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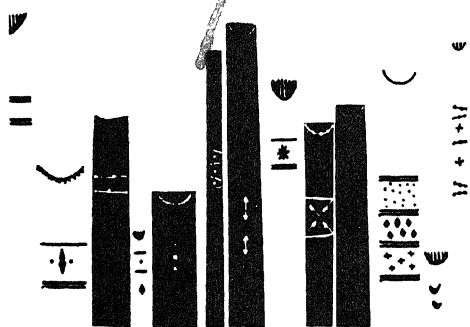
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Dear Ted

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A. E. Van Vogt



*The*  
**WEAPON MAKERS**

*By*

**A. E. vanVogt**



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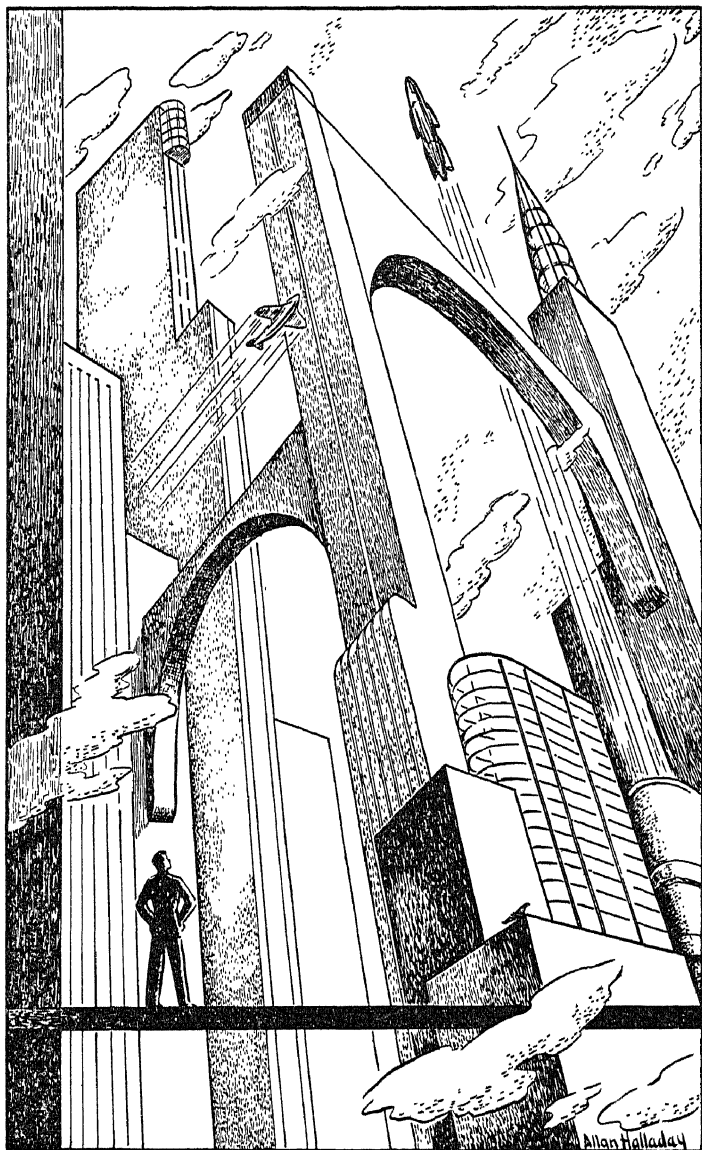
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# C H A P T E R



**A** WHOLE YEAR HAD PASSED. THE trail, Neelan thought, would be—*cold!*

He sat, letting the rhythm of the superbly swift trans-State plane soothe him. It had not been his fault that he couldn't get to Earth sooner. The meteorite, where Carew and he had been doing the preliminary work on their strike of "heavy" beryllium, had just entered the Dead Spot, the extreme opposite side of the Sun from Earth when the knowledge had come that Gil was dead.

For nearly a year, the meteorite, its velocity almost matching that of Earth, had maintained its remote position. Finally, however, a point had been reached where it was possible to figure out an acceptable orbit for Carew's and his simple type

freighter. Carew had landed him at one of the less expensive spaceports (the paired-atom beryllium mine might be worth its weight in platinum, but it wasn't paying yet) and so, after twelve months, he was on his way to Imperial City to find out how his brother had died.

In his pocket were a hundred credits, the remnants of the large stake he had sunk into the meteorite mine. He'd probably have to get a temporary job or—he made a *moue* of distaste—go back to gambling.

For a while, Neelan stared down at the distant, green land, at towns and cities that flashed by like gems from an unending emerald setting.

Suddenly, he was trembling. To think that he had been away from all this for ten years. Ten years! Actually to have deserted dazzlingly fertile Earth for barren Mars, the drab moons of Jupiter, and finally an airless meteorite! What fools men were!

Careful, Neelan thought grimly. It was just as well to remember that life on Earth under the ever-glorious Empress Isher was not all harmony and beauty. After all, he *had* had a reason.

The thought jarred. It was like a signal to his mind. It brought memory of the sharp emptiness that had come to him out there in space a year ago, his first knowledge that Gil was dead. Acute awareness it had been of the lack of that neural pressure which had constituted, even at that distance, the bond between his brother and himself.

There had been pain, Neelan remembered uneasily. Gil had died in agony, suddenly, without expecting it. The anguish had bridged the multimiles between Earth and the meteorite and twisted his own nerves in dreadful sympathy.

They had often wondered, Gil and he, and the scientists, what it would be like for one to die. The scientists had taken them at the age of five, identical twins already sensitive to

each other, and magnified the sensitivity until it was a warm interflow of life force, a world of dual sensation.

The interrelation had grown so sharp that at short distances (a few thousand miles) thoughts passed between them with all the clarity of the electronic flux in a local telestat.

Those earlier years had been pure joy of intimate relation; and then at the age of twelve began the attempt to make them different without breaking the nervous connection. Like a kid tossed in to sink or swim, he was subjected to the full impact of Isher civilization, while Gil was secluded, confined to studious ways.

Over those years, their intellectual association declined. Thoughts, though still transmittable, could be concealed. Neelan developed a curiously strong, big-brother attitude toward Gil, while Gil—

It was Neelan who noticed the diffident manner in which Gil tackled adulthood. Gil's way of life had made him shy, retiring. He could go all out on his job as research worker, but only too clearly the knowledge that his brother would automatically share all his emotional experiences made him hopeless socially, especially with women.

There never was any question as to who would leave. On the day that the contract with the Eugenics Institute terminated, Neelan announced that he was leaving for Mars. Gil was going to have his chance at life. Only it had been death.

Reverie ended. Neelan's tautness faded before the spectacle that was unfolding below—the beginning of Imperial City. Mile on mile of suburbs reeled past, bright shiny little places, each in their park setting, linked to the greater whole by a lacework of roads.

Minutes later he climbed out of the airliner onto the skyscraper roof that was the landing ground. He wasted no time, but put through his call immediately to Information Library. The answer came after considerable delay:

“—We have no record of a Gilbert Neelan dying in Imperial City on the day you mention, or on any other day during the past two years. Furthermore, a checkup with the Planetary Statistical Bureau has failed to reveal his name on the lists of the dead.

“However, it is clear that our records must be inaccurate, as he is not registered in this year’s planetary directory. His last known address was 1674 210th Avenue, Center, Imperial City, but that is according to last year’s records. Will you please tell us how you learned of your brother’s death—”

Neelan said hastily: “I’ll get in touch with you later.”

He broke the connection, walked to the nearest edge of roof, and stood for a long moment looking down at the mighty city.

At least he had one fact: The Information Library’s record of Gil’s address was the same as had been on Gil’s last letters. He would go there first, and then—

He had a sudden dark sense of destiny.

## C H A P T E R



**D**ARKNESS WAS SETTLING OVER THE ancient city when Neelan stepped out of a public carplane, and looked around. It was a street of what had once been fine residences. *The* house was equipped with an all-directional sign, already beginning to glow, which read: "Rooms to Let."

The doorbell was answered by a primly-dressed little maid, who returned after a moment with a fine-looking, buxom young woman of about thirty-five.

The woman frowned thoughtfully as Neelan explained his mission, then she shook her head. She was sorry, but while the name did somehow seem vaguely familiar, she really couldn't remember any Gilbert Neelan having stayed in her house. Perhaps if she looked at her accounts she might recall

something. His knowing that it was Room 3, and up to July 17, 4790 Isher, just a year ago, would help.

And of course she'd be glad to let him have a room for himself. They were lovely rooms and just one credit a night. Wouldn't he come in?

He'd enjoy staying here. There was a constant coming and going of new roomers, had been ever since she was widowed three years ago. Life was too rich, too wonderful to spend it in mourning. She liked change, variety.

She rambled on, sitting down on the edge of the bed with her accounts. Neelan made no effort to silence her agile tongue. He sat with a twisted smile on his lips, letting the gathering consciousness of the defeat that was here sink into his mind. On the very first leg of his search, he had run into quicksand, a bottomless well—a rooming house owned by a vague-minded creature to whom every boarder was a person dimly seen, important only in that such and such a room paid its way.

This poor woman with her desire for a steady stream of new roomers, new faces—what a strange restlessness it showed. What was it that Weapon Shop man on Europa had called it—a twisted, uncomprehended impulse toward rebellion against stability, a manifestation of the adventurous spirit of a dissatisfied era.

