "You mean . . . suspicious? Murder?"

"And very probably tied in with what somebody has tried to do to you. I won't buy this as a coincidence. At all. Brace up now, this looks like the place."

Joe brought the jet around in a screaming arc and then swiftly down on to the white landing strip adjacent to the glass and concrete buildings which stood out starkly from the rolling green and gold landscape. A bouncing cushion-car brought Scott and a uniformed trooper to meet them. Scott, in crisp white shirt and shorts, made a brief nod for Sam, gave a hard stare to the rest, and waved them to the car.

"Any of you ever been here before? No? All right, here's the layout. This stuff, either side, is offices, equipment stores,

silos, records, stuff like that. Out the back—that tower there—is Rex's private quarters. One personal man, the rest servo-robots. Nothing has been touched. You Venner? Interplan Security has no weight here, you understand?"

"The personal man, that would be old Jeff Hamlet," Sam mumbled. "Is he all right?"

"A bit shook, naturally, but he's okay. Mr. Sam—the way we heard it from Rex, he sent for you to come out here but a ship blew up, and you were reckoned to be on it."

"He wasn't, Chief Scott, he was traveling privately with me. We had reason to believe somebody was trying to kill him. That's how ISB comes to be involved anyway." Venner groped in a pocket, produced a card-case to hand across. "That's my identification. I know ISB carries no power here, but I assume you won't refuse the help of an expert?"

"Be glad of it. We don't get a lot of crime around here. And this is a crime. You'll see. There's the elevator. Come on."

They stepped out into sunny, airy space, many-windowed and quiet, at the top of the tower. Scott halted a moment to let them look around.

"Just to save you from getting any wrong ideas," he said, "I'm no whiz at detecting things. Me and Rex were good friends. Couple of weeks ago he told me he had the notion somebody was intending him harm. Didn't say who, but he *did* say, should anything queer happen to him, I was to look for suspicious details, assume a crime of some kind. I guess I would have smelled this one in any case. All this"—he waved an expansive arm—"is lounge, reading room, sun deck, diner, garden, balcony, exercise room and stuff. But in there, other side of that door, is his private office and workroom. He's in there."

"Then why are we standing out here?"

"Because we can't get in. That door has a trick lock, is coded to palm-prints. Only two. Rex's, of course, old Hamlet's. See? This morning was the first time I had ever been in there. It was this way. Old Hamlet was bringing his regular mid-morning coffee and snack. Saw him dead. Came out and called me, right away. He let me in when I came. I stayed just long enough to be sure he was dead, and came out again. The door locks itself. Hamlet passed out, but he's all right now. I'm glad you're here, Venner. I wouldn't know what to do next, that's for sure."

"We'll see this Hamlet first. Joe, take a look at that door,

see if it can be opened illegally. Sam, you'd better come. Will the old man know you by sight?"

"He ought to. We've met a few times."

Scott led them into a small, pleasantly bright room, but the old man slumped on the bed was in no condition to appreciate it. Sam choked back a gasp of dismay at the sight, and went forward.

"Jeff!" he said. "Come on, now. Dad always said there was nothing in the world that could upset you. Are you going to let him down now?"

"Oh, Mr. Sam!" The withered old face sagged with sorrow as the old man sat up. "We thought you were dead!"

"Not yet. Will you come and open the door for us, please?"

With help the aged retainer managed to stagger far enough to put his palm to the door-panel. Off to one side, Joe shook his head fractionally.

"It can't be opened from outside, sir, and it hasn't been forced."

"All right. Wedge it somehow, now that it is open. We don't want all this fuss every time we want to go in and out."

Sam followed Scott into a large and bright-lit room, three walls of which were windows. Sam, who had never seen it before, could feel his father's thinking here. A place to stand and look out over his domain. Typical. In the fourth wall was another door, standing open. Inside was a smaller room, tightly furnished with vision-screens, a desk, capacious memory-store modules, and a computer console. This was the uncluttered work space of a busy man, but it was silent now, as silent as the still figure in the chair.

"Didn't need any more than one look," Scott stated grimly. "See for yourself. There's a doctor on the way, but he has to come from the other side of the sector, and he can't do a damn thing when he gets here, except maybe tell us the cause of death."

Sam hesitated, felt Joe's strong arm come in support, and went forward to look. He needed the arm. Rex Hutten's face was so contorted in death-agony rictus that at first glance Sam had difficulty in recognizing him. Even Venner was shaken.

"By God, he looks as if something—or somebody—scared him to death. Louise, better take Sam out and get him something; he needs it. Joe, you and me will look. Damned if I know what for, but we'll look!"

From that moment on life acquired for Sam a middle-



distance texture of unreality. There were partial glimpses of conscious awareness. He knew that the drink Louise poured for him burned all the way down. He remembered a grave-faced stranger asking his formal permission to remove the body for a postmortem investigation. People asking him questions. Venner snarling, "Damn it, I know how to run an organization, this one or any other! Get whoever is next in the chain of command and tell him to carry on!"

Quiet little servo-robots trundling diligently to and fro about their tasks, one of which must have been to bring food, because he vaguely remembered eating something, drinking something. Someone—Louise?—discovering how to neutralize the trick door lock, from inside. Venner baffled. Joe just a massive enigma in the background. Snatches in black and white, shades of gray, all unreal. What was real was that Rex Hutten was dead. Killed.

The rock-bottom, taken-for-granted basis of Sam's life suddenly and incredibly gone. "I need you!" That half-humorous message burned in his brain. The old man had needed him, and now didn't need him, or anyone, any more. All that was alive in Sam Hutten churned and broke on that rock, and time stood and waited for him to pass it. Eventually he was aware of another drink, of someone telling him he needed to sleep, someone else helping him with strong but gentle hands to undress. Then rolling into a soft bed, and sinking down into miserable darkness.

Out of the dark came a hand to grasp his shoulder. On the instant he was totally and frantically awake, rigid with the insensate fear that "they" had come for him as they had his father. For one flash second, that held. Then, pulse hammering but suddenly resolved, he rolled over and grabbed at the hand that had touched him. In that same instant he became aware of something soft and warm on his other side, a flurry of movement, a click, the eye-ache of glaring light, and squinting to see that he was grappling roughly with old Hamlet. Jeff Hamlet, struggling feebly in a yellow-and-black striped nightshirt. He craned his head around desperately, to see Louise, her left arm still raised to the lamp cord, her right hand rock-steady and full of a deadly-looking weapon. Louise, all in powder blue froth-and-frills that were transparent enough to reveal not only her generous shape, but the black band of a belt about her waist. A holster, and a gun. Everything hung suspended for possibly three breaths. Then she slid back a step.

"Right, old man." Her voice had razors in it. "Make the

story good, and fast. What brings you on the prowl at this hour?"

Sam let go and sat up. She moved instantly to keep her bead on the old man. Sam blinked hard, shook his head to clear-it.

"What's going on here? Hamlet?"

The old man blinked, but his face set into obstinacy. "Your dad gave me a message for you, but it's private. That's what he told me. Only for you. I figured you'd be alone now."

"So did I." Sam swiveled his gaze back to Louise. "What the devil were you doing here, in my bed?"

"On it!" she corrected with gentle emphasis. "That can wait. I'll be back away out of earshot, and you go ahead and deliver the message—but don't overlook the fact that I can drill your eyeballs with this thing at twice the distance!"

"Not that kind of message." Hamlet was still mulish. "It's a recording. Keyed into the computer. I have the code combination."

Sam shook his head again and sighed. "This is ridiculous. Where are my clothes?"

Hamlet reached and handed him his pants and repeated, "Mr. Rex said particularly that it was private!"

"That's all right. I'll attend to it. You"—he glared around at Louise—"will stay here. You have some explaining to do."

The door burst open at that moment, and he got his head around just in time to see Venner come dashing in, also brandishing a weapon, also in an eyesore nightshirt, and Joe looming behind him in sedate gray allovers.

"Is everybody raving mad?" he cried. What do *you* want?"

Venner glared right past him to Louise, and then at Hamlet.

"What are you doing here?"

"Old faithful snuck in here just now, Chief," Louise drawled, "to have a confidential chat with Sam. Claims he has a special private message left by Rex Hutten."

"Chief?" Sam caught at the word, aimed a scowl at Venner, who looked at a loss without his perpetual cigar. "Chief?"

"You have some explanations coming, Hutten, but let's get this bit about the message straightened out first. What message?"

Old Hamlet shrank in on himself like a gnome. Sam eyed him, and sighed.

"It's supposed to be private. For my ears only."

"If it has any bearing on the killing . . ."

"How the devil can I tell until I hear it? See here, all of you, I have had just about enough of this. I don't remember asking for help, from any of you. I'm grateful for your help, of course. For everything you've done. But what *have* you done, anyway?"

"Just hold on a bit, son." Venner let his weapon sag. "You might not think you need us, but think again. Somebody tried to get you, twice. And somebody got your father. Nothing, so far as I know, is going to stop that somebody from trying again. Except us, and we aim to try. But as far as the message is concerned, well, you hear it, whatever it is, then you decide."

"Very well. I gather it is in the business computer. Lead on, Hamlet. I'll let you know, *Chief*."

As the old man shuffled away Sam heard Venner muttering "Better scare up one of those robots to bring coffee. We're going to have some talking to do in a minute."

The body was gone from the office, but it took Sam some effort to sit himself in that chair and key in the code settings that old Hamlet had memorized so carefully. As soon as the old man had gone out and shut the door, Sam took a deep breath and touched the read-out switch. The voice came as casually and naturally as if his father were sitting there with him.

"Hello, Sam." There was no emphasis, just gruff calm. "If you've got this far then it's pretty bad, and I'm sorry about that, but at least you'll know that it's something more than the senile ravings of an old fool. I'm storing this in the computer, and I'll give the key to Jeff, just in case something should come up to stop me from telling you all this in person. It *has* come up, if you are hearing me now. All right, let me put you in the picture. This has to be personal because it's nothing more than suspicions, so you may have to keep it under your hat. You'll be the best judge of that. Anyway, it's no secret, and you can check it, that this three-planet system is pretty well owned and run by eight men. Myself, Brandt and Eklund, right here on Verdan; Mullens and Armario on Zera; Silverstein, Groot and Lemkov on Ophir. You claim to have no interest in business or money, so a word or two about that will help. I control all the grain, wheat mostly, and other root and fruit produce. Eklund handles all the livestock. Max Brandt is responsible for all the processing and packaging, the marketing. Mullens and

Armario have the corner in petro-chemicals, synthetics and fuels, while the Ophir group make a big thing out of ores, rare earths, gems and semiprecious stones and stuff like that. The main point is this: wheat is still the major cash earner, and I'm still the head man, chairman and president. Not that I'm any dictator, but they usually go along with what I say.

"Until about a year ago, that is. That's when it started, just a small sense of things not being quite right. Call it a hunch. And it has been growing. There's nothing I can put my finger on, even now, but I get the impression, stronger all the time, that the rest, damn them, have gone power-happy over some sort of secession notion, to cut loose from Earth and set up an independent state. And, take it from me, Sam, this is lunacy! We are not economically viable as an independent unit, nor will we be for a couple of decades yet. We need Earth markets to survive, but Earth can do without us any old time. Anyway, you take my word for it, it would be the craziest thing we could do. Now, as I say, this is just suspicion. I've tried to squeeze something out into the open, but all I get is evasion and hints, and I can't help thinking that somebody—I don't know who—is rigging this thing against me. And that's why I need you. Business I can handle, anything economic—but when power-politics start creeping in, I bow out. I do not understand the power-complex, can't handle it. You're a sociologist, maybe you can. Maybe, at least, you can advise me on what's best to do. I need that, because this system is rich, believe me, and wealth means power, big power. I do not want it to explode in my face."

The gruff old voice halted, and Sam shook his head, frowning. Nothing he had heard so far indicated the need for fear or secrecy, not to this extent anyway. Business conflicts?

"This next bit is the hard part, Sam." Old Rex's voice took on an uncertain tone now, the half-humorous gruffness of the man who does not expect to be believed. "I reckon somebody is trying to get rid of me. Me in person, because I stand in the way. Maybe that's inflated ego, I don't know, but I feel it. And I am being haunted—and that is factual. I am hearing voices, being plagued by dreams and visions. No, I am not cracking up—I had Fisher check me over, just to make sure. He may not be the finest doctor ever, but he's good enough. And I am still hearing voices, whisperings in my mind when there's no one around. I didn't tell him

that, of course. And the voices? Well, again nothing I can pin down, but the general sense is this kind of thing: 'Soon now we will be strong enough to pull Earth down. We of Ceti will be the new world, the new rulers. Millions will flock to our cause. Those who stand in our way will be destroyed.' Stuff like that. Just whispers and hints, and the strong impression of one ruling personality at the back of it all."

The voice paused again, and Sam stifled a groan. Despite the doctor, it was obvious that the old man's mind was cracking, and he must have known it. It must have been hell for him. The voice came again, wearily now.

"That's about it, Sam. Just recently everything has turned sour, the voices have increased in power, and the conviction is growing that the whole system is on the point of blowing up into a crazy war with Earth. So I'm sending for you, in the hope that you'll be able to advise me what to do with this insane revolution. And if I am going loose in the head, I need somebody reliable to take over in my place. It has to be you; there's no one else. And, as I say, if you've got this far, it damn well has to be you. I hope you can handle it. Goodbye, son."

The machine click indicated the end of the message. Sam sat, rubbed his cheek, and felt helpless. According to Fisher, the doctor, the old man had been fit and well. According to this, he had been anything but. And yet he *had* been killed. *And* he had warned the Chief of Police. And, Sam thought, somebody had tried, more than once, to eliminate the heir, too. He shook his head at it, tried to recover his fine academic detachment, and failed utterly. It was a mess, and there was no sense whatever in trying to pretend that he wasn't involved. He was in it, like it or not. He got up, went to the door, called Venner.

"You might as well listen to it. You may be able to get something out of it. I can't. But I tell you this: I want action of some kind."

They all went in to listen, leaving him to sit outside and sip at a coffee brought him by one of the mechanicals, and think. When they came to join him Venner's face was a study in bewilderment. From somewhere he had got himself a cigar, and now he gnashed on it savagely. But Sam was reminded of something else.

"Let's start," he suggested harshly, "by explaining you three. Let's have the truth this time."