Neelan shrugged gloomily. Perhaps the woman—what was her name? Dendley; perhaps Mrs. Dendley was right. Life was too wonderful to spend it in mourning, or in searching, for the dead.

And Gil *was* dead. It wasn't just a matter of mixed records, or of mystery. He, Neelan, had felt the hideous flash of pain; and then the utter black-out of nervous connection. It had been fast, a matter of seconds; no sickness could ever have struck like that. Death had come through accident. Or murder!



The thought was not new. It was one that had racked him during all those long months of waiting on the meteorite, a picture of Gil struck down in some dark byway.

An exclamation from the woman jerked his mind back to her. "Why, yes," she said, "I remember now."

Neelan stared at her, as she went on: "He's *that* one. No wonder I couldn't recall him." She paused, then:

"He kept some luggage here because, as he said, he had to conform to the strict home-address regulations. He even gave me permission to rent his room overnight, but not for any length of time, if you know what I mean. I—"

"You mean" — Neelan felt blank — "he didn't really live here?"

The woman nodded brightly. "That's right. He came in once a month to collect his mail and pay the rent. He said his work made it necessary for him to sleep at his place of business."

She was looking down at her book. "I never knew where he worked, and he checked out on July . . . let me see . . . yes, July 17th. That'll be a year ago last week."

Neelan nodded, but his muscles were rigid. He straightened finally, consciously nerving himself to face the tremendous fact that Gil had left here deliberately on the day he died.

It seemed a start. For surely somewhere in the city someone would know something. It turned out an illusive hope! The trail, instead of widening and brightening, grew narrower, more obscure. When he called at the Eugenics Institute, he was informed that it would be necessary to obtain the case history from their Lakeside branch, and that would take a few weeks. No, they had had no local correspondence with his brother. The police publicity agent said: "Do you know that we've had five thousand unsolved murders in the past two years? This is one of those curious periods in history when assassination is almost respectable, and one more murder is like a stone thrown into the dark. A year ago, you say? Forget it!" No bank in the capital had any record of a Gilbert

Neelan account. There was a bank balance of several thousand credits at Lakeside, and if he would apply to the courts—it would take about six months. The Atomic Research Corp. reported that Gil had left his post in their great Lakeside branch two years previously, with the purpose of joining a private firm in Imperial City. They didn't know what firm. No application had ever been made for references. His work? He had been engaged in establishing a stable relationship between terrene and contraterrene matter, a well-explored field, completely lacking in recent sensational developments. Two half-minute telestat ads succeeded only in reducing Neelan's fading capital by sixty credits. At the end of three weeks he had paid Mrs. Dendley twenty-one credits for rent, and spent another sixteen credits on food, carplane fare, and person-to-person telestat calls.

On the morning of the twenty-first day, a woman from the Eugenics Institute called up and informed him that the documents of Gil's and his case history had arrived from Lakeside, but had yielded nothing of value. But would Neelan come in person at five o'clock that afternoon. The executive professor, Nad Rayburn, would like to speak to him.

After disconnecting, Neelan stood frowning beside Mrs. Dendley's telestat. He remembered the professor from his first personal call, a distinguished-looking, friendly graybeard. He'd go all right, he decided. But on the way he'd take time off for something more urgent. A man with less than three credits to his name had better start thinking in terms of making money.

He went out for lunch, and then forgot to eat. He walked restlessly. The afternoon was half gone before he remembered food again. Eating it in a small Self-serve, he felt his basic indecisiveness, the empty sense of all the time that had passed, the months that had drawn so many curtains across the death rail. And now his search must wait even longer while he made some money. What a laugh that was. In about three months, the "heavy" beryllium mines would start to pay at the rate of

a hundred thousand or so credits a month while he, very *un-*funnily, was in serious danger of having to get into a soup line, and so automatically qualify for permanent exile to Mars or Venus, where there was always work of a sort.

Out in the street, Neelan stuffed a coin in a corner PUBLIC AD machine. "Technical?" he said, when a girl's face appeared on the plate.

An older man replaced the girl, and Neelan said: "I have the following general qualifications—" He outlined his education and experience: atomic engineering degree, three years meteorite mining—"I want to emphasize," he went on, "that I do not wish to sign the usual two-year contract. I want a job distinctly temporary, two months at the outside. Have you anything?"

"I'm afraid," the clerk said, "such positions are all of a lower classification. The industrial contract, where the firm has to retain you six months, and *you* have to remain two years, is a business tradition. Besides, the powerful Engineer's Guild would not permit employment except under such terms."

"What do you mean?" Neelan asked, "by lower classification?"

"There's an ad here," said the clerk, "that's been running for five days, and was renewed this morning by registered telestat. I'll read it to you:

"Wanted: Man capable of repairing large atomic motors. No Automatic Repair trainees need apply. Call in person, Room 1874, Trellis Minor Building. Good pay.

"The unique feature about that ad," the clerk said in his precise voice, "is that it requires special training in a trade that is almost nonexistent in large cities, but which you would have learned in the course of attaining your degree. The Automatic Repair machines with their cheap, fast jobs, have forced the old hand craftsman out of business for sixty years

now. Apparently, someone wants the superior, longer-lasting repair job.

"I would say that ad was the best bet. I have here a number of other trade-type positions that—"

Neelan noted them down, as they were described. When finally the machine clicked off, he felt surer of his future. Something ought to materialize from the list; and, as the clerk had said, the first job was the most promising. The next morning he would prove or disprove its merits. Meanwhile—

The Eugenics Building was a gray-white shaft that pierced a thousand feet of sky, narrowing as it went up, and finally tapering sharply to a point.

Neelan stepped off the elevator at the ninetieth floor, and was admitted immediately to the office of the executive professor. The man stood up graciously from behind his desk, and, leaning over, shook hands. He said then:

"It is regrettable that we have been unable to assist you directly. Unfortunately, your brother's last communication to our Lakeside branch dealt with an obscure nervous disorder that proved to have no relation to our sensory investigations. That was five years ago."

Neelan said: "Thank you for your efforts on my behalf."

Quite suddenly, puzzlement came. It hadn't struck him before, but abruptly it seemed odd that he had been invited up here for a few polite words of regret. He stared sharply at the man, and was startled to see that the other was regarding him intently from under bushy eyebrows.

The old man caught his glance, and laughed shortly. "I'm wondering," he said finally, coolly, "if you're still as reliable as you were when you passed from out of our responsibility ten years ago."

Excitement touched Neelan. For here was something.

"I would like," the scientist went on, before Neelan could speak, "to make a suggestion, in the strictest confidence, as a friendly gesture to one of our former wards."

Neelan fought tautness, as he said: "You can trust me. I swear it."

He waited tensely, as the old man's fine gray eyes burned into his own, steadily, for a long moment.

"Why don't you," said Professor Rayburn, "try the Weapon Shops? It is not generally known, but they have an Information Center that has no equal. And now good-bye and good luck."

He turned away, without looking at Neelan, and busied himself with papers on a side desk.

Neelan's mind was still jumping as he reached the street. Because he hadn't known. He thought, "And I believed they only sold guns. I should have known. Why, I've been all over the solar system, been in several of their shops, had long conversations with that fellow on Europa."

He felt torn. His personal despair yielded briefly to a sense of the tremendousness of the Weapon Makers establishment, with its stores existing in tens of thousands of cities and towns in the far-flung Isher Empire, an independent, outlawed, indestructible, altruistic opposition to tyranny. He should have known, of course, that they must have an *inner*, hidden establishment that served the outer, visible one. Thinking about it, he had a sense of lift, the burden of his search seemed less of a weight on his soul.

The Weapon Shop was in a glade of green and floral vegetation; it made a restful, idyllic picture between two giant buildings. The great, universal sign of the store told its old, old story to all who cared to see:

THE RIGHT TO BUY WEAPONS IS THE  
RIGHT TO BE FREE

The window sign was the same, too, as in all the shops he had seen. The letters were smaller, but the words were just as positive:

THE FINEST ENERGY WEAPONS IN THE  
KNOWN UNIVERSE

Neelan stood very still, staring at the gleaming display of revolvers and rifles. It wasn't that there was anything new here. For years he had carried one of those marvelous, defensive guns. The weapon was in place now, fitted snugly in its holster under his left shoulder. Seven times, in the days when he had lived by his remarkable gambling luck, that supergun had flashed its abnormal power.

No, definitely it wasn't the newness. It was that the very sight of a Weapon Shop always gave him an eerie sensation. It required a distinct mental *reaching* to realize that every Weapon Shop was an impregnable fort, and that bloodily earnest attempts had been made by the Isher government in long-gone years to smash the entire organization.

Neelan shook himself, and walked toward the open door. It wouldn't open. He tugged at it, startled, thinking: Was it possible that the sensitive door was condemning him because he had so recently come from a government institute? Report said the door worked by thought, and no enemy of the Weapon Shops, no servant of the Empress Isher, was ever admitted. It—

It opened gently like a flower unfolding its petals, only faster. It was weightless in his fingers, like some supernally delicate structure insubstantial. And when he stepped through the opening, it crowded his heels without touching them, and closed behind him silent as a night in space.

Neelan stepped gingerly through a little alcove into a large room. Dimly lighted region it was, with wall and floor show-cases, not many, but neatly arranged.

A tall, middle-aged attendant emerged after a moment from behind double doors that led to a briefly seen, brilliantly lighted back room. Neelan explained his mission. The man went to a metal desk that stood against the back wall, and seated himself before an "endless" sheet of paper. The paper came out of the wall, and then went down a slit into the desk over a roller. The man wrote Gil's full name, and connecting

information. The paper with the writing rolled out of sight into the desk. They waited.

Five minutes passed, then the paper rolled back out of the desk. There was more writing below the original. The attendant studied the message with pursed lips, then he looked up and said:

“Take down this address: 1997 232nd Avenue, Center, Imperial City.”

Neelan’s fingers trembled as he wrote. His mind was twisting. His body left like liquid. He said in a wavering voice:

“You don’t mean to tell me that you’ve actually got his last address? What kind of wizards are you?”

He couldn’t go on. He listened as in a dream, as the man said:

“There are some unusual angles in the case. When your brother came to Imperial City, he went to live and to work at that address. The building is owned by a famous scientist, named Derd Kershaw, a great and thoroughly honest man. It is, and remains, our policy never to pry deeply into the affairs of such personages. For this reason, at the time, the bare details of your brother’s residence were noted, and that was all. However—”

He paused, then: “In view of the fact that your brother is now dead, it has been decided to go further into the matter. Unfortunately, it will be at least a week before an observer can be assigned to the task. I would advise that you take no personal action in the meantime, as our investigation will be immeasurably more thorough than anything you could possibly manage.”

His eyes were steady on Neelan’s. “I must emphasize that we are not taking your case in any police sense of the word. We do not punish crimes. We do not interfere with the great flow of Isher life, except under certain conditions where money is involved.”

He finished: "Come back in eight days, and we will give you further information. That is all. Good-by."

Neelan was out in the street before it occurred to him that he hadn't so much as offered a word of thanks.

Night was falling over the city of dreams when Neelan stepped off the public carplane in front of Mrs. Dendley's. A night made alive by lights that glowed softly from every crevice, and only the sky, the deepennig blue of the sky was yielded to darkness.

He stood watching the lights of the carplane flicker into the upper shadows, then he turned and went into the house. In his room, the high thrill of his success began to fade before a new reality. So he knew where Gil had worked up to the time of his death! So what?

He knew where a man now dead had worked!

It was startling to picture it that way. He thought, "Am I crazy? What am I looking for? Just because Gil and I were like two facets of the same form, why should I ruin myself simply to find his body? He's *dead*. Irrevocably. I've got to get that deep into my head."

The thought disturbed. He felt, suddenly, the unimportance of one life, one man dying somewhere, his body silhouetted for a cosmic instant against the horizon of time, and then plunging down into the night, another brave spirit lost among the hosts of Earth's dead.

Unsettled, he walked to the window. The house stood on a great rise; and so it was possible to see across the ocean of buildings to the distant sea of lights that was the "downtown," with its Avenue of Luck, Boulevard of Fun, and Street of Shows. Far to the right, he could just make out the Imperial Palace. For weeks of nights, the dazzling, crystalline structure had scarcely more than touched his attention. Now, suddenly, it caught his mind and his eyes.

The empress! Mentally, he pictured her. Imperious young woman in the full fire of her power and youth. The glorious



Empress Innelda Isher, not an angel from what he had privately heard, but whatever she was, she was the epitome of the lusty life that was out there under the six hundred square miles of blazing lights that was Imperial City, while he was sunk here in the contemplation of death.

Slowly, Neelan straightened. It was over, he thought, his search. Tomorrow, he would obtain his job. During the noon hour, he would take a ride over to the address the Weapon Shop had given him and, well, look the place over. He wouldn't go in, but would wait the eight days that the Weapon Shop man had suggested, wait for their report. He went to bed on that thought and dreamed that Gil was alive on a burning hell of a desert, choking, suffocating, in a perpetual blast of un-earthly storms.

He wakened, sweating; and saw that a cheerful sun was shining through the great window. Slowly, under the effects of an invigorating shower and the brightness of the morning, his body relaxed. Mentally, he renewed his determinations of the night before.

It was cool outside, almost bracing on the shaded side of the long, broad boulevard. Neelan crossed to the sunny side, and that made a difference.

The thought came that the sidewalk mechanism had been reversed too quickly. There was, of course, the fact that the more day's heat the streets absorbed, the more light they gave off at night, but after all the light was always augmented by atomic power.

Walking warmed him gradually, and he forgot the problem of temperature completely, as a hundred-story building loomed up ahead of him.

### TRELLIS MAJOR BUILDING

For a moment, the wrongness of the name did not strike Neelan. He quickened his pace, and stopped only when, across the street from the stupendous structure, he saw the smaller, fifty-story, spired monster that was the Trellis Minor Building.

The sight jarred his memory. Of course, Trellis Major and Minor were two meteorites revolving around each other somewhere beyond Mars. The larger was terrene matter, the smaller contraterrene. They were being mined assiduously by a single company; and these massive buildings were but two by-products of the still unended treasure that flowed in a steady stream from that remote region of solar space.

Some day Carew and he might have a building, or buildings, like this for that three-mile-in-diameter meteorite of theirs.

The mental picture was pleasing; and it occupied his mind so completely that he was stepping into the elevator before another thought struck him. Funny, an atomic motor repair company in a building. The law was strict about isolating the power tools involved, requiring a special type of wall and floor material, and at least fifty feet of fenced-in ground on all sides. This was possibly only an office; his actual working hours would be spent elsewhere. He knocked thoughtfully on the door of Room 1874, and waited.

Two minutes of intermittent knocking produced no results, and, frowning, Neelan stepped back and surveyed the impassive, opaque entrance. It was one of a long line of similar doors on the eighteenth floor, and he'd be hanged if he'd give up without a further effort. Before he could knock again, a harsh voice from inside said:

"Come in."

Neelan's fingers were turning the knob, and he was pushing the door open, before he remembered that the door had been locked when he had first tried it.

So the lock was remotely controlled—

Just inside the door, he stopped short. He was in a large room with a massive bulging window. There was no other door, no other room. A telestat stood blank and lifeless in one corner. There were four chairs and a desk but nothing else. There was no one in the room.

Neelan's mind flashed straight at the only possible source of the harsh voice that had invited him inside. Straight at the unlighted telestat in the corner, he said:

"What's the idea?"

There was silence. Neelan was about to speak again, when the voice that had invited him in, snapped from the telestat: "Who are you? What's your name?"

Neelan's impulse was to leave. The sharpness of the man's tone jarred on him. The whole affair seemed suddenly fishy. The only thing was, his need for money was too urgent. He couldn't just walk out. He laughed ruefully, and gave his name in his steadiest voice.

"What do you want? How did you come here? How did you find this place?"

The first real impatience touched Neelan. What kind of an idiot was he dealing with? But again his own urgencies held his tone to a quiet level, as he explained about the ad, his qualifications for the job, and the length of time he was willing to work.

He did not mention Gil, or any of his reasons for being on Earth. When he had finished, there was a long silence; finally:

"I guess you'll do."

"Thanks," said Neelan dryly.

"You must," said the voice from the telestat, "be wondering the why of this queer method of employment."

Neelan shrugged. "I did. But I don't really give a damn."

The man laughed, not too pleasantly. "I'm glad to hear that. I've got a job that will take just about two months; and I'll pay you a hundred credits a week, and no questions asked. How's that?"

Fishier and fishier, Neelan thought. Even with hand craftsmen as scarce as they were, that was about double what the job was worth. He shrugged, and said:

"I'll be too busy repairing motors to worry much about anything else."

He felt remote from the petty illegality that seemed to lie behind this. Remote, and conscious of his own need. He grew aware that the stranger had been speaking, and that he hadn't been listening. The man was saying:

"—So come up at once. I'll show you the general layout before lunch. All right?"

Neelan said: "Will you repeat the address while I write it down?"

The voice rasped: "Five blocks north along 131st Street. Then about one block east to 1997 232nd Avenue, Center. It's a tall, narrow, grayish building. You can't miss it. Ring the bell, and wait for an answer. Got that?"

There was something in the back of Neelan's mind, an indistinct something that tugged for his attention but faded as he realized that the man was waiting for an answer. Neelan looked up impatiently.

"Yes, he said, "yes, I'll be there."

He was out in the street before the something in the back of his mind came out of its dark. He stopped. His mind jangled. And then he had his note book out and was feverishly leafing it over to the address the Weapon Shop had given him. For a moment, then, it seemed to him that there was a fatal flaw in the physical structure of his brain; and that flaw was now cracking under pressure.

Because the two addresses—the one where he was going, and the one where Gil had worked before his death—were the same.

He couldn't get over it. The shock continued to beat at him, as he walked. And it did not fade, but grew. After two blocks, Neelan leaned, trembling, against a building. He was so weak that he felt sick. He was about to force himself on when another thought swept him.

The man had recognized him. Or rather *recognized his resemblance to Gil*. That was why his voice had been so unnaturally sharp. That was why he had been silent for such long

intervals. He must have been thinking of what might lie behind the appearance of Gil's brother, applying for a job whose origin had been so skillfully concealed.

He must have been nearly startled out of his wits.