"Just change one item," Venner snapped. "Louise is one

of us. Why? Hutten, when you're chasing drugs, you're digging dirt. You're after people without scruples or moral sense. You can't trust anybody. I set Louise to tail you from Earth, while I crossed your path on Mars. Our little charade was to baffle you, just in case. Now, well, I reckon it's different, no point in doubting you, or your father."

"But she was in my bed, damn it!"

"On it!" Louise repeated her correction. "And you were in no state to notice or care. Sam, it has always been my private dream that some day I would hook a millionaire and live happily ever after—and you're the nearest thing to ideal I've struck so far—but not like that!" He started to feel angry, then recognized her wry humor under the words and sank back. She went on deliberately, "Somebody tried to kill you. Somebody did kill your father. We couldn't take any chances."

"All right." Sam sighed. "But who? And how?"

"Two good questions. If only we had two good answers to match."

"I will swear, on what reputation I have," Venner growled, "that nobody broke into that room. The medical report is a mess. Strong similarities to electric shock and convulsions, but no other signs except a curious burn-mark in the palm of his right hand. Joe and I have checked that equipment six ways. If he was electrocuted, we can't find out how he did it, or how anyone could have done it to him. As for who, if you want to believe that a gang of multimillionaires would gang up on one of their number and wipe him out because he was standing up against some plan of conquest, and do it by some kind of black magic—you can. I won't buy that."

"You're suggesting my father was crazy?"

"The doctor says not. And he *was* killed."

"So what do we do now?" Sam demanded. "I want action!"

"I came here chasing drugs, not power-crazy economics. Best thing you can do, Hutten, is round up your colleagues—go visit them in person, make yourself known, get them to a conference of some kind. You'll have to do that anyway, to decide on future business. So do it. Maybe we'll be able to spot the bad egg when we have them all together. Meanwhile I intend to track out that damned Ipomoea plant business, right here where it grows. You'll need protection, though. Take Louise."

"No!" Sam's response was reflex and violent, without stop-

ping to think. Then he added, lamely, "You know what I mean?"

"I don't mix business with pleasure, mister. It's your neck."

Sam thought hard. "Couldn't I take Joe? And your ship? You won't be needing it for a while."

Venner didn't like it, but there were obvious advantages. "All right. You'll be safe, that's for sure. Joe, you go with Hutten, take care of him, do whatever he says, bring him back safe."

## IX

FOUR HOURS LATER, at nine o'clock on a fine and sunny morning, Sam was sitting down with Max Brandt in penthouse privacy at the very top of the Brandt Building in Verdian City. Joe, as imperturbable as ever, was seated close by but merely an onlooker. Brandt, red-faced and overweight but with sharp eyes that missed little, expressed his condolences.

"A terrible thing, Mr. Hutten, especially here. You realize that we have very little sensational on Verdian. We are all working hard, making money, building a new world. You say he was killed?"

"It looks that way, but the medical evidence is indecisive. There are suspicious circumstances; let's leave it at that."

"In confidence"—Brandt glanced aside at Joe—"maybe I could tell you something?"

"It would be safe with Joe. I can guarantee that. What?"

"Well, it is no secret that we are growing very quickly here. Look, I'll show you the map." Brandt rose to waddle across to a wall and touch a switch that brought a sketchy map of Verdian glowing on a screen. "You see? So far we have only scratched the surface of the possibilities. Just one small part of one continent. We have room to grow. We *will* grow—one hundred, one thousand times greater, more wealthy than we are now, and soon!" Brandt led the way back to his desk. "You are fresh from Earth. You must surely know how the authorities there are casting envious eyes at us, how they would like to take over?"

"Can't say I've heard anything about that, Mr. Brandt."

"No? But then you must be naïve. In political matters, I mean. No personal offense."

"I suppose I am, but I don't see where that has anything to do—"

"With your father? Perhaps not. But he was our strong man, you see. How convenient to have him out of the way, to upset our association."

"You mean this could be some kind of assassination, directed by Earth interests?"

"I suggest it, nothing more. I could be wrong. In any case, it is for us to strengthen our ranks, all of us. We must be unanimous."

"That's really why I came to see you, Mr. Brandt. It's my plan to invite all the interested parties to a full-scale conference, to decide what happens next. You see, I have to take over from my father now, and I am hardly equipped, not right away. I need help and advice."

"But of course. Very wise. You can depend on me."

"Right. Shall we say two weeks from today?" Sam was on his feet and ready to leave, but Joe had a word.

"A small matter, Herr Brandt. That is a very fine sun-stone you have there. May I ask where you got it?"

"This?" Brandt opened his palm to show the glowing red fire-ball he held and had been playing with. "You must be mistaken, surely. I have seen sun-stones, of course, but they are not at all like this. Not so big, much more brilliant, wonderful gems. This is just a stone, a lucky piece. For sun-stones you must talk to Fred Lemkov, when you get to Ophir. He is the expert on such things."

"I see." Joe nodded gently. "And where did you get this—stone?"

"I do not remember. I have had it a long time. It is not valuable, I assure you." Brandt dropped the red sphere in his pocket and led Sam to the door and out. It was not until they were once more settled in the charter-plane, with Joe carefully studying charts for their next hop that Sam decided to remark on the peculiar stone.

"Now you are pulling coincidences," he said curiously. "Twice. You're sure that was a sun-stone, aren't you?"

"I would need a laboratory test to be absolutely certain, but I'm reasonably sure. It is cut all wrong. One doesn't cut that kind of stone *en cabochon*. That wastes all the refractive quality. One might do it with a defective gem, to get asterism, but there was no sign of that."



"Back up a bit," Sam pleaded. "What's asterism?"

"It is usually seen in rubies or sapphires; an internal dazzle effect like a six-point star. It's due to microscopic inclusions aligned along the hexagonal lattice. But that stone didn't have it. As a gem-stone it should have been brilliant-cut anyway. For electromagnetic purposes it would be cut altogether differently again, only one wouldn't use a stone as big and as valuable as that in radio work."

"Whatever you say." Sam shrugged and forgot it until they were airborne and on course. This time they were heading straight out to sea in a southwesterly direction, aiming across three hundred miles of ocean to the island mass which Eklund had converted into one huge livestock preserve. Below them they saw the white-foam trail of a busy cargo-hydrofoil heading back to Verdun. When they were well on course, Sam tried again.

"That coincidence. Eklund's daughter was wearing a stone just like Brandt's. Said her father gave it to her."

"Perhaps he can tell us where he got it. Since we have already had an encounter with Miss Eklund, perhaps we had better work out a plausible story for this visit. I'd better be Adam Orbert again."

By the time that was done to their satisfaction they were in sight of the island. According to the chart it was roughly oval in shape, about five hundred miles by one hundred fifty, and the harbor was right in front of them as they flew, but when Joe raised ground control on the radio and asked for Eklund he was given coordinates for inland. Below them now was the natural harbor, as yet unnamed, and ahead it was obvious that a low mountain peak dominated the island's center. The terrain here was quite different from what they had flown over in going to and from Northwheat.

"Uneven," Joe commented, sparing a glance for it. "Plenty of scrub and brush. Pretty good cattle country but not much use for anything else without considerable smoothing out. Eklund must need an extensive staff to keep track of his stock."

"You seem to know all about everything," Sam declared, unable to keep just a tinge of sharpness out of his voice. Joe kept a straight face.

"I have eidetic recall, and no personal bias," he said, then cocked an eye at his radar. "We should be almost there."

They came swiftly up into the lee of the craggy peak of the mountain, and now they could see, ahead and below,

where some skilled hand had carved a park-like estate out of the wilderness. It lay like a neat apron in front and to either side of a gleaming white villa that was backed into the side of the mountain itself. Sam studied it.

"Does himself well, our cattle baron," he decided, comparing this magnificence with his father's humbler, more functional estate. "Reminds me of something Roman." Joe sent out another radio query and put the jet into a slow turn. Within seconds the reply came in a rich and rolling voice, full of chest-notes even through the little speaker.

"Here is Eklund. Who comes?"

Sam took the microphone. "Hello, Mr. Eklund. This is Sam Hutten."

"Hutten? *Sam* Hutten, the son of my dear old friend, Rex?"

"Nice to know that you've heard of me, Mr. Eklund."

"But—how can this be? The last word I had was that you had been killed in some disaster or other!"

"It's not true, but it almost was. May I have your permission to come down and talk with you?"

"By Thor! Sam Hutten! But of course, my dear boy, you must descend. You are most welcome. Can you see the field, to the south of the villa? It is equipped with ground-approach automatics. One moment, I will give you the coordinate references." He reeled off figures and Joe noted them, put up his thumb to confirm. The big voice resumed. "Do you ride, Mr. Hutten?"

"Ride? You mean on a horse?"

"That's right. Do you?"

"I've had lessons, but I haven't been across a saddle in years, why?"

"I will send someone to meet you, with a mount."

The connection went, and Sam replaced the microphone thoughtfully. Once, several years ago, he had taken a course in riding, more from a desire to get the mounted man's viewpoint than from any desire to gallop away anywhere. He had not enjoyed it very much, had never been able to feel that he was in command of the plunging beast. Then he shook his head.

"I forgot about you, Joe. I should have mentioned you. Do you ride?"

"Yes. Quite well. It seems that Eklund likes to live his part with all the detailed touches."

They were circling down into range now. Sam watched as Joe picked up the approach-beacon and set up the auto-

matic responses, then lifted his hands from the controls. The plane swooped in and down over a trotting herd of beefy animals that looked like cows but with subtle differences. Ahead was a long strip of green as neat and smooth as a lawn. The machine touched and rolled. The motor died. Joe raised a hand to point.

"Eklund flies," he said. "There's a hangar. The way it's landscaped, I couldn't see it from above."

As they climbed out there came the distant pounding of hooves and here came a Valkyrie, silver hair streaming in the wind, mounted on a great black stallion that moved like a tiger. No expert on horseflesh, even Sam could appreciate that this was a wonderful beast. So, too, were the silver grays she led, one on either side. He had never seen such horses, or such riding, and was quite properly awed as she brought the thundering cavalcade right up to where they stood and reined in her mount at the last minute into a plunging halt. The grays danced to her shrill commands, and sidled away. She leaned over, flung a long leg, and slid down to the turf, and as she turned to come toward them, Sam recognized her.

This was Corinne Eklund, but transformed. Gone now was the facade of cool hauteur she had shown as a stewardess, traces of which had still remained when interrogated by Joe on the warp-ship. Now she was all radiant and alive, a goddess, a child of Nature—the futile words jumbled together in his mind as she came to a halt before him. Her hair, rippled by the breeze, caressed her shoulders. Her only garment, apart from leg-laced sandals, was a brief loin-cloth in paper-white silky stuff. Warm sunlight glowed from her magnificent curves, and there was another warmth, all her own, which came to him as she put out her hand in greeting.

"Welcome, Mr. Hutten. I am so glad to see you again. When my father told me—I could hardly believe it. I saw the *Ceti Queen*—it was awful. I believed you dead!"

"I certainly would have been but, as luck would have it, I had just accepted the offer of a lift, privately, from a friend. Need I say I'm glad I did? And I am certainly very glad to see you again, although I never expected—like this—" Sam let go her hand and tried to regain self-control. There was witchcraft in this girl, an immense attractiveness that was only indirectly to do with her visible charms. She smiled, and the magic grew stronger.

"You are surprised that I would play-act at being a stewardess?"

"I'm puzzled, certainly. Not that it's any of my affair."

"It's no mystery!" She laughed, and he felt quite foolish in his inability to hold back a laugh along with her. "My father will tell you, if you give him the chance, that I am a wicked girl. Headstrong and impulsive. According to him. But, very simply, it is just that I get dreadfully bored here. It is a beautiful place, and my home, but so dull after a while. Don't you find it a drag, sometimes, to be so rich?"

"It has drawbacks," Sam allowed, with feeling.

"You see?" She shrugged devastatingly, and laughed again. "People behave differently when one is in a lowly position. It makes interest."

Remembering the conventions with something of an effort, Sam turned to nod. "I believe you've already met Mr. Orbert?"

She turned her smile on Joe. "I remember. You were so curious about my fire-ball stone. Be welcome to my home, Mr. Orbert."

"Thank you." Joe nodded pleasantly, and Sam noticed, on the side, how slightly, subtly but positively, his whole poise had changed. He said, "You're not wearing it now."

"But I always carry it," she said, "for good luck. See?" and she dipped fingertips into a fold of her loincloth garment, brought out the delicate chain and its attached stone, let it fall into Joe's palm. He took it close, studied it for about ten seconds, then returned it to her.

"Thank you. You brought *two* extra mounts. Guesswork?"

"Partly. It was likely that Mr. Hutten would be piloted, you see. But more because both Edda and Hilda need a run, and there would be a choice." She turned and snapped her fingers to the head-tossing grays. "They are both very well behaved. Not like my Wotan, who can be a devil sometimes, even with me. If you are ready?"

"I'm no rider," Sam warned. "Is it far?"

"Less than a mile. It is nothing!"

Nothing for her, Sam thought, but he was glad to see the veranda front of the villa draw near. He would have appreciated better circumstances in which to study it. A lot of marble, and artistry, had gone into the creation, and he was reminded more and more of ancient Rome. For a wonder, the man who stood at the top of the steps waiting to greet them was a fair match for the magnificence of the setting. He topped Sam's six feet by a clear three inches,

his shoulders were beam-broad and his stance lordly; his head would have delighted any classical sculptor; there was firm power in the hand that he extended in welcome, and his eyes were as blue as the morning sky as he said, "Welcome to my home, Mr. Hutten. This is a pleasure I had not hoped for, after such dreadful news. How is your father? Why did he not come with you?"

"Then you haven't heard yet? More bad news, I'm afraid, Mr. Eklund. My father is dead."

"No!" Eklund said it strongly, almost indignantly. "But you would not joke about such a thing, so it must be true. And terrible. How? And when? You must forgive me, I get so very few visitors, and even less news, here. You must tell me all about it."

"There isn't a lot to tell. May I introduce Mr. Orbert?" Sam waved a hand. "He happened to meet your daughter, and he's interested in the stone she was wearing, so I brought him along."

"Ah yes. Corinne told me of you. Welcome, Mr. Orbert. But please come inside and be comfortable. I forget my manners. This way."

Eklund led off at a fast stride, his long white toga-like garment swirling in the breeze of his movement, bringing them to a long and airy room bright with color and luxurious with long low couches. A purring robot came in response to his signal. When they had been properly settled and served, he gestured to Sam.