Neelan's mind simply would not reach out to grasp the implications. For over and above everything else was the fact that the stranger had recovered a semblance of reason and asked him to come up. *Urged* him. The sense of danger that came in that moment was like a blow. He braced himself, all his muscles tightened.

"Am I going up there?" he thought shakily, "without telling anyone where I'm going? It's true, I've got a remarkable defensive gun but—"

There was the further fact that the man might become suspicious if he didn't arrive within a certain time. Nevertheless, one digression shouldn't cause too long delay. Swiftly, he walked to the nearest carplane stop, and pressed the button. A machine swooped down out of the sky.

The Weapon Shop door opened at his touch, without offering an instant's resistance. The attendant came forward, recognition in his gaze. He listened thoughtfully while Neelan explained what had happened. Finally, gravely, he shook his head.

"I'm sorry," he said, "that you failed to appreciate what I told you before: The Weapon Shops do *not* interfere in the affairs of individuals, except under certain circumstances that do not apply here.

"Overwhelmingly, our business is that of selling guns to men who have the will and courage to protect themselves and their rights against tyranny. In the final issue, it is the maintenance of that spirit of resistance that is our concern during any given generation or century.

"My advice is, wait until one of our observers can be assigned to the case. Unfortunately, all our available men are engaged upon a task of the utmost importance, and under no

circumstances can they be shifted. I can see the importance of what has happened. The man who talked to you does not sound like Kershaw but"—he shrugged—"I'm sorry."

To hell with the Weapon Shops, Neelan thought grimly, as he sat in a carplane on his return journey. Seven more days before one of their men would be free, and even then, no matter what they discovered, they wouldn't take any action. Such cosmic detachment might have a long-run practical value, but it didn't mean a thing now.

And there was no time for further delays; his strength lay in the fact that the man, whoever he was, did want a job done. Neelan climbed off the carplane within a block of his destination. There was a store across the street; he went in, bought an envelope and a sheet of paper, and wrote a brief note to Professor Nad Rayburn. The note stated the facts as simply as possible, and ended: "If you fail to hear from me by tomorrow noon, get in touch with the police."

He mailed the letter; and then, satisfied, he headed along the street. It was, he saw by his watch, exactly thirty-one minutes since he had talked to his—employer. Not too long.

So that was the building! Neelan stopped, and stared. It was an ungainly structure in that it was out of proportion, much too long for its width. Like a great, gray-dull needle it poked into the lowering sky three, four hundred feet, a curiously sinister construction. There was no sign outside it to indicate what went on inside, simply a narrow walk leading from the sidewalk to a single, unimposing door that was level with the street.

He pictured Gil walking along this street on the day of his death, striding forward up to the door, disappearing. The thought stiffened Neelan as he rang the doorbell.

A moment passed; then: "You took your time about arriving," said the familiar voice from a hidden speaker above the door.

Neelan said steadily: "I walked straight here."

There was another brief silence. Neelan thought: The man must be thinking that over, mentally measuring the distance from the Trellis Minor Building. Finally:

“Just a minute.”

The door began to open. Neelan saw a wide, high alcove, just how high he couldn't make out from where he was standing. He forgot the alcove as he found himself staring at a thick, partly open door made of dark, mottled metal. The entire inner wall, in which the big door was set, was smoothly wrought in the same metal.

Neelan was stepping through the outer door when it struck him with a start what the over-all, unnatural effect was. The inner wall was Fursching steel, the structural alloy that was used almost exclusively for the superhard shells of spaceships.

The strange building was a hangar for a spaceship. And the ship was *in*.

Neelan drew back like a man who has unsuspectingly picked up an innocent-looking rod, only to find that it was a white-hot, hellish thing.

“What's the matter?” said the harsh voice. “What are you waiting for?”

The words stirred Neelan. He tried to force himself to walk in. And couldn't. He stood there, his brain feeling too big for his head with the thought that was swelling in it.

Gil had died, not on Earth, but in a flight through space.

The reality of what the man had said struck him again, more sharply this time. It brought the realization that his hesitation was ruining him. The time for dissembling was already past. Only the truth could explain why he was standing here like a clod of wood. He found his voice:

“I've just discovered that this is a spaceship.”

“Oh!” There was silence; then the voice said urgently: “Just a minute. I'll be right out. I'll prove to you that everything is all right.”

The annoying thing to Neelan was that he didn't suspect. Not that it would have made any difference. He was going in, regardless. But to stand there, feeling in partial control of the situation with his Weapon Shop revolver snugly ready in its holster; and then—

The inner door, that had been fractionally open, swung wide. It revealed a third door, which was also open, and, beyond that, floating in the air, was a mobile energy gun, mounted and riding easily on antigravity plates.

The three-noded muzzle of the gun pointed with a mechanical steadiness at Neelan. From an inner speaker, the man said in a tight, hard voice:

“With your experience on the planets, you probably carry a Weapon Shop gun. I hope you realize the futility of such a weapon against a ninety-thousand-cycle unit. Just toss your revolver through the door.”

There was nothing else to do. And it was as the revolver struck the floor inside that a tall man came into view. He scooped up the viridescent little instrument, and then faced Neelan from behind the mobile unit.

“Come on,” he said curtly.

Without a word, Neelan stepped through the two inner doors, each one of which, in turn, clanged behind him with heavy finality.



# C H A P T E R



**A**LMOST, HEDROCK FORGOT THE SPY ray. It glowed on, the picture on the screen showing the Imperial conference room as cleverly as ever. There were still men bowing low over the hand of the cold-faced young woman who sat on the throne chair, and the sound of their voices came distinctly. Everything was as it should be.

For Hedrock, however, all interest in that splendid, shining room, that courtly scene, had shuddered into nonexistence. The icy words of the young woman spun around and around in his mind, though minutes had now passed since she had spoken them.

“—Under the circumstances,” she had said, “we cannot afford to take further risks with this Weapon Shop turncoat.

What has happened is too important. Accordingly, General Grall, you will, as a purely precautionary measure, arrest Captain Hedrock an hour after lunch and hang him. The time sequence is important as he will, as usual, sit at my table during lunch, and also because I wish to be present at the execution."

"Very well, your majesty—"

Hedrock paced back and forth in front of his viewing machine. He felt mentally and physically shattered, indecisive; and there was the clammy beginning of fear, for a purpose was in his mind, a hardening determination not to accept the failure that was here.

Very slowly, he faced again the spy-ray machine, which, in its present materialized form, occupied an entire corner of the apartment. He saw, with a somber awareness, that the young woman was still in the conference room, alone now. She sat, a faint smile on her long face. The smile faded as she touched an instrument on her chair, and began to dictate in a clear, bell-like voice.

For a moment, Hedrock allowed the meaning of the routine palace matters she was discussing to penetrate his mind; then he withdrew his attention, and, very carefully, began to adjust his machine. The scene showing the young empress faded. The viewing plate flickered? with formless light, finally caught the face of a man, and steadied.

Hedrock said, "Calling the High Council of the Weapon Makers."

"It will take a minute," said the man on the screen, gravely, "to bring the various councilors to their locals."

Hedrock nodded stiffly. He was suddenly jumpy, cold. His voice had been steady enough, but he had the feeling that it would deteriorate into a quaver unless he could pull himself together.

He stood very still, fighting that shakiness. When he looked again on the screen, a dozen faces had replaced the one, enough members for a quorum. He began at once an account

of the sentence of death that had been pronounced on him, finished finally:

"There is no doubt that something big is up. Time and again during the last two weeks, when an Imperial conference has been called, I have found myself headed off into tedious conversations with superior officers, prevented from returning to my rooms.

To my mind, however, the personally significant factor of the hanging order is the time element involved. Note that I am not to be arrested until an hour after lunch, that is, about three hours from now. And then, too, I was allowed to return to my rooms in time to hear the sentence pronounced. If they know the Weapon Shops, they must realize that, given three hours of warning, I have ample time to escape. Therefore—"

"Are you suggesting," said Councilor Peter Cadron sharply, "that you are going to remain?"

The putting of his unsettled intention into words startled Hedrock. The cold, stiff feeling came back; and when he spoke again, his voice shook the faintest bit, though the words themselves were precise and, in their essence, confident:

"You will remember, Mr. Cadron, that we have analyzed the empress' character. The abnormal sociotechnical pressures of the age have made her as restless and as adventure-minded as are her nineteen billion subjects. She wants change, excitement, new experiences, *but*—

"But above everything else she is the Imperial power, representative of the conservative, antichange forces. The result is a constant tug of mind, a dangerous state of unbalance, which makes her the most difficult enemy the Weapon Shops have ever had."

"The hanging, no doubt," said another man coldly, "will supply a fillip to her jaded nerves; for the few moments that you jerk and bounce in the noose, her life will seem less drab."

"What I had in mind," Hedrock said steadily, "was that one of our No-men might resolve the various factors and advise on the practicability of my remaining."

"We will consult Edward Gonish," said Peter Cadron. "Now please have patience while we discuss this matter *in camera*."

They withdrew, not visually, for their faces remained on the viewer. But, though their lips moved, no voice came through.

The conversation seemed to go on for a very long time, and there was an almost endless period when something was being explained to somebody not on the screen. The time grew so long that Hedrock stood finally with clenched teeth and clenched hands, his muscles working, face contorted. His breath exploded from his lungs with a whistling gasp when, abruptly, silence ended, and Peter Cadron said:

"We must regretfully report that the No-man Edward Gonish considers that there are not sufficient known factors for him to offer an intuition. This leaves us with only logic, and so we wish to ask one question: At what time will your present chances of escaping from the palace begin to deteriorate sharply. Can you possibly stay for lunch?"

Hedrock held himself preternaturally steady, letting the shock of the report of the No-man's verdict drain out of him. He hadn't realized how tremendously he was depending on that superbly trained intuitive genius to decide on *his* life or death. In an instant, the situation had become uncertain, dangerous beyond his previous conception.

He shook himself, said at last: "No, if I stay to lunch I'm committed. The empress likes to play cat and mouse, and she will definitely inform me of the sentence during the meal. I have a plan, dependent on her emotional reactions and based on the fact that she will consider it necessary to justify herself."

He paused, frowning, stared at the screen: "What were the conclusion of your discussion? I need every possible assistance."

It was Councilor Kendlon, a thick-faced man, who had hitherto not spoken, who began:

“As you know, you are in the palace for two purposes, one being to protect the Weapon Shops from a recurrence of anything approaching the desperate danger we were placed in seven years ago. Your other purpose is, of course, your own pet scheme of establishing a liaison between the Weapon Shops and the Imperial government.

“You are a spy, therefore, only in a minor sense. Any lesser information you may gain is yours alone. We do not want it. But think back in your mind: Have you heard anything—*anything*—that might provide some fulcrum for your theory that something tremendous is being planned?”

Hedrock shook his head slowly, wordlessly. Quite suddenly, he felt no emotion, a sense of being physically detached. His voice came finally as out of a remote, cold region, precise, even, conclusive:

“I can see, sirs, that you have come to no decision, yet you cannot deny that you are reluctant to have my connection here broken. And there is no doubt at all of your anxiety to learn what the empress is concealing. Finally, of course, there is, as you say, my pet scheme.

“Accordingly, I have decided to remain—”

They were not so quick as that to agree. The strange, restless character of the empress made it possible that the slightest wrong word on his part would be fatal. Details—details—they discussed them with a painstaking thoroughness. There was the fact that he was the first apparent traitor to the Weapon Shops in history, one who nevertheless refused to give any information to the curious ruler. His striking appearance, mental brilliance and strong personality had already fascinated her, should continue to do so.

Therefore, except for the dangerous fact that she was engaged in something secret and important, the threat of hanging was a test, product of suspicion. But be careful, if neces-

sary, give her secret Weapon Shop information of a general nature, to titillate her appetite for more and—

At that point, the door buzzer broke off the conversation. With a start, Hedrock flicked off the controls, shut off the power; and then, acutely conscious that he had allowed himself to become jumpy, he deliberately removed his tie pin from the cravat, and bent down over the table.

The ring lay there, a small, bright design, its ornamental head an exact duplicate in miniature of the spy-ray machine, the image of which was built up into solid form by the atomic forces manufactured by the perfect power plant inside the ring. It would be quicker to release the tiny, automatic lever that was attached to the ring for that very purpose, but his own nervous condition was more important.

It was as delicate a job as threading a needle. Three times his hand trembled the slightest bit, and missed the almost invisible depression that had to be contacted. The fourth time he got it. The spy-ray machine winked out like a smashed light, only there was no debris, nothing but empty air. Where it had stood on the corner table was only the blanket he had used to protect the table top from scratches. Hedrock whisked the blanket back to the bedroom, and then stood for a moment with the ring in his palm, undecided. He put it finally in a metal box with three other rings, and set the controls of the box to dissolve the rings if there was any tampering.

Only the ring gun remained encircled on his finger when at last he walked coolly to answer the insistent buzzer.

Hedrock recognized the tall man who stood in the corridor as one of the empress' orderlies. The fellow nodded recognition, and said:

“Captain, her majesty asks me to inform you that lunch is being served, and would you please come at once.”

For a moment, Hedrock had the distinct impression that he was the object of a practical joke, and that the abnormal woman was already playing her little thrill game. Lunch time?

The thought ended, as, automatically, he jerked up his hand, and stared at his wrist-watch. The little dials showed twelve thirty-five. An hour had passed since he had heard the sentence of death from the empress' firm, finely shaped mouth.

Actually, the question of whether or not he remained till lunch had never been his to decide. The event was rushing upon him even as he was telling the council that it was an hour away. The reality of his position became clear, as he walked along past scores of soldiers who stood in every corridor on his way to the royal dining salon; and that reality was that he was staying. It was so final that Hedrock stopped on the threshold of the great, brilliant room, stood for a moment, smiling sardonically—and was himself.

Quietly, still smiling faintly, he wended his way among the tables of noisy courtiers, and sank into his place five chairs down from the empress at the head table.

# C H A P T E R

# IV

**T**HE COCKTAIL AND SOUP COURSES were already past. Hedrock sat, more pensive now that he was not physically on the move, waiting for whatever was next. He studied the men around the table, those young, strong, arrogant, intelligent thirty-year-olds who made up the personal following of her imperial majesty.

He felt a pang, sharp, almost cruel. He had enjoyed his six months among this brilliant gathering. It was a change after the years of the quiet sanity of his Weapon Shop friends. There was something about young people tasting the fruits of stupendous power, a wild, untamed enjoyment of joy that was reminiscent of the old, old days.



Hedrock smiled wryly. The difference was that coming here had been the most dangerous situation he had committed himself to in all his long years.

He had known, of course, that he would sooner or later involve himself beyond even his secret powers. There was a quality about immortality that he had not allowed for—in the beginning—a developing disregard of risks until the crisis was actually upon him, a pre-danger casualness about the danger. Now as in the past, only his over-all purpose, as distinct from the purposes that people thought he had, was important.

The empress' voice, sugar-sweet, rising for the first time above the soft clamor of conversation, cut off his reverie:

“You seem very thoughtful, Captain Hedrock.”

Hedrock turned his head slowly to face her. He had been wanting to give her more than the cursory glance he had allowed himself so far; but there were angles to that, such as the fact that her green eyes had been glowing at him from the moment he had seated himself.

It was a strong, a striking, almost a noble countenance. It had the high-cheeked, firm-chinned facial structure of the famous Isher family; and there was no doubt, no doubt at all that here was only the latest, not the last member of a star human line.

Wilful passions and power unlimited had twisted that perfect face. But already it was apparent that the erratic, brilliant Innelda, like all the remarkable men and women who were her ancestors, would endure through corruption and intrigue, in spite of character defects, and carry on the extraordinary, the great imperial strain of Isher.

The important thing now, Hedrock thought with a sharpening alertness, was to get her out into the open under the most advantageous—for him—circumstances. He said:

“I was thinking, Innelda, of your grandmother seven times removed, the lovely, glorious Ganeel, the golden-haired em-

press. Except for your brown hair, you're very like her as she was in her younger days."

The green eyes looked puzzled. The empress pursed her lips, and then parted them as if to say something. Before she could speak, Hedrock went on:

"The Weapon Shops of course have an entire pictorial of her life. What I was thinking of was the rather sad idea that some day you, too, would be but a pictorial record in some dusty Information Center."

It struck deep. He had known that this vibrantly alive young woman could not bear the thought of old age or death in connection with herself. Anger brought a gleam to her eyes, and produced as always it had in the past what she was really thinking.

"You at least," she snapped in a brittle yet ringing voice, "will never live to see any pictorial of my life. You may be interested to know, my dear captain, that your spy work here has been found out, and you are to be hanged this afternoon."

The words shocked him to his core. It was all very well to theorize in advance that here was nothing but a cunning, murderous test, a determined attempt to draw him out. But sitting here within speaking distance of a flesh and blood tyrant, this creature whose every whim was law, and who could be as cruel as death itself—sitting here, all theory seemed weak, unreal, fantastic.

Abruptly, it was incredible that he could ever have been so mad as to place himself in such a predicament. He could so easily have waited another generation, or two, or more, for a woman to turn up again in the Isher line. True this was the logical point, both biologically and historically, but—

By sheer will power, Hedrock fought off that black mood. He forced himself, then, to relax, to smile firmly, grimly.

After all, he had fished that answer out of her, clearly before she really wanted to announce the sentence. In a grisly sort of way, it was a psychological victory.

A few more victories like that, however, and he'd be all set for a nervous breakdown.

There was still conversation going on in the great salon, but not at the royal table; and it was that that brought Hedrock back to full awareness of his environment. Some of the young men were sitting staring at the empress. Others looked at Hedrock, then at the empress, then back again.

All were transparently puzzled; they seemed uncertain as to whether it was a bad joke or—Hedrock recognized their expression—or one of those damnable real-life dramas that the empress precipitated from time to time, seemingly for the sole purpose of ruining everybody's digestion. The important thing, Hedrock thought tightly, was that the situation now had the full attention of the men whom he expected to save his life.

It was the empress who broke the silence. She said softly, tauntingly:

"A penny for your *latest* thoughts, captain."

She couldn't have put it better. Hedrock suppressed a savage smile, and said:

"My earlier statement still holds. You're very like the lovely, temperamental, explosive Ganeel. The main difference is that she never slept with a live snake when she was sixteen."

"What's this?" said a man. "Innelda sleeping with snakes. Is this intended symbolically or literally? Why, look she's blushing."