"Now, you will please tell me all about this dreadful thing."

Sam told him what there was, omitting any speculation and playing down the mystery. Corinne, opposite him, was wide-eyedly attentive, her agitation obvious.

"Then you do not know, really, what happened—or how?" she demanded, when the tale was finished.

"That's it. There's possibility of foul play, as they say in the dramas. The local police are looking into that angle. I don't know what to think."

"Police!" Eklund snorted. "Here? We have no police worthy of the word, nor have we needed them before. This is not Earth, Hutten. Here we are peace-loving, hard-working—shall I say it?—wholesome. This is a fair planet, not like that stinking rat-heap we came from. Mark me, my young friend, if the truth is ever discovered it will be found that your father was done to death by some Earth interest. Does that surprise you?"

"Not really," Sam admitted. "Not now. I can't see it myself, but I paid a visit to Max Brandt just before coming to see you, sir, and he said something very much the same. You see," and he dragged his eyes away from Corinne to concentrate on her father, "no matter how, or why, now that my father is dead it is up to me to carry on in his place. And, frankly, I'm not up to it on my own. I shall need help. I'm now on my way calling on all my father's associates with the idea of arranging a policy conference, so that we can work something out. That's why I visited Brandt, and why I am here. I need your help."

"You are very wise, my boy. And quite right. It is proper that you should go to see everyone, in person. And we must have a conference, of course. But where? Had you thought of that?"

"Not yet, no. Things are happening so fast—"

"Then allow me to suggest—why not here? I have ample room, and seclusion. Privacy. The others have all been my guests at one time or another and will be pleased to come. And I will be delighted, too, to be able to help. You accept?"

"I don't see why not. That's very kind of you."

"It is nothing. My boy, listen to me." Eklund leaned forward and the force of his personality was a tangible thing now. "We must preserve a common purpose here. This planet, this whole system, is mankind's chance to start again, to build a new and better world. I am not ashamed to ask you to look around—to look at me, and my lovely daughter—and realize that I have a great affection and admiration for the ideals of Ancient Greece. I do not say that we should try to go back—that is not possible. But it is true that humanity reached its glorious peak at that time, and has declined ever since. I say we have the chance, here, to start again and go forward, and achieve the greatness that is in us. But I also say this:

"Envious eyes are cast upon us. We are a prize that Earth would like to grab, and squeeze dry. I have said that I believe your father fell prey to Earth machinations. That may not be true, but what is true is that we must act together now in case someone sees an opportunity to divide us. You are wise to call a conference. We will talk more about it at that time. But now, let us discuss something different, something less harrowing. Mr. Orbert, you were interested in my daughter's stone, the fire-ball?"

"That's right," Joe agreed. "I thought it was a sun-stone. I still think so, although I've never seen one cut *cabochon*."

"Ah! You know something of gem-stones, then? Wait here a moment."

Eklund rose and went striding out. Corinne dipped into her loincloth again, got out the chain, passed it over her head, and arranged the glowing red fire-ball so that it lay between her out-thrust breasts. She sat up artlessly, putting back her shoulders and exhibiting the fire-glow of the stone against her honey-tanned skin. As if, Sam thought with pounding pulses, she needed anything to draw attention to her abundant curves. He was almost glad when her father returned, to offer a distraction and produce a carved wooden casket, which he opened with a small flourish.

"What of these, Mr. Orbert?" he demanded, with a mischievous smile, and lifted out a tray that was full of glowing spheres in all colors and hues. Passing that tray to Joe, he removed another to pass to Sam; by the look of the box there were more layers. Joe studied the array carefully.

"I am no expert," he confessed. "I know a little, but not enough to be able to identify this material."

"Your candor does you credit, nor does it surprise me that you cannot name the mineral. So far as I know, it is as yet unnamed. It is an odd but quite common crystalline deposit found in several places, on Ophir. It is, I believe, a magnesium-titanium compound. Worthless, except for show. My friend Lemkov—you know of Lemkov?—gave me a quantity of it, when I asked him to find something for me to play with. A hobby of mine. But they will not cut. The cleavage-lines are irregular. All I could do was turn them into spheres, as you see. Perhaps I will pierce some, sometime, for a necklace. But not, I assure you, sun-stones. My dear sir, think of the value if they were! The color deceived you, perhaps?"

"That's possible." Joe touched one or two, handed back the tray. "Thank you for putting me right, sir."

"It is nothing. Allow me to present you with one—of the red ones? And you, Hutten. Please! My friends are good enough to say that they can bring good fortune."

"I can certainly use some of that." Sam shrugged and chose one of the fiery spheres, seeing Joe do the same.

"Now we have something in common." Corinne smiled, arching herself, and Sam nodded, unable to trust his voice for a moment. Then he stirred.

"That's it, then. I'm sorry to dash off, sir, but the sooner I get around to the others—you know what I mean?"

"Of course. You have much to do and a sad errand. But

please feel that you are welcome here at any time. Any time." As they moved out onto the veranda again, Corinne took his arm possessively.

"You must come back, very soon. And stay longer. It will not be dull, if you are here."

"The next time you come," Eklund declared, "we will talk of other things. Are you, for instance, interested in cosmology?"

"I know very little about it, I'm afraid."

"A pity. I would like your reaction to a theory of mine that accounts for many of the mysteries of this planetary system."

"Oh?" Sam frowned, and waited out of politeness, while Corinne clung to his hand and snuggled close to him. "I had no idea there was all that much mystery about it. Do you mean about Zera, and the mineral deposits?"

"And other things. As you say, Zera is bleak and frozen, yet it is rich in the fossilized remains of tropical vegetation. This planet, now, *should* be tropical, and is not. It has no native fauna larger than a small rabbit-like creature. And Ophir, so rich in oxides and rare earths, is much too hot and too near the primary ever to have formed such deposits. A whole mass of contradictions."

"Doesn't that just prove that our cosmology theories are faulty?"

"Possibly, but there is an easier way than casting aside the whole of physics, my boy. If we assume just one thing—my belief that this entire system is the result of intelligent manipulation. That it has been deliberately rearranged by some alien intelligence!"

"Good Lord! That's quite an assumption. Do you have any evidence to support it?"

"Only what can be seen all around. When you see something that could not possibly have happened by itself, what other explanation is possible?"

Corinne had readied the horses. Sam was glad to scramble up and get away. He'd have to have been stone-dead not to respond to the exultant loveliness of the goddess who rode by his side, or to fail to tingle at the clasp of her hand as she bade him a last goodbye and insisted that he come again, soon. But it was with a sigh of relief that he settled alongside Joe in the plane and heard the engine roar up to speed.



## X

WHEN THEY were safely airborne and headed back for Verdan, Sam let out a long sigh of relief, again.

"It probably doesn't affect you in the same way," he said to Joe, "but that's the first time in my life I ever felt crowded by just one man! Talk about larger than life!"

"An unusual pair," Joe admitted. "And a really intriguing theory that Mr. Eklund put forward."

"Alien intelligences? You're not serious?"

"It has the undoubted merit of explaining all the anomalies of this planetary system in one package. None of the other theories do."

"Theory is no good without proof. Or evidence, anyway. And what about those sun-stones now? You must have been wrong."

"That is possible, of course, but I would rather shelve the matter until I can do some tests. There is an adequate laboratory facility on the *Venner Three*."

"You don't give up easily, do you?"

"That's not the question, here. There are discrepancies. Whether the gems are sun-stones or not, the way they have been cut is intriguing. Mr. Eklund said he couldn't cut the mineral he mentioned, but had to *turn* it. One doesn't turn this kind of thing. Neither the stone that Miss Corinne wore, nor Brandt's, nor those he had in the box, certainly not the one he very kindly gave me—were turned. That much is certain."

"I don't see how you could keep still long enough to notice, the way she was putting it on. There's a girl would drive a man mad!"

"She has a great deal of personal magnetism," Joe allowed, and Sam snorted. He was still feeling scorched by the memory.

"It must be different for you," he growled, and immediately felt ashamed of himself, but if Joe was offended he made no sign.

As they set down in Verdand's spaceport it was only a short step to the *Venner Three*. On Joe's suggestion, it seemed the best place to be. In the control room Joe asked for a telephone link and a number.

"I'm calling the Verdian office of Interplanetary Security in case Mr. Venner has any information for us," he explained.

"An office? I didn't know ISB had an office here!"

"We have offices on all the major planets where there are colonies. The operators are merely observers, with no authority. ISB has no power to intervene in internal affairs. Hello!"

The face that grew on the screen was dark with Latin-American contours, announced itself as José Ramirez and then abruptly gave way to the familiar countenance of Orbert Venner, complete with cigar.

"Joe. What's new?"

"Very little, sir. We have contacted Brandt and Eklund, are about to lift off for Zera. Will you speak to Mr. Hutten?"

"Sure. Put him on. Hutten, any more attacks, threats, anything like that? Anything you think I ought to know about?"

"As Joe told you, very little. Brandt is fairly normal, Eklund is eccentric—maybe more than that—and both of them seem to have the solid conviction that there's an interstellar plot hatching, for Earth to take over this system. Apparently a lot of other people think so too."

"They could be right, but that's no concern of ours. You're getting the conference idea across?"

"No trouble there. It's the obvious thing to do in any case, isn't it? Only one slight alteration. Eklund has suggested we hold it at his place, and I see nothing wrong with that."

"All right. On our side we have a crumb or two." Venner edged to one side to make room for Louise, who smiled and nodded greeting. "So far as I can find, that damned plant grows only in a few places, all on your father's home fields. The seeds are extracted in processing. Probably cheaper that way. I believe some of them are shipped to Eklund, and Louise will be going after that lead. Me, I'm going to snoop around the processing end a bit. We will leave reports here from time to time, just in case we're not here when you get back, and you do the same, huh? Have a good trip."

The screen darkened, but Sam sat staring at it for quite some time, struck by the dramatic contrast between Louise and Corinne. Dark hair, dark eyes, and the screen had shown enough to remind him of her ample shape—an attractive woman for all her flippant surface-mannerisms. But compared with Corinne she seemed crude somehow.

"Something troubling you?" Joe asked.

"Eh? No, it's nothing. How long to Zera?"

"A little over eighteen hours, and almost all of it on automatic. You had better catch up on some sleep."

"You have a good idea there." Sam sighed, realizing suddenly just how weary he was. "Will you be all right on your own?"

"I think so. Will you let me have that sun-stone Mr. Eklund gave you, please. I won't damage it."

"Going to do your tests, eh? All right, here." The smooth sphere felt strangely warm, and unexpectedly heavy in his hand. Holding it he had a sudden and extremely vivid memory-picture of Eklund, lordly and majestic, with Corinne by his side, bewitchingly beautiful. The picture made him shiver. He passed the fire-stone to Joe gladly.

"I'll turn in," he said. "Just in case I don't wake, call me before we get down, won't you?"

Much to his own relief, Sam slept well. He had half-expected and wholly dreaded nightmares, but when he woke he had no memory of any. It grieved him, still, to think of his father ending his life in delirium, but what else was there to think?

Joe was up in the control room watching the image of the gray storm-planet down there. The ship was an hour away from planetfall and arrowing in on the spaceport beacon. Sam took a look at the screens and shivered at the signs of sleet and snow.

"Hostile sort of place," he muttered. "Damned if I'd care to live there. How do they stand it?"

"Almost all the domestic establishments are below the surface," Joe explained. "An artificial environment which cannot be so very different from the way things are on Earth. But it makes Mr. Eklund's point. It is difficult to see how this planet can ever have had lush tropical vegetation."

"I won't buy aliens," Sam objected; "not just like that. And there have been no traces found that I've heard of."

There was silence for a while as Joe made fractional adjustments, then Sam brought up the subject that was haunting him.

"Voices," he said. "When a man hears voices out of nowhere, that's a sure sign of insanity, isn't it?"

"Not necessarily," Joe corrected, instantly but calmly. "That was the traditional belief. Much more is known, now, about the anatomy of the brain. Mechanical stimulus of certain areas, for instance the temporal lobe region, produce a 'play-back' effect. The person hears, or sees, or both, some scene

from his own past as if it were being repeated. Optical flicker patterns can produce similar effects. So can certain chemical substances."

"Drugs, you mean?"

"That word is used loosely, always pejoratively."

"Sorry," Sam mumbled. "I ought to know better. But you're saying that certain chemical changes in the brain can cause the subject to actually 'hear' and 'see' things that aren't there?"

"It has been done. There's not too much data on it. You'll understand, that is the kind of experiment that is very difficult to do, for all sorts of reasons. Similar effects can also be produced by certain rather irregular radio frequencies, but again, nothing very definite is known, as to fine detail."

"You seem to know a lot about it."

"Only because I have a special interest in the subject. As a matter of fact quite a lot of material has come up as the result of experiment and observation on *Ipomoea* addicts. Some of them claim to hear voices, not that such evidence is one hundred percent reliable, but it is interesting."

Sam thought about it grimly. "Do you think it's possible that my father was being doped in some way?"

"I have no opinion on that. There were no postmortem signs. All I wish to suggest is that it does not necessarily follow that he was deranged, just because he had visions and heard voices."

"I see. Well, that's something to be thankful for, I suppose. But now we have to look at the possibility that somehow somebody either doped him, or got at him with some kind of radio-wave—and drove him to death. That's how to kill a man inside a locked room, all right. The classical crime-story twist. That's fine for fiction, but this is real. Give it to me straight. Is that sort of expert know-how available? Can it be done?"

"I don't know," Joe admitted. "Certainly not within the state of the art as known to me, but I would need an expert second opinion before being certain."

"Where do you reckon to get that?"

"I don't know," Joe repeated, "but there are plenty of technical experts down there, and many more on *Ophir*. I can ask around. I can do that while you are talking to the businessmen you've come to see."

Sam watched him caress his controls and ease *Venner Three* in to a perfect lock-on to the beacon control down there. The ship began to slide down through Zera's gale-

harried atmosphere. He felt a twinge of envy. He couldn't imagine, at all, what it felt like not to have a personal ego-sense. He wasn't even sure what the term meant. But it had to include, by way of a bonus, complete freedom from personal problems. There could be problems in plenty, but they would all be academic. No gnawing worries. No fear, for instance, of being killed. No sense of sorrow at personal loss. And none of the corrosive futility of yearning for some kind of personal revenge without any clue where to turn to gratify it. It must be a blessing to be free of all that.

The envy, the bitterness, the futility, stayed with Sam as they were met and hustled through arctic weather to a drift entrance and into the extensive underground warrens of Zera City. Around the spaceport, screamed at by the perpetual gales, were the gaunt angles of rigs and refineries, crackers and converters, plant of all kinds, making the scene look like some casual glimpse into a corner of Scandinavian hell, but once underground everything was snug and opulent. Crude and tasteless in spots, as is any place where wealth and hard work clash, but comfortable for everyone. There were women here, and children. Homes, theaters, leisure areas, shopping centers, even hard-struggling gardens and grass, enough to make a man marvel at the irrepressible spirit of man against nature. But Sam had small time for it all. He wanted to meet Mullens and Armario and get it over with.

They were a contrasting pair. Mullens was long, lean, taut-nerved and intense, whereas Armario, a small and dark explosion of a man, was all vivid affability and smiles, muted now because the ether-waves had already brought the news to them of Rex Hutten's passing. "We are sorry for you," he said forthrightly. "And for us, too. In this business a man does not expect to live forever. It is a hard life. But to be killed, that's different. We are vulnerable. All rich men are vulnerable. Always there are those who envy, who want to take, to rob, steal, cheat. But killing!"

"We don't know he was killed, Eddie." Mullens restrained his more voluble partner. "Hutten didn't say that. All the same, as long as it's a possibility we have to watch it. There's plenty would like to see the Ceti System taken over by Earth. Right now we're independent, free agents. Pretty soon we'll be in a position to cut loose altogether, and talk to Earth on a basis of cultural equality. They won't like that."

Sam resigned himself to hearing a rehash of the same old story. He was able to listen and nod at the appropriate moments, and at the same time pursue a train of thought all his

own. Somebody had spread the propaganda very thoroughly, and, at this stage, it was pointless to try to determine who. Brandt, Eklund, and now these two all sounded as if they had arrived at their belief by rational means. To them it was an obvious thing. And that meant that they had been nursing the notion so long that they would not now recall, even if they wanted to, who had first suggested it to them. Whoever it was, he had done his work well.

On the other hand, Sam mused, the second part of his father's fateful message had contained the impression that someone was calling the people of this system to rise and start to create the New World. And that sounded very much like Eklund. Only Sam couldn't imagine his father being sold on that kind of oratory any more than he himself had been. Eklund had a tremendous personality, true, but he was a nut, a fanatic obsessed with the glories of the past. Sam had met many like him, people who firmly believed in the "good old days" and that everything since the Renaissance was a decline. And that loopy theory about alien intelligences!

But there was one curious thing. Mullens, nerve-tight and abrupt, had a trick of rattling something in his pocket, and once, in a gesture, he produced a red sphere, together with a couple of ball bearings. Sam was intrigued, and thought immediately of Captain Queeg. Then he noticed that Armario had one too, mounted into a gold stickpin to hold his shirt-neck neat. For good luck, Eklund had said, and if wealth was anything to go by, these men were lucky enough. All at once he wanted to get away. He was sick of wealth and of the hazards in its train, wealth that could make men and women burrow in holes under the surface of a strange planet like so many worms. Never before had he really appreciated just how powerful the lure of wealth was. He was infinitely glad when Joe reappeared and offered him an excuse to depart.

Their little ship looked small and bright, grotesquely out of place alongside the massive and functionally ugly ore and oil carriers. As out of place as he felt.

"You know," he muttered as Joe hit the switches and they fell upward and away from the bleakness, "if only I could find some way to do it fairly I'd drop this whole affair right now, take passage back to Earth, and forget the whole thing. It is just not me!"

"Aren't you interested in problems?"

"Oh sure, but not this kind. Joe, I have never been interested in politics. That may sound strange for a sociologist,

but it's true. My interest is in the forces that infuse and move people, in the mass and as individuals, and a politician is neither one nor the other—he's the instrument of a drive, a lust for power. When you couple that lust to the other one, greed for wealth, I just do not want to know. And that's all this is, a cabal of wealthy men obsessed with some urge to wrap up this whole planetary system as their own personal package. This idea that Earth is trying to take it away from them is nothing more than the projection of their own subconscious urges. I think my father knew it, and he was absolutely right—it's insane. Whether they conspired together to get rid of him or not seems to make very little difference now. There'll be a conference, with or without me; that's unavoidable. And it can lead to one of two things: either I agree, go along, become a rubber stamp—or I could try opposing them, and they would crush me without straining themselves. I'm just not equipped. I can't fight them the way my father would have."

"He wasn't very successful," Joe pointed out.

"That could be why someone is trying to kill me," Sam mused. "If that someone has the notion that I would resist, like Dad, be an obstacle in the way of the plan."

"But what plan?" Joe queried. "Earth has no designs on the Ceti System. Not yet, anyway. The most that could come of it would be a trade war, and that's not likely for a long time yet."

"But somebody thinks so. Joe, I am sociologist enough to know that no group ever really functions without a leader of some kind. My father *was* the controlling voice. Not now. Somebody wanted him out of the way. The same somebody wanted me out of the way too. So why don't I just do that?"

Joe made no reply for a long while. His face was unreadable, calm and inward-turned, thoughtful. "There is still the question of means," he said, at last. "We can discount drugs, because your father showed no other indication of being abnormal. That leaves only the possibility of some kind of specially-tuned radio wave or something similar. I managed to talk to one or two qualified men, and they all agreed that it would be possible but impractical to direct a modulated beam over a distance to strike a specific target no bigger than a man. The three major snags would be distance, power output, and the hazard to anything in between. On the other hand, the whole thing would be enormously simplified if one could contrive to have a tuned receiver at the target end."

"You've got something on your mind," Sam accused, and Joe nodded.

"I thought I had. A suspicion, nothing more than that." He reached into a compartment under the control panel and brought out a metal box. He cracked open the lid to show a fire-ball inside.

"Sun-stones," he said flatly. "This *is* a sun-stone. So, too, was the one Mr. Eklund gave me and which I tested to destruction just to be quite sure. No doubt about it at all. The point I was pursuing is this: that the sun-stones are precious as gems, yes, but they are also extremely valuable because they have certain rather unique and unusual electronic properties. In certain configurations they can act as a one-unit demodulator; in others the effect is similar to a Gunn device—that is, like a variable capacitor with a zero-infinity range. Other experimenters have reported some extremely interesting effects in extrasensory perception."

"Eh?" Sam stared at him. "Psionics? But that's hokum, isn't it?"

"It's an extremely difficult field in which to be positive, but the reports I have come across indicate something worth following up. So I had to assume that it was a possibility here. That stone has been cut, *and* cooked with hard radiation too, for some purpose. However"—he extended the box to Sam and shrugged—"I got no results of any kind from mine, although I tested it, as I say, to destruction. You'd better have yours back."

Sam took it. The little box was surprisingly heavy, probably lead. He tilted it, let the stone roll into his palm, put the box away. Again, the glowing thing was quite definitely warm to the touch, and heavy.

"Worth quite a bit," he said, "if you're right. But why would Eklund give them away? And how come Lemkov, supposedly an expert, could be so wrong about the stuff they were cut from?"

"I don't know." Joe was flat calm on it, but his face carried just the trace of a frown. "I do not like things that fail to add up. . . ."

Sam heard his voice plainly, and yet it was far away, all at once, and there was a warm tingle in his hand, like a tickle that made him close his fingers by reflex. And now—

"I can hear voices," he breathed, "myself, now. Faint and far away. No words, just a call, very very faint." He looked at Joe in wonder, and then that faded out too, went away, and instead there was a vision, a loveliness to make him gasp



and catch his breath. Now there were many voices, a vast choir of sound, and yet it wasn't singing, just talking, a host of quite impelling voices, calling . . . calling . . .

## XI

HE STOOD ALONE on a low hill, with the sun warm on his face, a delicate breeze caressing his body, and he felt godlike. The quiet wonderment at this state of effortless bliss was like a song. Before him stretched a green and fertile plain, the breeze rippling fugitive patterns in the lush grass. Even as he stared, wondering where he was, the scene modulated to become a wide-curving beach, a vivid blue sea, dazzling white sand. A gay company of exquisite people played there, dipping in and out of the waves, moving over the sands. Wonderful people, the women ravishing, the men handsome and stalwart, all of them naturally and sublimely unadorned—and he knew he was one of them.

The vision dissolved and changed again, to a vista of an elegant village of unobtrusively beautiful dwellings in delicate pastel colors and nestling in graceful garden grounds. Again the people were there, moving gaily and eagerly, nodding and smiling to each other. Now they turned to look to him, to wave, to call him into their company. And the melodious voices grew stronger, still without distinct words, but their meaning was plain: *Join with us. Become as we are.*

In his mind, although unspoken, he knew it was for him, and that there was more, so much more, than was apparent on the surface. Paradise, a simple land where life was good and happiness was the rightful part for everyone. And power, too. No illness nor sickness here. No poverty, no anxieties, no fears of any kind. Come and join us!

For a while, it seemed, he dawdled and enjoyed the sense of being able to choose. Even this was free. He could refuse if he wished. It was power, although there was no real doubt in his mind that he would choose to go and be with them. Even as he dallied, slightly drunk with the anticipation, out of the moving assembly came three glorious girls, each an exquisite thing, each with a delicate daintiness, each with

a radiant and inviting smile to lure him, not that he needed luring.

He could resist no longer. He stirred himself to run—and out of the clamor came a distinct voice, the 'sense' of another who spoke to him, this time in plain words.

"All this shall be yours, and more, if you but follow me. All this!"

Just one breath the vision held, then something fundamental within him made Sam draw back in rejection, revulsion against temptation. The glorious vision wavered and became unreal, dwindled swiftly away. That persuasive voice came stronger now, compelling. "If you but follow me . . ."

"No!" he shouted, and the vision collapsed. "No, damn you, you can't win me that way!"

All at once he was staring wide-eyed at Joe and trying furiously to open his hand. There was a knotting tingle in his palm. His fingers were locked as if someone had replaced the tendons with hot steel wire. Joe moved all at once, lifted his hand and brought it down sharply, palm-edge to Sam's wrist. The shock was agony, but so was the hell-fire that burned in his palm, searing and scorching. His hand flew open helplessly and the glowing red ball fell, to strike the steel deck and explode in a blinding flare of actinic blue. Sam screamed as air got to the burn in his palm.

The next thing he knew, he was stretched out on his bunk, in the cabin Venner had allocated to him so long ago. That sight was normal, familiar and comforting. The rheumatic aches all over his body were not. He groaned as he bent his arm to bring his right palm to where he could inspect it, and groaned again as he saw the fresh burn-mark there, now sealed under a thin skin of ointment. So it had not been a dream, a nightmare, but real. He groaned again and sat up, feeling old. Joe appeared in the doorway.

"Are you all right?" he demanded, and Sam winced.

"I've felt better."

"You know who you are, where you are, remember what happened?"

"Eh? Oh, see what you mean. I'm still sane. I think."

"That's a relief." Joe settled on a seat. "I had no way of checking that. I could tell you hadn't broken any bones, and I have treated the burn in your palm, but I feared you might have been damaged mentally." He shook his head. "That was careless of me. I should have known. But, after all, I did test the other stone, and there was no effect. Not on me."

"There was an effect on me, all right." Sam looked at his

palm again and felt the first uprush of genuine deep-seated anger. "Now we know how—for sure. And we know who, too. At least I do."

"If you're fit enough let's get back up to control and you'll have to tell me exactly what happened there. We need all the information we can get."

Sam stirred, found that his aches and pains decreased as he moved, and by the time he was settled in a seat in the control room, with a coffee Joe had provided for him, and which he suspected was generously laced with alcohol, he felt comparatively human again.

"Of course," he said wonderingly, "you didn't see or hear anything, did you?"

"As I told you, the stone had no effect on me."

"No—I meant while I was having my vision. It was real, vivid, a vision of the Promised Land, Utopia—I don't know how to describe it to you properly." Sam had no need to grope since it was still real to him, but so much of it was subjective, what he had felt rather than seen, that he had to struggle to discover the proper words. Joe was very patient, prodding for the odd detail now and then, asking unusual questions about quality, the preciseness of the sounds, the personal impressions, and by the time Sam had satisfied him he looked grave.

Anxious at this novel change in Joe, this break from his customary impassivity, Sam asked, "What do you think of it all? Was it all delusion, or was I seeing something that really exists?"

"I'm not sure, but there are certain indications. You felt automatic rejection once there was a definite suggestion of some one person tempting you?"

"Absolutely. I suppose that's a Puritan relic in me, but I have a horror of being tempted by anyone or anything. Like to feel that I make up my own mind, I suppose."

"Yes." Joe looked even more solemn. "It seems to be something acting on a personality level, a very general message, to be interpreted and modified by you in your own personal values."

Sam looked at it for a moment and thought he could see light. "So that might be why it didn't have any effect on you? I mean"—he tried to be tactful—"your not having a personal ego."

Joe nodded, quite readily. "That is the only answer which fits. Like trying to seduce a deaf man by whispering in his ear."

"I can't imagine what it must be like not to have a personality," Sam confessed candidly, and Joe smiled. The expression lit up his face.

"That's not quite right. I can assume, or discard, almost any personality at will. I quite often do, when it is necessary. What I do not have is a sense of personal identity. It is difficult to define because it is something the normal person takes for granted without thinking about it. I have discussed this at great length with several expert people, and it seems to work out something like this. You never have any doubt as to who you are, at any time, and you seldom think about it. Not your name, which is purely on the side. Even a man with total general amnesia, who can't recall his name, or who he was, is still aware of being himself. I do not have that, at all."

"I'm afraid that doesn't help a bit," Sam admitted.

"Well, some of the results of my condition are that I have no feeling of owning anything, or wanting anything, or even anticipating anything I *may* want, or need—for myself, that is. I do whatever Dr. Venner tells me to, and he gives me a very interesting life. I tackle problems because they are problems, not because they are important to me personally. And that calls attention to something else. You, I think, are not the type to crave power, or wealth, or material things."

"That's me," Sam agreed.

"And that would be why, although you describe the scene you saw as being ideal, you wouldn't take it as a bribe. So you rejected it."

Sam shivered as he thought about it. "You know, this is a devilish thing. I mean, you give a man one of those damned fire-balls—and you've got him!"

"Unless, like you, he happens to be resistant to temptation."

"In which case you wind up the voltage and blast him dead, the way my father died. He was a lot like me in that respect."