It was so. Hedrock's cool gaze studied the empress' scarlet-cheeked confusion with amazed curiosity. He had not expected to get such a rise out of her.

His eyes narrowed. In a moment, of course, there would be a veritable flood of bad temper. It wouldn't bother most of the bold men present, who had, each in his own way, found that middle path between yes-man and individual that the young woman demanded of all her personal followers.

"Come, come, Hedrock," said the mustachioed Prince del Curtin, "you're not going to keep this splendid little tidbit to

yourself. I suppose this also is derived from the pictorial files of the Weapon Shops."

Hedrock was silent. His smile of acknowledgment seemed to be directed at the prince-cousin of the empress, but actually he scarcely saw the man. His gaze, his whole attention, was concentrated on the only person in the room who mattered.

The Empress Isher sat, the flush on her face slowly yielding to anger. She climbed to her feet, a dangerous glint in her eyes, but her voice had only a fraction of the fury in it that he had hoped for. She said grimly:

"That was very clever of you, Captain Hedrock, to twist the conversation the way you did. But I assure you it won't do the slightest bit of good. The very fact that you were so swift in your response confirms that you were aware in advance of my intention. You're a spy, and we're taking no more chances with you."

"Oh, come now, Innelda," said a man. "You're not going to pull a miserable stunt like that."

"You watch out, mister," the woman flared in abrupt violence of temper, "or you'll join him on the scaffold."

The men at the table exchanged significant glances. Some of them shook their heads disapprovingly, and then, all of them fell to talking among themselves, completely ignoring the empress.

Hedrock waited. This was what he had been working for, but now that it was here, it seemed inadequate. In the past, ostracism by the men whose companionship she valued had a great emotional effect on the ruler. Twice, since his arrival he had seen it influence her decisively.

But not this time. The realization penetrated to Hedrock with finality, as he watched the woman sink back into her chair, and sit there, her long, handsome face twisted satirically. Her smile faded. She said gravely:

"I'm sorry, gentlemen, that you feel as you do. I regret any outburst which would seem to indicate that my decision against

Captain Hedrock was a personal one. But I have been greatly upset by my discovery that he is nothing but a spy.”

It was impressive. It had a convincing ring to it, and the men's private conversations, which had died while she was speaking, did not resume. Hedrock leaned back in his chair, his sense of defeat stronger with each passing second. Quite clearly, whatever was behind the execution was too big, too important, for mere cleverness to overbalance.

Drastic, dangerous, deadly action was in order.

For a while, then, he was intent on his own thought. The glittering table with its network of cloth coverings, its gleaming dishes, its two dozen fine-looking young men, yielded before that intensity, became a background to his ever grimmer purpose. Words, he thought, that would change the whole design of the situation, plus action that would clinch it. He grew aware that Prince del Curtin had been speaking for some moments:

“—You can't just make a statement that a man is a spy, and expect us to believe it. We know you're the biggest and best liar this side of creation when it suits you. So how about a little fact.”

Hedrock was conscious of impatience. Actually, the men had already failed, had already accepted the sentence, though they didn't seem to realize it. The quicker they were cut out of the conversation the better.

But careful now. Wait till the empress had committed herself, regardless of how well she did it. She was, he saw, sitting stiffly, her expression grave, unsmiling. She said quietly:

“I'm afraid I shall have to ask you all to trust me. A very serious situation has arisen; it was the sole subject of our council meeting today, and I assure you the decision to execute Captain Hedrock was unanimous, and I am personally distressed by the necessity.”

Hedrock said: “I really thought better of your intelligence than this, Innelda. Are you planning another of your futile

forays against the Weapon Shops, and you think that I might find out about it, and report it all to the Weapon Shop council?"

Her green eyes blazed at him. Her voice was like chipped steel, as she snapped:

"I shall say nothing that will give you a single clue. I don't know just what kind of a system of communications you have with your superiors, but I know that one exists. My physicists have frequently registered on their instruments powerful wave lengths of extremely high range."

"Originating in my room?" asked Hedrock softly.

She stared at him, her lips drawn into an angry frown. She said reluctantly:

"You would never have dared to come here if you had had to be as obvious as that. I will inform you, sir, that I am not interested in continuing this conversation."

"Though you do not realize it," said Hedrock in his steadiest tone, "I actually said all that was necessary to prove my innocence when I disclosed to you that I knew that, at the age of sixteen, you slept one night with a live snake."

"Ah!" said the empress. Her body shook with triumph. "Now, we're beginning to get confessions. So you expected to have to put up a defense, and you prepared that little speech."

Hedrock shrugged. "I knew something was being planned for me. My apartment has been searched every day for a week. I've been subjected to the most boring sustained monologues by the prize dunderheads in the army office. Wouldn't I be a simpleton if I hadn't thought of every angle?"

"What I don't get," chimed in a young man, "is the snake business. Why do you think your knowledge of that proves you not guilty? That's too deep for me."

"Don't be such an ass, Maddern," said Prince del Curtin. "It simply means that the Weapon Shops knew intimate details of Innelda's palace life long before Captain Hedrock ever came. It shows the existence of a spy system more dangerous

than anything we ever suspected, and the real charge against Captain Hedrock is his absolute remissness in not telling us that such a system existed."

Hedrock was thinking: Not yet, not yet. Somewhere along here the crisis would come with a bang, and then his action must be swift, perfectly timed, decisive.

Aloud, he said coolly: "Why should you worry? Three thousand years have proven that the Weapon Shops have no intention of overthrowing the Imperial government. I know for a fact that the spy ray is used with great discretion, and has never been employed at night except on the occasion that her majesty had the snake sneaked in from the palace zoo. Curiosity made the two women scientists in charge of the machine on that occasion continue their watch.

"The story was, of course, too good to keep in a file; and you may be interested, your majesty, to know that two psychological articles were written about it, one by our greatest living No-man, Edward Gonish."

From the corners of his eyes Hedrock saw that the slim, lithe body of the woman was leaning forward, her lips were slightly parted, her eyes were wide with an intense interest. Her whole being seemed to move according to his words.

"What," she half whispered, "did he say about me?"

With a shock, Hedrock recognized his moment. Now, he thought, *now!*

He was trembling. But he couldn't help his physical condition, nor did he care. A man threatened with death was expected to show agitation, or else he was considered unhuman, cold—and received no sympathy. His voice rose against the pattern of babble from distant tables, a little wildly passionately, but that, too, was good, for a woman was staring at him with wide eyes, a woman who was half child, half genius, and who hungered with all her intense emotional nature for the strange and the exotic. She sat with shining eyes, as Hedrock said:

"You must be mad, all of you, or you wouldn't make this constant underestimate of the Weapon Shops and their lineally developed science.

"What a petty idea it is to imagine that I have come here as a spy, that I am curious about some simple little governmental secret. I am here for one purpose only, and her majesty is perfectly aware of what it is. If she kills me, she is deliberately destroying her better, greater self; and if I know anything about the Isher line, in the final issue they draw back from suicide."

The empress was straightening, frowning. "The presumption of your purpose," she snapped, "is only equaled by your cleverness."

Hedrock couldn't afford to pay attention to the interruption, couldn't dare to give up his initiative for a single instant. He rushed on:

"To give you some idea of the great scientific attainments of the Weapon Shops, you will be interested to know that they have an instrument which can predict the moment of death of any person.

"Before I came to the palace six months ago, for my own amusement I secured readings as to the death moments of almost every person at this table and of the members of the Imperial Council."

He had them now; he could see it in the strained faces that looked at him with a feverish fascination—but still he could not afford to lose control of the conversation. With an effort, he forced himself to bow at the white-faced ruler; then hastily he said:

"I am happy to announce, your majesty, that you have a long and increasingly honorable life ahead of you. Unfortunately—"

His voice took on a darker tone, as he raced on: "Unfortunately, there is a gentleman present who is destined to die—within minutes."



He did not wait to see the effects of that, but turned in his chair, a tigerishly swift movement—for there was no time to waste; any second, any *instant*, his bluff might be called; and his show end in a ludicrous failure.

His voice bawled across the space that separated him from a table, where sat a dozen men in uniform:

“General Grall!”

“Eh!” The officer who was to carry out the hanging order whipped around. He looked startled when he saw who it was.

It struck Hedrock that his bellow had brought complete silence to the room. People at every table had stopped eating, stopped their private conversation, and were watching the royal table, and him. Conscious of his greater audience, Hedrock pushed his voice forward in his mouth, tightened his diaphragm, and brought forth the ringing question:

“General Grall, if you were to die this minute, what would be the cause?”

The heavy-faced man two tables away, stood up slowly. “I’m in perfect health,” he growled. “What the devil are you talking about?”

“Nothing wrong with your heart?” Hedrock urged.

“Not a thing.”

Hedrock thrust his chair back, and climbed to his feet. He couldn’t afford errors due to awkward positions. With a jerk, he raised his arm and pointed at the general with his finger, rudely.

“You’re General Lister Grall, are you not?”

“That’s right. And now, Captain Hedrock, I resent most violently this—”

Hedrock cut him off: “General, I regret to announce that, according to the records of the Weapon Shops, you are due to die at exactly one fifteen o’clock *today* from heart failure. That’s this minute, this—second.”

There was no stopping now. With a single, synchronized motion, Hedrock bent his finger, shaped his hand to receive

the gun materialized on an invisible plane by the gun ring on his finger.