Joe looked grave again. "That's the part I am not happy about," he declared. "I've examined the spot where that sunstone flared, and the burn on your palm. I have run tests, as I told you. And I know two things. One is that this demonstration of control is far and away beyond anything I know of, in that field. I know quite a lot, and what I don't know off-hand is stored in the computer store, right there. It's a subject of great interest and importance to Dr. Venner."

"So Eklund is a genius!" Sam declared impatiently. "We are agreed on Eklund, aren't we?"

"Oh yes, but it is hard to believe that he can be all *that* far ahead of the field. We'd have heard of him. However, the other point is more tangible. You said 'wind up the voltage and blast him dead.' And it may have looked like that. But it wasn't. It couldn't have been. Entirely apart from the power density required at the range—and the sun-stone I tested just could not have carried anything like that kind of power—there is the range itself. You ask if we agree on Eklund. I would point out that Verdan is roughly one hundred and eighty million miles distant from us; that it would take a message over half an hour for the round trip!"

"But—" Sam began, then halted. "How long was I under?"

"Your whole episode lasted no more than thirty seconds!"

"Wow!" Sam sagged back and shook his head. "You've lost me now."

"Unless," Joe murmured, "there is some kind of inherent factor in the transmission which strikes a discord when there is resistance—in your case, when you tried to reject the message. That's just conceivable. Looked at from an abstract viewpoint one could regard the preliminary part of the message as a tuning-in, getting the subject aligned, and then passing the master suggestion. And if the subject resists, he feels pain. The more he resists, the more it hurts. Something like that. Various subconscious compulsions act in a similar manner. The man who tries to force himself to do something he doesn't want to do, and develops psychosomatic disorders as a result. Hysterical blindness, shell shock, things like that."

"That'll do!" Sam put up a shaking hand. "What are you trying to do, scare me to death?" There was something particularly distasteful to him in the idea that something could get inside his mind and bend it.

"Now we know who," he said, "and how. That's good enough. Question is, what do we do next?"

"I assumed you would agree with me that there is no point in going on to Ophir now. A message will suffice, if you still want the conference to take place. So I have reset our course to return us to Verdan as fast as possible. This is something Dr. Venner needs to know about."

"That is fine by me. We can't afford to waste time. That Eklund!" Sam shook his head, awed by the magnitude of the problem as it now was, and the goal that Eklund had set himself. One-man ruler of an entire planetary system, a system, moreover, bursting at the seams with wealth. The new world! Eklund's world.

As if tuning in on his thought, Joe said, "We are merely assuming Mr. Eklund is the person responsible. I still find it hard to believe."

"If he's fronting for somebody else we'll make him talk."

"Possibly. I find it hard to believe in anybody else either. I wonder what Dr. Venner is going to say to it all?"

Verdan City Spaceport looked unchanged as they slid down to a berth on the outskirts of the field. Sam felt disappointed, until he counted up and realized, in amazement, that it was barely forty-eight hours ago that they had departed. It felt like weeks! With no delay at all, Joe got on a visor-phone link and called the ISB office. As Ramirez came on, he asked, "Can you tell me where I can contact Dr. Venner, urgently?"

Ramirez looked worried as he shook his head. "I know nothing at all, sir. The last I heard from either Dr. Venner or Miss Martinez was twenty-four hours ago. It was understood that they would call me, or submit some kind of report, every four hours, but there has been nothing!"

"Haven't you *done* anything?" Sam demanded, but Joe checked his anger with a gentle hand.

"José isn't in a position to take any action. Did they deposit any reports at all, with you?"

"I have two. Will you come for them?"

"No time. It could be urgent. Squeeze 'em. Hold on a moment." Joe did things with his instruments, then said, "Right. Go ahead!"

The picture shattered into a mish-mash of color and frantic gabbling for a few seconds, then cleared to show Ramirez again. He made a move with his hand, and again there came the tear-up and chatter.

"Right." Joe flipped switches and nodded to Ramirez. "I'll call you if I have anything to leave. Out!"

The screen darkened, and he reset more switches, explaining as he went. "This is routine. José transmitted the contents of the spools he had, but at ultra-fast speed. All I have to do now is play them back slow. Now."

There came a buzz and then Venner's rasping voice.

"Joe. Nothing very important yet. I've tracked the seeds from where they grow all the way to here, to the plant where they are extracted before milling. As far as I can tell they are bagged and shipped out to Eklund as some kind of cattle-food additive. I'm sending Louise to follow up that angle. Meantime I have happened across a small plant where they pack and wrap sugar exactly the same as the happy-

stuff, and I am going into that a bit more closely. I have arranged with Ramirez to deposit these reports with him every four hours, or to call him if I have nothing to report of importance." There came a click, a low buzz, then the same voice again.

"Still nothing much to talk about. That sugar-packing plant is not so easy to get into. No word from Louise. Maybe she got held up."

Another click and buzz-pause, then Venner was speaking again, this time with crackling emphasis. "Joe, I think we've struck trouble of some kind. For me, that damned sugar-packaging outfit is better guarded than a bank vault, and that is suspicious in itself. I'll give it one more try, but I am worried about Louise. She should have reported in—she knows the score well enough—but not a sound from her. Unless you hear something to the contrary, that's where we'll be. Better join us—with your eyes wide open."

A final click, a brief buzz, and then nothing. Joe closed a switch.

"That's the lot," he said, and there was an edge on his voice that Sam had not heard before, an intensity and forbidding calm in his eyes. "And that was twenty-four hours ago. My master is in danger."

"That figures," Sam agreed. "What do we do?"

"You?"

"Yes, me! Look, I know this is not my kind of action, but I am under a certain amount of obligation. Damn it, Venner saved my life. So did you with that sun-stone thing. I want to help."

Joe stared at him for fully five seconds, and Sam wondered how a face could be so expressionless and yet so ruthlessly determined.

"Very well," he said, at last. "Thank you. Just a moment." He made the connection once more with Ramirez and, without preamble, said, "José. The situation is critical. If you do not hear more from me in twenty-four hours, push the panic button. Understood?" The screen went dark and Joe got to his feet purposively.

"There are certain preparations I have to make. While I'm doing that you can be arranging to hire that jet-plane again. Five minutes."

It was fifteen minutes later that Sam settled alongside Joe in the jet-plane and watched while the engine howled into life.

"What's the object of that panic button thing?" he asked. "Calling up the heavy reserves to the rescue?"

"Nothing like that." Joe had his calm back now, kept his eye on the temperatures and pressures as the engine warmed up. "As you've been told, ISB has no status to interfere with internal affairs, and we have not yet established that this is anything more. Not to prove, that is. So there will be no overt force. The panic button merely tells H.Q. that we have failed, but that we think we were on to something, and therefore someone else should be assigned to follow up."

Sam nodded, keeping his feelings to himself. Failed, it seemed, was a euphemism for deceased. He felt a chill. But then he recalled his burned palm, his father, the several attempts on his life—and realized that he was about to take a crack at the man responsible, and he felt a little bit better about it. They took off into a rose-tinted afternoon with no more than an hour of daylight ahead of them.

"Darkness will suit our purpose well enough," Joe commented, as he turned the controls over to the auto-pilot. "Meanwhile, we have things to do. You'll need this." He produced a heavy plastic belt, broad and black and bulky. "Before you put it on, let me show you what it's for. We dislike using brute force at any time, but when it is necessary, we use it thoroughly."

He did deft things with the buckle. "This gets you a knife, see? It is flexible, razor-edge this side, diamond-hard file the other." He put it away again, made other movements and had a handful of what looked like green beads on strings. "This is detonite, an extremely powerful explosive. To use, you pinch one off and dispose of it—and you have thirty seconds to get clear before it explodes. These"—he was producing stuff like a conjuror with a top hat—"are smoke-and-retch bombs. Pinch off in the same way. They make a smoke screen, but they also stop anything that breathes air, positively. This"—he gripped a small disk, tugged it free—"is an extremely rugged two-way transmitter-receiver. Use it like this, or you can leave it in place, and activate it just by turning the disk half a turn, then someone else can listen in on whatever is being said where you are, up to half a mile. This"—it was a slim rod, no more than a pencil to look at—"spits darts accurately up to about thirty feet. They are toxic. One will knock a man out almost instantly, and keep him out for almost an hour. Fully loaded with fifty."

He was finished with the belt. Sam looked at it nervously, demanded a run-through to make sure, and then buckled it



in place. He saw that Joe was already wearing one exactly like it.

Joe then tapped a small gray box he had attached to the control panel. "And this is a direction-finder that is tuned in to a small transmitter built into Dr. Venner's teeth. We have to assume that he will have been searched and disarmed, but I doubt if they will have noticed the bug. We can hope, anyway." He switched on the finder now, and adjusted it with great delicacy. The small screen glowed a dull lam-bent green, but without anything resembling a trace on it. Joe sighed.

"We are hardly within range yet. Soon, though, we should get it."

Far down below them the sea grew darker, dappled with fingers of green-white fluorescent foam. Sunset loomed ahead and grew, like a dark purple cloud, to meet them. Joe kept caressing the finder, and consulting the plane's navigation indications. All at once he said, in quiet satisfaction, "That's it, see?"

Sam saw a tiny green dot hovering away off center to the lower right-hand corner of the screen. Joe crouched over it like a scout nursing the first sparks of a campfire, constantly referring to the flight data. Now, in growing gloom, he flicked on the radar scan and the sweeping finger traced out the distant bulk of the island. Sam wasn't sure whether or not he could actually see it with the naked eye, but there was no doubt about the electronic one. Then Joe sat back, and sighed.

"It's nice to be sure. He's there, right enough."

"That's fine," Sam agreed. "But where does it leave us? What I mean is, if Eklund's as smart as we've been giving him credit for, you can bet *he* has various eyes and ears well out and working. I can't see him just sitting idle to let us fly in and land, and walk in and start asking awkward questions. Can you?"

"I don't see why not," Joe countered quietly. "If you have the nerve for it!"

## XII

"NERVE?" Sam asked, not liking the suspicions that were rushing to his mind.

"I can't advise this," Joe said, very quietly, "I can only describe it to you, and let you choose. You have, after all, been invited back. Mr. Eklund's words were 'any time,' as I recall. And Miss Eklund seemed eager to have you return. And you are, like it or not, *the* Hutten now. You told Mr. Eklund that you were on your way to interview Mullens and Amario on Zera. You had his approval on that. You have in fact just done it. What could be more natural than that you would want to call in here on your return, to rest a while before making the other trip, to Ophir?"

There was a horrible logic about it. In any other circumstances Sam could see himself doing exactly that.

"Yes, but—but what if Eklund gets suspicious?"

"Why should he?"

"Well, for one thing he will expect me to be well and truly under the influence of that devilish fire-ball he gave me, like a zombie!"

"Not necessarily. He gave you no order to carry it with you. It might annoy him, but surely nothing more, if you say that you've put it away somewhere for safekeeping. Or even that you've lost it!"

"You have an answer for everything," Sam muttered. "But you and I both know that we are walking all around the real issue. That man is as crazy as a bedbug, and dangerous."

"I am aware of that." Joe was serious. "But you are, remember, the Hutten heir. Mr. Eklund may be power-mad, but I doubt if he is rash enough to do you any harm. I doubt if he would want the publicity that would be bound to follow. And he can hardly be sure that you suspect him of anything, certainly not if you walk right in and act naturally. After all, why should you suspect him any more than Brandt, or Mullens, or any of the others? The most he can do is try by some other means to get you over on his side."

Sam cringed from it, but there was logic in Joe's design. On the surface there was indeed no reason why he shouldn't just drop in and act as if he had accepted an invitation.

After all, he thought, I've already done it once. So, unwillingly but resigned, he had a further question.

"Suppose I do, what will be achieved?"

"I've been thinking about that. Essentially, it must appear that you are alone. Fortunately this aircraft can be flown almost entirely on automatic controls, so that's no problem. Now, recall the villa as we saw it from above. It is backed into the mountainside. If I can get clear and work my way around there, I may be able to find some back way in, while you are keeping them distracted in the front. It's not much of a plan, but it is the best I can think of, at short notice. You'll have to play your part by ear, just as it comes, and forget all about me—except that you could switch on that communicator in your belt as soon as you're in. Then I will be able to keep in touch with whatever you're doing. There's the coastline now, just ahead. You haven't much time to decide."

Sam found he had very little hope of any alternative, either. By the time they were within range of the villa he had decided, not happily, but there was nothing else he could do that he could think of. Joe got on the radio, raised the villa response, passed the microphone over.

"Remember," he warned, "you're alone. Make it good!"

Sam gulped, saw a little green eye winking at him, pressed the talk switch and a richly feminine voice came.

"Villa Eklund. Who is it?"

"Hello, Miss Corinne." His voice came out rusty and he coughed to clear it. "This is Sam Hutten, back again."

"Oh!" That first reaction was surprise, then it came again. "Oh, Mr. Hutten, how lovely to hear your voice again, so soon! Are you coming in to land?"

"If that's all right with you?"

"Of course it is. I will activate the beacon right away. I'm so glad you've come. But you must excuse me; perhaps I am being selfish. Is this just a friendly visit, or are you on some serious business? Do you wish to speak to my father?"

"It's nothing serious." Sam struggled to keep his voice light. "Just taking advantage of your very kind invitation. You see"—he made a feeble try to chuckle casually—"the fact is that I've just got back from Zera, from visiting Mr. Mullens and Mr. Armario, and I couldn't think of anywhere else I wanted to go right away. I shall have to visit Ophir, of course, and soon, but I've done so much hopping about lately . . ."

"Yes, of course, you poor man. I understand perfectly."

"And I didn't really feel like staying at Hutten House. Not all alone. And then I remembered your very warm invitation—and here I am!"

"I'm so glad. My father is busy just now with a guest, but I know he will be just as pleased to see you as I am. I will come and get you, not with horses, this time. I will spare you that. Are you alone?"

"Yes. All by myself, this time. Thank you again." Sam shut off the mike and put it back on the panel. His hand shook, and he felt clammy all over, but Joe gave him a swift sideways grin and nod.

"Past that hurdle," he said. "Now, as soon as this is on the ground-control system I'm going to hide. In the back. Just in case she gets close enough to look in. Then, when you're gone, I'll be out and away. Don't forget that communicator."

"I'll do it now." Sam made the adjustment, shrugged the belt into comfort and was glad that he was wearing pants almost the same color, so that it wouldn't show. "I never knew I was such a good liar," he said, trying to grin. Joe glanced ahead.