No ordinary, retail-type gun was that unseen, wizard's product, but a special Unlimited never sold across the counters, never displayed, never used except in extreme crises.

It fired instantly on a vibration plane beyond human vision; and, as the general's heart muscles were caught by the paralyzing force, Hedrock unclenched his hand; the invisible gun dematerialized.

In the pandemonium that followed, Hedrock walked to the throne chair at the head of the royal table, and bent over the empress. He could not suppress a tingle of admiration for she was completely, abnormally calm.

Emotional, erotic woman she might be, but in actual moments of excitement, during the hour of vital decision, all the great, basic stability that was her Isher inheritance came to the fore. It was that quality of utter sanity in her that he had appealed to, and here it was, like a precious jewel, shining at him from the quiet viridescence of her eyes. She said finally:

"I suppose you realize you have, by implication, confessed everything by your killing of General Grall."

He knew better than to deny anything to the supernal being she had for that sustained moment become. He said:

"I was advised of the sentence of death, and by whom it was to be carried out."

"Then you admit it?"

"I'll admit anything that you wish so long as you understand that I have your best interests at heart."

She looked incredulous. "A Weapon Shop man, whose organization fights me at every turn, talking about my interests."

"I am not, never have been, never will be, a Weapon Shop man." Hedrock spoke deliberately.

A startled look came into her face, then, "I almost believe that. There's something strange, and alien, about you, something I must discover—"

"Some day, I'll tell you. I promise."

"You seem very sure that I shall not have somebody else hang you."

"As I said before, the Ishers do not commit suicide."

"Now you're on your old theme, your impossible ambition. But never mind that. I'm going to let you live, but for the time being you must leave the palace. You can't fool me with that talk about an all-purpose spy ray."

"Can't I?"

"You may have had such a machine prying into the palace when I was sixteen, but since then the whole palace has been fitted with defense screens. Those can be pierced only by a two-way communication machine. In other words, there must be a machine inside as well as out."

"You're very clever."

"As for the pretense," the woman went on, "that the Weapon Shops can see into the future, let me inform you that we know as much about time travel, and its impossible limitations, as the Weapon Shops. The see-saw principle involved is only too clearly recognized, with all its ever-fatal end results. But, again, never mind that.

"I want you to leave for two months. I may call you back before then, but it all depends on my little enterprise. Meantime, you may transmit this message to the Weapon Shop council. What I am doing is not in the faintest degree harmful to the Weapon Shops. I swear that on my honor."

For a long moment, Hedrock gazed at her steadily. He said at last, softly:

"I am going to make a very profound statement: I haven't the faintest idea of what you're doing, or going to do, but in your adult life I have noticed one thing. In all your major political and economic moves, you are actuated by conservative impulses.

“Don’t do it. Change is coming; let it come. Don’t fight it, but lead it, direct it. Add new laurels of prestige to the famous name of Isher.”

“Thank you for your advice,” she said coldly.

Hedrock bowed, said: “I’ll be knocking at your door in two months. Good-by.”

The hum of renewed conversation was thickening behind him as he reached the series of ornate doors on the far side of the room. He passed through, and then, out of sight, quickened his pace.

He reached the elevators safely, stepped into one hurriedly, and pressed the express button for the roof. It was a long trip, and his nerves grew jumpy.

Any minute, any *second*, that mood of the empress would wear off.

The elevator stopped, the door opened. He was stepping out before he noticed the body of men. They came forward at the double march, and instantly hemmed him in. They were in plain clothes, but there was no mistaking that here were police.

The next instant one of the men said:

“Captain Hedrock, you are under arrest.”

# C H A P T E R V

**F**OR NEELAN, FACING A GUN THAT withdrew sideways as he advanced, there was a kaleidoscope of swift impressions. He saw that he was in the control room of the spaceship, and that startled. A control room was, by law, located in the center of a ship. That meant this hangar extended about four hundred feet underground, as well as above. An eight-hundred-foot spaceship—what an enormous machine for a private citizen to own. Somebody had planned big.

Neelan drew a deep breath. Gil, he thought shakily, Gil, you tight-mouthed idiot, why didn't you write and tell me? Why I've got to find out from—

"Well," the stranger's voice cut raspily across his thought, "what do you think of it?"

Slowly, Neelan turned toward his captor. He saw a long, pale-faced individual, about thirty-five years old. The fellow had maneuvered the mobile unit toward the ceiling; and he was in the act of slipping Neelan's gun into his coat pocket. In his fingers he held an Imperial single-noded pistol; and he was regarding Neelan with large, brown, suspicious eyes.

Neelan said swiftly: "For Isher's sake, put that gun away. I can see now there's something damn funny going on. But I still need the job. Does that make sense?"

He had struck, he realized, the right note. The man relaxed visibly. His gun lowered. He spoke finally with an attempt at heartiness, that didn't quite come off.

"Now you're talking. You can see how it was. I thought you weren't going to come in."

Neelan said: "The spaceship startled me, located here in the heart of the city."

It was a point, it seemed to him, that he should press even harder: the fact that all this was new and strange to Gil's brother needed stressing to a man who knew their relationship, who *knew* that Gil was dead, and yet who wasn't saying a word about his knowledge.

Neelan went on: "So long as we understand each other, I guess we'll get along. The hundred credits a week still goes, does it?"

The man nodded. "And it'll be clear, too," he said, "because I'm taking no chances on you not coming back here."

Neelan stared. "What do you mean?"

The fellow smiled sardonically. He seemed to be more pleased with the situation. He looked surer of himself. His voice sounded cool and confident, as he said:

"You're going to live aboard until the job is done."

"Oh!"

He was startled, in spite of himself. Not that having to remain bothered him, although he ought to make some kind of strong protest as a matter of principle. According to the

Weapon Shops, a great and honest scientist, named Derd Kershaw, owned this building. If honesty could be judged by actions, then this long-bodied unpleasant young man was *not* Kershaw. Was it possible that an accident had occurred that had killed Kershaw and Gil and the rest of the staff, leaving one survivor, who was trying to take personal advantage of the situation? Or was the reality even more sinister than that? Whatever it was, he had to say something, a protest, something explicit. Neelan said:

"Now, look here, I don't really mind staying aboard, but you're taking a pretty high-handed manner. What's up? It's all very well for me to keep saying it's none of my business. But every few seconds you push something new at me until—well, I think I have a right to a few general facts."

"Like hell you have!" the man snapped.

Neelan persisted, "What's your name? I don't think it will hurt you if I know who you are."

"Come along!" It was a curt command. "I'll show you the engine room."

He motioned with his gun, then paused. His long face twisted into a frown. "I guess I can tell you my name." He smiled with sudden savage exultation. "After all, *she* knows it. My name is Rel Greer."

It meant nothing except—he wasn't Kershaw. And admitted it. But who the devil was *she*? Neelan said:

"You're a scientist?"

The man flushed. The color crowded into his cheeks in a flood of anger, and then, almost instantly, he turned even whiter than he had been. He snapped:

"The best scientist on this side of—" Greer stopped the words with a visible effort. He swallowed hard, and then he glared at Neelan, and raged: "What are you trying to do—pump me? Now, let's go. Any further talk can wait till lunch time."

Neelan hesitated. The fellow's unexpected anger astounded him. Questions quivered on his lips. He felt himself on the verge of vital information. It required a distinct effort to remember his dangerous position. Quietly, he turned, and led the way down into the bowels of the ship.

They came to a world of engines. Titanic drivers of the approved point-expand-point design, glistening, oval-shaped monsters that filled all one great room, clustering almost belly to sleek belly over the floor.

Neelan counted them from the bottom of the stairs with a gathering surprise: one, two . . . seventeen—

"But," he said, amazed, "these are one-hundred-million-cycle engines. Since when has a ship under a thousand-foot length needed more than two such supers, and one of them for emergency only—let alone seventeen?"

He saw that Greer was enjoying his astonishment. The man stood with a faint sneer of superiority on his pasty-white face.

"This ship is a new invention," he said smugly. "I'm selling it. I'm negotiating, and have been for some weeks, with the empress herself."

He looked hard at Neelan. "I decided on the way down to tell you that. It isn't any of your business, but I don't want you worrying your head off about it, and maybe prowling around.

"Now you know where you stand. It's *her* idea that the whole thing be kept quiet. And I pity any interloper who goes counter to her wishes in anything. The Earth wouldn't be big enough to hold such a fool unless he was a Weapon Shop man. There, is everything clear?"

Neelan mustered a nod. He felt sick. The reality of what had happened was coming clear.

The great scientist, Kershaw, had hired Gil and Greer and perhaps others to assist him in perfecting his invention. Somewhere along the line, Greer had murdered everyone else, and taken control of the ship.



There were blurs in that logic structure, details missing. For instance, why had a whole year elapsed before Greer acted. But the main sequence of events was only too obvious. Gil had died so that this creature might feel himself safe to dispose of an invention important enough to interest the Empress Isher.

“What I want,” Greer’s voice penetrated to him, “is for you to lift one engine at a time into the repair shop on the floor above, and fix it before you even touch another. None of this mass production stuff of doing the same plate on each engine one after the other, and so on—”

Greer stopped short. His eyes were brown pools of suspicion. “What’s the matter? You gave me a funny look there.”