"There's the strip. Auto-pilot on! Let's hope she's not as good an actress as you are a liar, that's all. She certainly *sounded* pleased."

As the plane bounced gently on the grass and rolled to a halt Sam saw a pair of blazing eyes in the distance rapidly nearing. He scrambled out and went to meet the car he could hear now. It was a low and sleek cushion-car, with Corinne at the tillers. She pulled it to a halt right beside him, gave him a dazzling smile of welcome, and laid her hand on his wrist as he settled in by her side.

"I am so happy that you decided to come, Mr. Hutten."

"Please call me Sam," he murmured, trying to match her mood. "I feel guilty, dropping in just like this."

"Don't be silly! You are at home here, always. And you must stay a while, this time. I want you to." She set the car sizzling away, and Sam felt the sweat breaking out on him all over again. The whirling confusion in his mind was bad enough in itself, but being so close to this gorgeous girl, and engulfed by the sheer vitality that came off her like radiance from a fire, was enough to make him slightly light-headed. For this evening she was dressed, if that was the right word, in something white and insubstantial, cobwebs and moonbeams, from breast to mid-thigh. It was sheer enough to reveal not only her devastating figure but the

sultry red-glow of the sphere that lay on her bosom. It seemed a far cry, several lifetimes ago, that he had been a cool, calm, dispassionate and uninvolved instructor of youth, and the period in between was somehow totally unreal. How had he ever got himself into a nightmare like this?

Once again Eklund was at the top of the steps awaiting him, but this time, with his majestic stance, the silver hair crowning his magnificent skull, and the bright light coming from behind to strike a halo around him, he looked like some strange, supernal being. In just that instant Sam had a twinge of irrational fear. Eklund had spoken of aliens. Perhaps he was one! But then the rich rolling voice banished the illusion.

"My dear Hutten, you are most welcome. I am honored that you chose to come here when you were weary and needed somewhere secure to rest."

"That's one way of putting it." Sam exchanged grips cordially. "For my part I feel I should apologize for taking liberties."

"Nonsense. You had a good trip?"

"You could say that. Mullens and Armario are substantially in agreement with what we were saying, and they'll come to the conference all right. Can't say I was captivated with Zera, though. I'd hate to live there for long."

"You will never need to, my boy. If and when you do decide to build yourself a home here, please allow me to advise you. Meanwhile, this must be your home. But this will never do. I am keeping you standing, talking, when you are surely weary and in need of a bath."

"That's true. I'm not fit to be associated with, right now. If you would direct me . . . ?"

"I will see to it." Corinne took his arm possessively. "This way."

"I'm afraid I haven't any luggage either. Such a rush!"

"We will take care of that too. You shall have everything you need. Come along with me."

"We dine within the hour," Eklund boomed after them. "See you then, my boy."

Sam allowed himself to be led away, through an arch and along a cool passage, ending in a room that made him halt and stare. It was large, lit with rose-glow isotope-lamps, each one held up by a lifelike human effigy. The walls and floor were gold-and-white tiles decorated with a repeated floral motif. The middle of the floor was all one huge sunken

bath from which vapor rose in lazy spirals. Corinne gave it all to him with a casual gesture.

"I will call a slave to assist you," she said, and stepped to the wall to touch a button. Sam, expecting a robot of some kind, stared even more widely as from an archway on the far side came a girl, gliding toward them with catlike grace. He looked again—and it wasn't a girl at all. The contours were lushly feminine, but this "thing" was as sexless as any store-window dummy. It halted silently in front of them and Corinne spoke, enunciating with care:

"Bring soap, towels, depilatory and clean robes. Then assist the master to bathe and dress." That said, she smacked her palms together sharply and the thing went away instantly. Sam discovered that his mouth was sagging open, and closed it as Corinne turned, smiled her dazzling smile, and said, "It is a robot, of course, but of an advanced type. My father has a fancy for such things. It will obey simple commands within its program scope. We use many of them, for all sorts of things, cleaning and cooking and assisting with the herd animals. Is there anything else you need?"

Sam shook his head, more to clear it than anything else. Then he looked at her again and managed a shaky smile. "Can I ask for privacy?"

She laughed, and it was a sound to send ripples along his spine, then stared at him with bright blue gaze and bubbling mischief. "I am tempted to join you. I would scrub you all over—but not this time. Perhaps later? Would you like that?" She laughed again and put a hand on his arm. "We shall have such a lot of lovely times together, you and I, you'll see. But I will not keep you longer. Here come your towels. When you are ready you simply tell the slave 'Take me to the salon,' and that will be all right. We will be waiting for you."

Sam was glad of the bath. It eased away the last traces of his aches, and it helped to reduce a little of the horrible confusion in his mind. In all his life before he had never met anyone quite like Corinne Eklund. The thought came again: perhaps both of them were aliens, that they merely *looked* human. Certainly he had never met any woman who had so much built-in allure and yet such artlessness. Women *that* beautiful usually knew it, and made conscious use of it. And that slave—he managed studiously to avoid being aware of the thing while he was actually in the water, but it insisted on helping with towels, and ushering him into the robes it had brought for him. And, even at touching

distance, it looked alive. It breathed. And, as far as he was aware, it was fantastically superior to anything robotic that he had ever heard of. He was relieved to see that it showed not the slightest interest in the belt of lethal hardware he managed to strap around his waist under the toga-like robes provided for him.

Even so, it was a fantastic creation, and Eklund *must* be some kind of genius, even if Venner had never heard of him. On the other hand it was unlikely, to say the least, that such a man would be content to bury himself away like this. Or was it? If Eklund really did have delusions of becoming some kind of absolute dictator, a demagogue . . . ? Sam gave up the hopeless muddle, ordered the thing to take him to the salon, and followed meekly.

This was another room entirely, and by the time Sam had reached it he felt convinced that he was, surely, within the bulk of the mountain itself. Here, again, slave-shapes were arranged around the walls, each holding aloft a rose-tinted isotope-lamp, and here, too, the floral motif was repeated endlessly in the wall and floor ornamentations. But Sam had time for only a brief glance at the scene before his eyes were drawn to the long, low table at the far end. There, lolling beside it on a stuffed couch, was Max Brandt.

"It is good to see you again, Hutten," Brandt called, sitting up and bobbing his head in greeting. "We did not expect you back from Zera so soon!"

"Come and sit by me," Eklund called graciously from his place at the head of the table. "You must be hungry now."

He looked more Caesar-like than ever, Sam thought, as he made his way to the seat. And where did Brandt fit into the picture? Boss-man of packaging and processing. Venner had been investigating part of his plant. And got himself caught and brought here?

He sat, uneasily, in the space indicated, and alongside Corinne. She at once slid her slim arm affectionately around him.

"You must help yourself to whatever you want," she instructed. "Here, have some wine to begin with."

The board was piled high with a profusion of roast meats and fruits; some he recognized, others were unfamiliar to him. Platters that looked like silver. Goblets and finger bowls in glittering crystal. Jugs of wine. All the Roman trappings. Or did Eklund really believe this was Greek? Here and there were low vases supporting a spray or two of the same flower that formed the ever-present motif of the decorations.

Corinne poured him a generous helping of a pale amber fluid, then one for herself. His hand shook as he reached for it, but he saw her sip daintily and felt reassured that, at least, it wasn't poisoned. It had a clean, slightly astringent taste.

"I've no palate," he confessed, "but this could be a reasonable sherry and I wouldn't argue."

"A home-produced equivalent. Max can tell you more. He's the one who processes all our products and prepares them for marketing."

"It's true." Brandt gulped at his wine and nodded. "We all work as a team here. You grow things. Our host rears them. On Zera they extract and refine them, and on Ophir they look and find—but it all comes to me to be put into shape for selling. We are a team."

"I would have thought that rather obvious," Sam remarked, wishing inwardly that the girl on his right would stop caressing his neck with her cool fingers. He had enough on his mind without that.

"It is obvious," Eklund said. "It is also obvious that if anyone desired to sabotage our unity, to strike a blow at our whole system here, the key place would be Max's part of the operation. You agree?"

"Sabotage?" Sam queried, almost able to guess what was coming now.

"Indeed so. That is the reason why I am here." Brandt put down his goblet and sat up straighter. "That is, apart from the pleasure of being here anyway. My watch-people have observed and caught an Earth agent who was trying to break into a part of my processing plant. Of course he denied that he was an agent, that he was trying to break in, that he intended sabotage. But what would you expect? I held him. I did not know what to do for the best, so I called my very good friend here, for advice. And I received a surprise. You tell him, Gunnar."

"I told Max, as I now tell you, Hutten, that I too had been intruded upon by unwelcome eyes. A young woman. She was apprehended interfering with some sacks of cattle food, some rather special seeds which I receive from you. Not you personally, of course, but from Northwheat. Rare and unusual seeds, which grow nowhere else—but I will tell you about those later. The point is, here was another person up to no honest purpose!"

Sam instructed his face to look innocent and bewildered.



He said, lamely, "You're sure they are both crooks? I mean, couldn't they just be over-inquisitive tourists?"

"Tourists, however inquisitive, are not in the habit of carrying offensive devices. Moreover, as soon as Max described certain of these devices to me I was able to see similarities, enough to establish that the pair were associated in some way. Working together!"

Sam clung desperately to his pose of innocence, tried gently to push Corinne away, and said, uneasily, "I suppose you've called in the law?"

"We are the law, here," Eklund stated firmly. "Max brought his captive here to me. We now hold them both."

"What do you plan to do with them?"

"That is something we will decide, when we are ready. But I must now warn you to prepare yourself for something of a shock, Hutten."

"A shock?" Sam braced himself, grabbed Corinne's hand as it started to wander again. "What kind of shock?"

"We have had time to examine this man, to investigate something of him. From various articles in his possession, and other means, we gather that he is, in fact, some kind of agent for some Earth organization; that he calls himself Orbert Venner, with some title he is probably not entitled to. Further, that he arrived here on Verdan in a privately owned spaceship registered as *Venner Three*. And"—Eklund leaned forward portentously now—"that you reached Verdan as a passenger in that same ship. Am I to assume that this man is a friend of yours?"

Sam quailed at the thrust. Out of the chaos came a memory, a hint he had read long ago. When telling a lie, keep as close to the truth as is possible. He tried it now.

"I met Dr. Venner on Mars, when I was transferring ships. I have never seen him before that moment in all my life. I had a rather unfortunate experience on the trip from Earth. Corinne can tell you about that. Can't you?" He turned to her, and she took this as an invitation to snuggle close.

"I already have. You remember, Father, the strange accident with the emergency door?"

"On account of that, hearing me tell it, Venner offered me a lift in his own ship, since he was headed for the same place. Incidentally, he helped a lot with the difficulties over my father's unexpected death—and he has just loaned me the use of his ship for my trip to Zera and back. I don't want to disagree with your findings, but isn't it possible that

you might be mistaken about this man? He has been very good to me!"

"Is there any reason why he should be? Isn't it just as likely, my young friend, that you have been hoodwinked by a rascal? Why would a total stranger be so ready to offer you help in this way? However, we shall soon see who is right. I have my own methods . . ."

"Father!" Corinne sat forward suddenly, a finger to her lip. "It has just occurred to me. You said *Orbert* Venner, didn't you? And that man who came with you last time, Sam, his name was Orbert, wasn't it?"

"Now you come to mention it." Sam was in too deep now. All he could do was follow the way the conversation was leading. "I understood that he was Dr. Venner's assistant. And pilot."

"And a gemmologist?"

"He certainly gave me to understand that he knew a lot about the subject. I'd no reason to doubt him."

All at once, and by nothing more than some subtle alteration in the way he sat, Eklund seemed to grow, to dominate the entire room. His frosty blue eyes bored into Sam's as he leaned forward and asked, quietly, "What have you done with the pretty stone I gave you, Hutten?"

"Eh? Oh, that! I'm sorry, I don't know where it is, off-hand. I must have mislaid it somewhere." It sounded pitifully feeble as he said it. Eklund kept his sword-like stare for a long moment.

"I see," he murmured, still very quiet. Then he rose majestically. "Come. We will settle this thing now. We will talk with the captives and you shall see, Hutten, how I deal with those who try to interfere with my affairs. You shall see. Come this way."

### XIII

CORINNE seemed to find nothing at all to worry about as Eklund led the way, moving still deeper into the heart of the mountain. She tripped blithely along beside Sam, holding his hand as if they were out on a moonlight stroll. Over all his inward fear and apprehension, her sublime indifference

struck him as peculiar. Either she had a remarkable insensitivity to atmosphere, or she was simpleminded, or something. Then a chance glimpse of the fire-red bauble at her breast made him think something that chilled the nerves in his spine. He had said it himself: "Give a man one of those damned fire-balls, and you've got him!" Like a zombie. She was conditioned. So, too, was Brandt.

The passageway went on and on, and now the very character of it became sinister and weird. There were still the everlasting tiles on roof, walls and floor, and still more permutations on that same flower design, but these tiles glowed with a chill greenish light. And the shape of the passage itself became different, with in-slanted walls and a peaked roof. Again the notion of something alien came to shiver in Sam's mind. This place had all the patina and smell of immense age, of something other than human.

The passage ended abruptly in a ninety degree corner that brought them out into an immense chamber, so vast that the sound of their steps went away and was lost in distance. The green light was brighter now, but not bright enough to reveal the high vault of the roof, somewhere up there. There was something of the feel of a church, but no human church would ever need the grotesque yet somehow functional shapes that were to be seen here and there about the floor space. Whether they were statues, works of art, or devices, Sam couldn't guess, not at first sight. All he knew was that they were utterly unlike anything he could define. As Eklund led on still, pacing steadily around the looming objects, Sam stared up at them in wonder. Some had patterns of light which moved and changed, others had protruding rods and tubes. Machinery of some kind? Now, as they kept on walking, he saw they were coming to an open space, a kind of amphitheater. Across it on the far side was a structure that could have been either an altar or the bar of judgment, and beyond that again was something that had to be a seat of power, a throne.

Sam paused, his knees beginning to give under him as the strangeness of the place became more apparent with every passing second.

"What kind of place is this?" he demanded. "Where are we?"

Eklund halted and spun around to glare down with those piercing blue eyes of his, now glowing darkly in the green glare.

"You are about to learn, Hutten. Stand there!"

He pointed a finger, and power seemed to flow from him like a tangible thing. Sam stood, quaking, while the big man strode on and up the stone steps to the throne, and seated himself. Brandt and Corinne followed, to seat themselves on either side, on the steps level with his feet. Eklund reached down to his side and brought up a curious object, all glittering wire and points of light from cut gems, and it was a headdress, some kind of crown. Sam caught his breath and started forward to protest. Eklund leveled a commanding finger, and it was as if an invisible hand had clamped itself around Sam, holding him rigid, as if he had suddenly been frozen inside a great block of transparent glass.

"You will remember that I told you," Eklund boomed, "that this planetary system had once been occupied by aliens? You asked if I had any hard evidence. I had. I have. This is it."

"How do you mean, aliens?" Sam argued unsteadily. "You mean the original inhabitants, don't you?"

"I do not. The people who built the devices you see all around came from a far distant star, in toward the hub of the galaxy."

"How can you know that?" Sam was babbling now, talking for the sake of it, anything to fend off further horrors, to keep Eklund talking.

"I know. I was an academic like you once, Hutten. Ancient history, lost civilizations of the past, archaeology, those were my subjects. But I was a frail and sickly man, unfit for the struggle of competition. I had a little money. I came here with my wife and child in search of open air and health, hoping to raise enough livestock to keep myself solvent. And I found this—all of it—by accident, when I was building my villa. I knew at once that it was alien. I also knew instantly that it was immense, magnificent, superior to anything we could show. And I determined to keep it to myself, at least for a while. But then, as I investigated, I found records, diagrams and pictures—and I learned to read and understand them well enough to have most of the wisdom of these people right here in the palm of my hand!"

"Weren't you scared they might come back?"

"Not at all. One of the first things I learned was that this is unthinkable ancient, this establishment. I cannot be certain as to the exact time scale, but it must be on the order of several hundreds of thousands of years since they de-

parted, leaving this behind. They took away their fantastically powerful planet-modifying machines. I suspect they were incorporated into their ships. But they left this."

"What was it all about? Why did they come here, and what made them go away again?" Sam offered the questions off the top of his mind, and all the while he kept straining to move just so much as one muscle of his arm, or leg, but in vain.

"Alas!" Eklund sighed. "They were a great and wonderful people, very much like us, humanoid to judge by the pictures they left—but they had their problems too. Their home world, like ours, was strained and sickened with discontent and strife, and they were constantly being plagued by the attacks and enmity of other races. They came here as an expedition, to find some new place to start again. They had completed the major alterations. They threw Zera into an orbit that would rapidly petrify and preserve its rich carbon complexes; they changed the orbit of Ophir as a counterbalance to that. They cleared this planet of several undesirable life forms, and they had begun the next stage—but then they had word that their home planet was in mortal danger. And they had to return. That was long ago, Hutten. I can only think that they were too late."

"So they couldn't have been all that superior, after all?"

"Fool!" Eklund roared. "They were masters at the one subject which really matters, the one subject we know so little about. They—and I have contrived no name for them—were supreme masters of the mind, of mental power. From the lowliest living form to the very highest, they had control. And it is all here. I have it. I hold you powerless now by only a slight exercise of my power. If I wished, which I do not, I could strike you dead where you stand as easily as crooking my finger. I can, and will, bend you and shape you to my will, just as I have done with so many more. I hold the secret of complete rule, Hutten."

"You're mad!" The exclamation came to Sam's lips before he could censor it out. Cringing, expecting to be annihilated at any moment, he tagged on the afterthought. "I mean—you said you were keeping all this to yourself, a secret. But you've let me in on it, and those two!"

"And others." Eklund smiled expansively. "But it is still my own secret, and it will be. When you leave here, Hutten, you will be mine!"

Now Sam strained even harder to break free of the invisible clutch that held him, but to no avail. All his struggles

were as futile as dream running. Corinne rose from her graceful crouch at her father's feet and came to stand in front of him, to undulate and turn, deliberately exhibiting the elegance of her perfection before him.

"There is nothing to be afraid of, Sam," she sang, sheer joy of life infusing her tone, "in the promise of wonder. My father is not a tyrant. He is a benefactor. What he did for me he can and will do for you too."

"What do you mean?" Sam's throat went dry.

"I have the power." Eklund intoned it regally. "I told you that I was a sickly man when I first came here. You see me now! The aliens knew many things about life. They came here prepared to breed and develop the perfect people, and they could have done it. Once you have the secret of mental power, all else is simple. I learned their methods, their secrets of true health and abiding beauty. I used them on myself. What better evidence do you need? I used them on my daughter. Look at her, Hutten, and tell me if you have ever seen woman more fair? I would have taught my wife"—he lowered his voice to a somber note—"and I would have had sons. But I learned from her what the aliens had known and could not cure—that some minds are stiff and stubborn, not amenable to new ideas. This is found only in self-aware minds, not in the lower animals. It is one of the penalties of being human, that some minds are stiff, like hers. She died!"

"You killed her, you mean!" Sam was too far gone in fear to have any caution left. "You killed her!"

"No." Eklund was massively patient. "I had the killing power. I have it now. All power is double-faced, for good or evil, but I did not kill her. Listen to me. The aliens had to abandon this place and return to their home planet because it was being threatened by barbarians. There is a familiar note for you. We, too, have our barbarians ready to pounce. Their enemies hated them, just as our stupid ones hate us, because we have the power to change our values, to adapt and progress. When the aliens tried to bestow their gifts on *their* barbarians all their skills could not overcome the rejection of stiffened minds. The barbarians could not learn. They suffered and died rather than learn. Because, Hutten, this is one of the laws of the mind: once it has become set it will break rather than yield, and the person dies through his own fanatic resistance. That was how my wife died. That, too, was how your father died, Hutten."

"You killed him, too!" Sam spat it defiantly. "And you tried to kill me, through her, your daughter. Didn't you?"

"I could not allow anything to stand in the way of my plan. As soon as that ethergram was sent—and I knew about it, of course—I made arrangements to have you investigated. You are not quite the nonentity you would like people to believe. As I've said, I was academic myself, once. I knew that you tended to be independent in your thinking, that you would reinforce your father's mental attitude. I had hopes of winning him over, even then, to my cause. You threatened that. But you escaped, and he is dead, and you are here now, no longer any threat. Soon you will be one of my people, fit to associate with my daughter, right for my kingdom, my new world."

Sam caught at the ragged edge of his near-panic and fought his way back to a semblance of calm, helped a little by the sudden remembrance that he was not alone in his troubles. Louise and Dr. Venner were here in this deadly place somewhere. And there was Joe, outside and alarmed, although what he could do was somewhat doubtful. All the same, Sam realized, it was still his best ploy to keep this madman talking, keep him occupied. He saw Corinne swing away and go pacing back to her father's feet, there to drape herself on the steps in a feline sprawl.

"Your new world," he sneered. "Your people? They're nothing but mind-rinsed slaves. Zombies who obey your commands. And you're going to make me into one of those? I'd sooner *be* dead!"

Eklund smiled, the patiently tolerant smile of the superior, and that, somehow, was even more horrifying than anything that had gone before.

"You don't understand. My people are not slaves. I have slaves, as many as I need. But my people, the people of my new world, they are not slaves, nor are they brainwashed. That is not my method. As I told you, some minds are stiff, inflexible, they break before they bend. But that is when I use impersonal force. That is what the little fire-stones are for, to focus an impersonal command. But now that you are here with me I can use more refined methods; I can melt and mold your personality so that you will *want* to be one of my people, so that you will see how stupid you are now, and how wonderful your life and future can be. Let me give you a demonstration. I think it will convince you."

He touched one of the buttons set into his chair arm and turned his head. Sam strained, but could only roll his eyes, until Eklund noticed, smiled again, and the petrifying clutch vanished suddenly, so unexpectedly that Sam staggered and almost fell with the release.

"You see how easy it is for me to free you? Be warned. It will be just as easy to lock you again—or knot you into blinding agony—if you try to do anything foolish."

Sam took the hint, and stood still to watch as, from a distant archway, there came pacing the herculean form of a man-thing. Man-shaped and thewed like Hercules, yet it was just as sexless as had been the slave of the bathroom. It paced obediently near, and stood. Eklund pointed.

"Bring the captives here."

It turned and went away. Eklund smiled again. "*That is a slave, Hutten. Not, as my daughter told you, a robot, but a creature of flesh and blood and bones, as human as you or I in makeup, in every way except brainpower and self-determination. My creation, Hutten. I grow them, using the secrets I have learned from the store of alien wisdom. I shall not lack for slaves, believe me. But these two*"—he indicated his daughter and Max Brandt with a careless gesture—"are not slaves. Call them disciples. They serve me, and my plan and purpose. Just as you will do in your turn, and these two who come now."

Sam saw them and felt sick. It was obvious that Venner had put up a valiant struggle against someone, and quite recently. The angry bruise across his cheekbone was turning black and one eye was puffed almost shut. His gray hair stood in spikes, his shirt was in tatters, and one leg of his pants was flapping in a tear. But his head was up, and his one good eye was hard and defiant. By his side, Louise showed equal signs of wear. Her hair was hedge-wild and there were black finger-bruises on both her arms. She must have done some kicking at some time, for her feet were bare and there was only a shred or two left of what he remembered as snug-fitting blue pants. The long legs thus revealed were grubby and also carried their quota of bruises. Sam stared, and his sickness gave way to mingled shame and admiration. Admiration for the unquenchable defiance that infused both of them, and shame at the craven part he himself had played so far.

A fine silvery chain linked them ankle to ankle, and their brawny escort, pacing behind them, jangled keys. Sam got a nod from Venner, and a quick grin from Louise, then Eklund ordered, "That is far enough. Stand where you are." To the moronic jailer he said, "Release them. Remove the chain." As they stood and stared him out he went on patiently and with care:

"As I have warned Hutten, so I warn you. Do not provoke



me by trying anything heroic, or stupid. I have the power to hold you, crush you, strike you dead if I so will."

Venner didn't seem impressed. He took time to glance around the vast chamber and to stare curiously at some of the enigmatic devices. Then, "Just what are you, Eklund, some kind of alien creature masquerading as human? This stuff never came out of any human workshop."

"You are reasonably astute, Dr. Venner. You would naturally appreciate the alien quality of this equipment. Quite rightly. But I am human. The intelligences responsible for this are long gone by several hundreds of thousands of years. It is all mine now, mine to use. With it to help me I intend to produce the new race, the successors to Man. *Homo novus!* I cannot allow you to interfere with that grand design. So it is my intention to alter you, to mold your personality so it will be for me instead of against me."

"You're going to make me into a superman?" Venner's old voice fairly crackled with sarcastic overtones, but Eklund put on his superior smile.

"Not you, Dr. Venner. You will merely assist. You are too old to be remodeled, too old to take advantage of mental therapy. Hutten, now, is promising material. And you, Miss Martinez, also. Once you know how to live, once the blemishes and flaws have been smoothed out of your mind, you will become as radiant as my daughter, and it will be your honor, with her and others, to bring forth the new people, the perfect people."

"Me, like her? Like that—" Louise used a coarse and improper noun with gusto. "I'd rather die first!"

"That can happen." Eklund lowered his voice ominously. "As I have just warned Hutten, and all those others who have been through the process, resistance can be fatal. If your mind is so stiff that you cannot be made to see reason, then you will die and the honor of bringing forth the new race will fall to others. There will be many. . . ."

"Aren't you taking rather a lot for granted?" Sam spoke up, taking heart from Louise's courage. "You can't possibly know that these methods you have dug up *will* in fact work on us."

"They have been tried and tested, Hutten. You shall see my herds, sometime. No one has ever seen such cattle. And, as I told you, I have applied this learning to myself and my daughter. Can you doubt your own eyes? And my slaves, are they not perfection?"

The challenge hung in the air a moment. He moved a hand now to a chair arm control, and Venner edged forward.

"Do not tempt me!" Eklund warned instantly.

"Wasn't going to. If you're going to take out my mind and bend it into a pretty pattern there doesn't seem to be anything I can do to stop you. But, well, maybe you'd gratify an old man's curiosity, and tell me something?"

Eklund looked undecided. Sam held his breath. The old man was playing for time. Would Eklund fall for it? And, if he did, what was the best way to use the breathing space? He conceived a harebrained and outrageous plan, simply because there was nothing else he could do. Delicately, keeping his eye on Eklund, he eased his hand around and into the robe he had been given, to probe at the weapon-belt he still wore.

"You wouldn't want me to go to my death frustrated for the answer to a simple problem, would you?" Venner nagged.

"I am not going to kill you. I thought I had made that clear. Any distress you may suffer will be entirely of your own making, by the resistance you offer. But what is this request you have? Ask it. If it is within my power you shall have it. I am magnanimous."

"That's nice to know. All right, it's just this. How and where does *Ipomoea* tie in with this super-race plan of yours?"

"*Ipomoea*?"

"The blue flowers. What we would call Morning Glory. They grow here. The seeds are used as a drug-source!"

"Indeed! I presume you are using some botanical name. You *are* an astute man, Dr. Venner. And I did not know that the sacred flower had an Earthly counterpart. Thank you for that."

"Then it *is* tied in. You are shipping the stuff to Earth as a drug. But how? And, if I may confess to not being all that smart, why?"

Sam struggled with the slippery plastic of the belt, seeking the pouch that held the dart-thrower, trying to recall how to free it, and all the while striving to appear motionless and interested only in what was being said. Eklund nodded now.

"It is, of course, natural that you would classify it as a drug. The active principle, extracted from the seed-head, has remarkable properties in modifying the personality. It works very quickly to delete all care and anxiety. I use it as a feed supplement for my herds, and the change in their behavior is remarkable. And in their health."

"But what about the Happy Sugar?"

Brandt spoke up, surprisingly after such a long silence. "The drug, as you call it, is in the plastic wrapper, not the sugar. And the drug packets are carried by people who are already converted. They know what to do. They choose a likely person, drop the whole packet in his drink, and wait. The action is very fast, and the person is ready to be won to the cause in less than a minute. He or she is commanded to take more of the drug and find others, tell no one until *after* the dosage has been given, and then await the coming of the master, when all will be well."

"The coming of the master?"

"Myself," Eklund declared simply. They are all mine. When I give the word, they will rise, even those who have slipped away into stillness."

"You can't control them from here?"

"I can. Another effect of the drug is to make the person delicately sensitive to orders through the fire-stone linkages—and there are many of those, my key-points, already on Earth. And know this, Dr. Venner. It is a common error to compare thought-power with electronics, simply because it is possible to amplify it that way. But thought is fast, much faster than light. When I command my followers to rise up, they will rise."

Sam's fingers found the trick, got the pouch open, and took hold of the dart-thrower. Now he had to ease it around, under cover of his cloak, until he could take aim. Venner looked stunned.

"Those addicts are immortal, immune to disease, just waiting . . . !"

"Exactly!" Eklund declared, and at that moment the ground beneath their feet jumped and shuddered, and a split second later the air in the cavern twitched to the distant blast of an immense explosion.

#### XIV

SIMPLY BECAUSE the weapon was there in his hand and ready, Sam was the first to react, while the others were momentarily frozen by the shock. Dragging the dart-thrower out into the

open, he cocked it, crouched a little, took careful aim on Eklund—and Corinne saw him. She sprang up.

“Father!” she screamed. “Father, watch out!”

It was too late to call back the little dart. Sam saw it pluck a tiny fold in the frothy stuff over her breast, saw her jerk and stare down in disbelief—and then she crumpled and fell down the steps into a limp sprawl at the foot. Then Eklund had swung around, finger pointing, his eyes like twin swords of blue ice. Sam felt as if two huge fists had slammed him on either side of his head simultaneously. The scene went away in a fog of pain, and he began to fall, screaming soundlessly at the knotting agony in his skull—when once again the solid ground leaped and shook, and again a blasting rumble came to jar the cavern’s air. The pain dropped away from Sam as Eklund turned to stare, to bore with outraged eyes into a dim distance. The indignant astonishment on his face would have been laughable at any other time, but Sam had no stomach for mirth. He was still shaking from the brain-mauling he had endured. He heard the would-be world master muttering.

“There cannot be anyone there. My detectors would have warned me about it. What—” As if to mock him more, there came another shattering concussion, closer now, and savage enough to ache the ears. Sam made an unsteady step, shaking his head and knowing, frantically, that he was wasting precious time. He moved again, remembered the weapon in his hand, went down on one knee and ordered his hand and arm not to shake as he took careful aim again. Just as he was squeezing the release, Eklund moved, stepped back to drop into his seat and slap the chair arms angrily. Again the dart was gone beyond recall, and this time Brandt stiffened, held still for a moment, and then crumpled down the steps. But now, in response to Eklund’s switching, all the monstrous machinery was stirring into purring life. The entire cavern started to shiver with crackling energies, none the less potent by being invisible.

“Whoever and whatever you are,” Eklund bugled, “I command you to come here! Come!”

Sam squandered a moment to turn and squint into the distance, then twitched as he heard a frantic whisper calling him.

“Hutten! Over here! Come on, quick!”

He whirled around, searching, saw Venner’s anxious face peering around the plinth of one of the machines, and went at a staggering run to take what cover there was.

"Gimme the belt, son," the old man muttered. "They took ours."

Sam fumbled at it, let it fall. "That must be Joe," he whispered.

"You don't have to tell me. He's been tuned in on me for the past half-hour. He's providing a distraction. Let's not waste it." His deft old fingers sprang loose the cache of detonite strings. "Joe tell you how to use this stuff? Did? Fine, you take one. Louise, one for you."

"What's the drill, Chief?" She was on her knees, but looked ready and willing enough for anything.

"Best thing we can do is knock some hell out of these machines. Do it this way. Pick one to run to, for cover, right? You, Hutten, over there to the left, that concrete-mixer thing. Louise, that one over there, looks like shelving. I'll take this one to the rear. When I say, we all scatter. I'll leave one of my pills here to take care of this one. Repeat that. You choose the next one, drop the pill and run for it, right?"

"We don't know what these gadgets are for," Sam objected.

"No, but we do know Eklund is getting his power from them—some of them anyway."

"Chief, why don't I just lob one over by his throne?"

"Only if we have to. We want him alive if possible. He knows all about this junk, and that's valuable. Ready now?"

Louise stood to peer over an edge, and stiffened. "Oh, oh!" she hissed. "Come and see, Chief."

Sam stood also, and stared. Far away over there, out of the green glow, came Joe, head up and marching steadily. All at once he stopped, spun around like a dancer, made a throwing motion, came all the way around to the front again and marched on, cringing slightly at the slam-bam explosion that came from back there. Eklund's fury was apparent in his scream.

"Stop that! Stop it! Stand there!"

Sam winced as that imperative arm and finger stretched out; he could feel the air sizzle with unleashed violence. But Joe kept straight on, striding steadily.

"How *can* you defy me? What manner of man are you?" Eklund was shrieking crazily now. All at once he aimed at his slave, and snarled. "Get him! Seize him! Bring him to me!"

The herculean man-thing turned stolidly and went to meet Joe, huge ham-hands reaching out ready to grasp. Joe hesitated, came forward, veered suddenly on one foot and darted in on a slant course. He ducked and slid in under the mighty

arm that grabbed for him, spun around and used all his weight and spin to add emphasis to a roundhouse palm-chop across the slave's neck. Sam heard the *whump* of it clearly over the booming machinery, saw the massive creature nose-dive and sprawl. Joe waited, moved around, readied himself as the thing stirred and began to clamber back up. Choosing the moment, he clasped his hands, raised them, and struck down like a blacksmith pounding metal. The slave-thing went down flat, hard enough to bounce a little, and lay still.

"That's my boy!" Venner muttered. Sam was transfixed. He should have been in action. They all should. But there was something riveting about the implacable way Joe turned and came on, and frightening in the way Eklund rose, shaking with mania, his face shiny with sweat.

"Stand!" he screamed. "*You must obey me! You must!*"

Now the machinery howled and the rock underfoot shuddered as Eklund summoned up everything he could call on. Joe slowed, leaning as if he was breasting his way through treacle, but he came on. Now Eklund began to crack. Sam could see the gray froth on his lips, saw him trembling with insane fury. He sank back into his chair, dabbing at his switches with wild fingers, and a corona-like discharge grew around the strange power-helmet on his head. Now he raised his arm again, and it shook as he leveled his finger at Joe.

"Die!" he choked. "Die, damn you! Die!"

From the corner of his eye Sam saw the sprawled figures of Brandt and Corinne convulse and half-rise from the floor at that fearful command—then they fell back and were still. Joe stood fast, gave a slight shake of his head as if dislodging an itch, and the malevolent glow around Eklund's head coalesced, all at once, into a searing flare. The would-be master wrenched up out of his chair in a spasm of agony, screamed—and fell bonelessly down the stone steps of what was to have been his throne.

As he fell the nerve-twisting howling of the machines began to fade and dwindle, wailing down the octaves into shuddering silence. Sam shivered, tried to stop it, and shivered more. His arms ached, one where he had been clutching the machine he was using as cover, the other because his fingers were still clamped on the dart-thrower in a death grip. He heard Venner let out a long and shaky breath, saw him go forward.

"You all right, Joe?" he demanded shakily. "My God, did you know what you were up against, there?"

"I knew a bit about it, yes, sir. And I'm all right. A bit weary. Some of that power came through, was a drag."

"Is that all?" Sam came to catch his arm. "A drag?"

"There are several chambers back there." Joe pointed generally over his shoulder. "One of them is full of charts and diagrams. I took a little time to look them over. I could hear what was going on, of course. The symbols are strange, but a circuit diagram is a circuit diagram, in any language. In a way, all these machines are personality-boosters, tuned to different patterns and rhythms. Most of those back there are for animal life forms. These in this chamber are for humans."

"Yes, but—" Venner started to complain. Joe grinned.

"I saw what the sun-stone did to Mr. Hutten. It did nothing to me at all. So I took a chance. I had to, anyway, in the end."

"You saved my life!" Louise said it with dramatic emphasis.

"Joe, I'm all yours. Joe! Joe?"

"How the hell did you get in, anyway?" Venner demanded, ignoring her posturing entirely.

"That was a guess," Joe admitted, just as if she wasn't stroking his arm and shoulder. "There had to be machinery somewhere. There had to be a good reason why the villa was backed into the mountain. The tracer showed that you were somewhere *inside* the mountain, so the deduction was obvious. And it followed that there had to be air-shafts of some kind."

"Isn't he wonderful?" Louise demanded. "When he stood there like Ajax defying the lightnings, I thought we were all dead for sure. That man had us all tied in knots without even lifting a finger. And the pain!"

"I'll endorse that," Sam said, with feeling. "But what I still do not quite get is why you were immune. And what happened, anyway? Did the gadget backfire?"

"Something like that." Venner sighed. "It tells you in all the old magic books that it's dangerous to call up forces if you can't control them and use them. They have to go somewhere in the end. And they didn't work on Joe because they are on a level that he doesn't inhabit. Incidentally"—the old man turned to his impassive assistant, and there was a note in his voice that made them all pay attention—"these aliens knew a thing or two about the mind, Joe. More than we do. This place is a treasure trove of all sorts of information, and if Eklund could learn to read it, we can. And there might well be stuff here that will enable us to do something about you, boy. D'you want to think about that?"

Joe stood a moment in careful thought, then shrugged.

"I'm quite content the way I am, sir. I can't see that having a personal ego sense would be any great gain to me."

"I love you just the way you are," Louise declared warmly.

"As far as I can see," Joe went on as if she hadn't spoken, "this awareness of being someone seems to be one of the chief causes of most of the distress and unhappiness in people."

"I'm not at all sure that you don't have a point there." Sam sighed ruefully. "There were moments, just now, when I wished I was somebody else, and somewhere else, too."

"You did all right, son!" Venner cracked a grin that must have hurt his bruises. "It took nerve to walk in here the way you did. Well, now, let's have a check around, shall we? There's a lot of ends to be tied off before we can relax. There can be no doubt about Eklund being dead, so we won't waste time on him. What about the other two?"

On inspection Brandt proved to have a burn-mark discoloration in the palm of his hand, and there was a similar scar on Corinne's breast—no traces of sun-stones—and both were quite dead.

"Hm!" Venner clamped his jaw grimly. "I don't like that. He was raving mad when he shouted that death-wish, and the power was in full spate. 'Die, damn you'—and they died! I don't like it!"

"Are you suggesting he broadcast a death-wish to all and sundry?" Sam was aghast as the idea sank home.

"We'll have to check it. Joe, how's the android creature?"

"Same as the others, sir. And I didn't hit him *that* hard."

"All right, let's get out of here and where I can find a phone. Come on!"

Long before they got as far as finding Eklund's phone the dreadful suspicion had received further support, was now almost a certainty. In the salon there was the dismal sight of all the lamp-standard slaves fallen and sprawled at random like so many collapsed dummies. All were dead. Out in the morning room, while Venner searched for the communication center, Sam found his way to the luxurious bathroom, and reported back.

"They're all dead in there too, Venner. This is awful!"

"It's even worse than you think!" Louise came back in from the balcony, her flippant humor quite gone for the moment. "As far as I can see from here, all the herd animals are dead too. And, presumably, the slave-staff who looked after them!"

Venner had the phone, was barking at the sleepy-eyed José Ramirez at the other end. "Get out all your feelers. I



want to know about any reports of mysterious sudden deaths—you what?"

"I was about to tell you, sir. Already the radio news is coming in all about it. Here in the city several of the Brandt plant foremen and overseers have been found dead. Also from the spaceport, several customs men, and stewardesses—and more coming in all the time! What is it, sir, some kind of plague?"

"No, not that. It won't spread. Keep listening. I'll call you back soon."

Venner broke the link and shook his head, his voice growling in his throat as he said, "Would anybody care to take bets that this—plague—death-roll—will stretch to take in Zera? And Ophir?"

"And all the way back to Earth," Sam whispered, sinking into a couch as his knees gave way. "What are we going to do?"

"I'll tell you one of the very first things, Hutten. Did I say this place held a treasure house of information? Well, I take that back. This kind of information we can well do without. What one man can do, another can copy, and we don't want another Eklund. So I say this. We four, here, are the only ones who know about this place, and the damned aliens. I say we keep quiet about it, and, just as soon as ever we can, we fix up some way to blow the whole damned thing to hell and gone. Get rid of it forever. Anybody want to challenge that?"

Nobody did. His next suggestion was practical, and easy to follow.

"Best thing we can all do right now is take time out to clean up, eat, and think. Let's do that."

An hour later, when they were rested, refreshed and reasonably clean, with bright sunlight outdoors to help restore a sense of perspective, they gathered again to talk. Venner had been on the phone every fifteen minutes during the break, and the news had confirmed their worst suspicions.

"No doubt about it, Hutten. That crazy genius had every top man in all the key points right in his hand, and they are all dead. It's a mess. The three-planet system is a shambles!" The phone twittered at him. He came back within minutes looking savage.

"That puts the lid on it. Ramirez had an ethergram from Earth, for me. I asked to be kept informed of anything new about the Happy Sugar business. This is new. All known addicts, in all stages, just dropped dead—like that! The

sooner this place goes up in a big boom with dust and smoke the better I will like it. But that won't be the end." He aimed his sharp eyes at Sam. "Hutten, you have a jumbo-sized job on your hands."

"Me?" Sam shrank back into his seat. "Why pick on me?"

"Because you are the only legitimate and genuine survivor of this system's financial empire. You are the logical man to take control. You are the only one entitled to do so."

Sam boggled at the thought. "But I couldn't! Me? Take control of the whole shoot?"

"You'll have to. And quick, too, otherwise you'll have financial collapse, anarchy, every get-rich-quick sharpie in the cosmos headed this way with his digging tools out—imagine! But you'll have help. Me, Joe, and Louise, here. And there'll be plenty of others, just as soon as I can send for them. All right?"

Sam looked at it, looked very hard for a hole to crawl through, but he couldn't find one. He cast an anxious eye over the tense faces watching him, and gulped, and gave in.

"All right, if you say so. But with help!"

"That's fine. You'll do all right, Hutten. Let's not waste time. Joe, you take that jet-plane and get back to Verdun City, bring some stuff to blast this place—enough to crumble the entire damned mountain. . . ."

As the pair of them strode off Louise got up, smiled, came and sat very close to Sam, putting her hand on his wrist.

"You helped save my life, too," she said. "Never mind that Joe. He's just a yes-man. Didn't I always say I intended to marry a millionaire?"

Sam managed a grin to match her humor, but shook his head. "You'd better stick with Joe. It looks as if I'm going to be too busy to have time for anything else at all!"

"Don't you believe it!" she retorted. "With a really good secretary to help him, *no* man is that busy. And I am very good. So good that before you know it I'll be indispensable. You'll see!"

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