Neelan managed to say, “I was thinking that you certainly are taking precautions.”

Greer relaxed, and looked pleased. “Oh, I’m taking no chances. I want to be able to leave here at a moment’s notice, if anybody tries to double-cross me.”

Neelan scarcely heard. His mind was thrumming like a machine. The man had revealed himself so irrevocably now that there was no longer any doubt. The silly, stupid, egotistical fool. Standing there and talking knowingly about not doing more than one engine at a time. The insides of different atomic motors, once they had been in operation, were simply not allowed together. No two engines ever stopped at the same “boiling” point. Exposed to each other, a leveling flow would start, that would ruin the plates, and probably everything else in the vicinity.

And if plates from seventeen motors ever started inter-flowing—

Neelan couldn’t even let himself picture it. The catastrophe would be on such a vast scale that part of the ship would dissolve into its component elements, and the rest would droop into shapeless blobs. No wonder Greer had reacted so violently to the question as to whether or not he was a scientist. What-

ever else he was, he wasn't even a mechanic when it came to atomic energy—and therefore the one question about his status must have seemed to him potent with hidden meanings.

Very, very definitely, Neelan thought grimly, he was going to carry out that part of Greer's orders forbidding mass repairing. As for the rest—his mind paused icily—it shouldn't be hard for a man like himself to best an ignoramus like Greer.

Greer was speaking again, "I've fixed up a place for myself in the empty room above the repair shop. I'll spend most of my time there during the next couple of months. It isn't that I don't trust you, but while I'm there, I'll *know* that you're not wandering around the ship, prying into secrets."

Neelan was able to say: "I'll get busy right away."

He was trembling, as he climbed up to the repair room. It seemed hardly credible that it could have happened so soon but—his opportunity was upon him.

He had his purpose. The only thing was, Greer didn't go up to the next level right away. He hung around like a man starved for company, but at the same time afraid of it. At any other time, with anyone else, Neelan would have felt at least a bleak sympathy. Of all the emotions he could appreciate, it was loneliness.

Not now! Impatience racked him. Damn you, he thought, get out of here. Get up to your guard room.

It struck him suddenly what he must do. "I'll bore him stiff," he thought savagely.

He began to examine the tools, conscious of Greer's eyes on him. There were mobile cranes and clamping machines, and welders and de-welders, and serrated polishers, all on the necessary gigantic scale, and all—one glance at meters plus a surge of testing power sufficed to verify the fact—ready for action.

But how would a nonscientist like Greer know that? The important thing was, it seemed to Neelan, that he gain control

of the ship before he took an engine apart. Otherwise he'd be tied down for at least four days.

An atomic motor simply wasn't left standing in pieces. Far better, therefore, to spend several hours seeming to check over the repair tools.

A half-hour passed. From somewhere behind Neelan, Greer said:

"So you've spent a great deal of your life on other planets. What brought you back?"

There could be no hesitating over that. The man knew too much. "My brother's death!" Neelan said.

"Oh. Your brother died?"

"Yes." Lay it on thick, Neelan thought. "Yes, he used to send me an allowance. When that stopped, I made inquiries, and it seems he's been missing for a year, unregistered. It'll take about six months more to close the estate, but, as you know, the courts recognize nonregistration as proof of death in these days of multiple assassinations."

"I know," was all that Greer said.

In the silence that followed, Neelan thought, "Let him mull that over. It wouldn't do any harm, in case something went wrong, for Greer to believe that Gil and he had no strong feelings for each other. In fact, press the point."

"It's more than ten years," Neelan said, "since I saw him. I found I didn't have the faintest sense of kinship. I didn't give a damn whether he was dead or alive. Funny."

Greer said: "You're going back into space?"

Neelan shrugged. Abruptly, it was irritating again to have to talk to the man. But there was no evading a direct question. "Nope!" Earth for me from now on. There's more excitement, fun, pleasure."

"I wouldn't," said Greer, after a silence, "exchange my last year in space for all the pleasure in Imperial City."

"Each to his own taste—" Neelan began.

And stopped. His will—to get the man up to the insulation room—collapsed into secondary importance. For here was information. Slowly, the mental repercussions of the words died. Puzzlement came. Actually, he hadn't learned much. What Greer had done during the last year wouldn't explain much. Gil had been dead during the whole time. The picture remained as blurred as ever, except for one thing. Greer had volunteered the new fact. He wanted to talk. He could be led into saying more.

Neelan said: "My idea of life isn't cruising around space looking for meteorites. I've done it, and I know."

"Meteorites!" Greer exploded. "Are you crazy? Do you think the Empress Isher would be interested in meteorites? This is a hundred-billion-credit deal. Do you hear that? And she's going to pay it too."

He began to pace the floor, a rising excitement in his manner. He whirled suddenly on Neelan.

"Do you know where I've been?" he demanded. "I—"

He stopped. The muscles of his face worked convulsively. Finally, he managed a grim smile. "Oh, no, you don't," he said. "You're not pulling anything out of me. Not that it really matters but—"

He stood there, staring at Neelan. Abruptly, he twisted on his heel, climbed the stairway, and disappeared from view.

Neelan gazed at the stairway, his mind almost blank, but conscious of one thing. The time had come for action.

Neelan examined the ceiling metal with a modified transparency, and nodded finally in satisfaction. Four inches thick, the usual alloy of lead and "heavy" beryllium, atomically processed. The transparency also showed the exact spot where Greer was sitting, a blurred figure, reading a book. Or rather, holding a book. It was impossible to see whether he was reading.

Neelan felt himself cold, humorless. His only emotion was a remote, deadly pleasure that Greer was sitting up there,

smugly imagining himself in control of the situation. To think that the man had brought an easy-chair into an empty room without even considering why the room was empty. The insulation "gap," confining areas where power was developed or used in large amounts was old both in law and of necessity. The legal restrictions had been so effective that most people were probably not even aware that the danger or the protection existed. And yet at the same time scientists like Gil or Kershaw would be so familiar with the idea of the restrictions that it probably had never occurred to them that others might not know.

Which, Neelan thought, was ideal.

He maneuvered the heavy polisher directly under the spot where Greer was sitting, and turned its finely toothed surface to point upward. Then he began his estimation. Greer had looked about one hundred seventy pounds. Two thirds of that, roughly, was one hundred fourteen. To be on the safe side, allow for a blow that would kill a man of a hundred pounds. Greer didn't look too physically fit. He'd need the handicap.

There was, of course, the four-inch floor to figure in. Fortunately, its resistance was a formula based on tension. To Neelan, it was briefly interesting to remember the day in the university when the lab professor had illustrated with a tiny machine the physical impact that resulted from exposure to the active surface of power-driven tools.

The model lab machine had delivered a blow as of a gently thrust fist. This polisher would—

Greer simply crumpled. Neelan went upstairs to where the man lay sprawled on a leg-rest chair. He examined the unconscious body with a color transparency, for detail. No bones broken. And the heart still beat. Good. A dead man wouldn't be able to answer questions.

There were a lot of questions.

It required considerable mathematical work to plot a system of force lines that would bind Greer into a reasonably com-

fortable position, allowing his arms and legs to move, and his body to turn, and yet capable of holding him forever if necessary.

Neelan spent the following hour going over the big ship. It was a cursory search only (there were too many locked doors and packed storerooms) and it failed to produce what he was looking for: a Lambeth mind-control machine.

Logic said there was none aboard. The very fact that Greer had got on the staff proved that those fuzzy-minded scientists, Kershaw and Gil, had not had the sense to test everyone on ship for validity. Neelan experienced a surge of helpless anger. What in the world could ever be done with the type of mind that would spend years exhaustively exploring the variable reactions of energy and which would then quite blithely admit a human snake to a murder opportunity, and so destroy everything?

His rage faded before the reality of the long year that had passed. He went down to the insulation room, and found Greer conscious. The man glared at him with mingled hate and fear. His voice made a crescendo of sounds, of threats, of warnings about what the empress would do to him. When the babble finally died down, Neelan said:

“Where are the others? Where are Kershaw and my brother?”

The brown eyes widened, then narrowed to pin points: “Go to hell!” said Greer. But he sounded frightened.

Neelan said: “What’s the combination at this end of that telestat in Room 1874, Trellis Minor Building?”

No answer.

There was a sensory-energy test, Neelan recalled, that showed under what degree of torture a man would talk. It took half an hour to rig up a testing instrument.

Greer screamed hideously—and Neelan, shuddering, had his answer. Greer would talk all right, but it just happened that

there was no one around robust enough to carry the torture through.

Neelan used the minutes and the hours of the afternoon to go over the ship, room by room. No cursory search, this time. He used an atomic drill to break recalcitrant locks. The personal quarters above the control room held him longest. But Greer had been there before him. Nothing remained. Greer had used his time well. If Gil or Kershaw had ever been aboard, there were no identifying marks to show it, no letters, no personal property, nothing that would ever cause embarrassment to a murderer. In the air lock at the very nose of the ship was a fully equipped lifeboat, powered by two replicas of the giant engines in the main machine. The lifeboat was about a hundred feet long. Nowhere was there a Lambeth mind controller.

He had to have one, if he was ever going to get any information from Greer. In a strong box in the control room, he found a hundred thousand credits. A Lambeth would cost about five hundred, so he stuffed a thousand credits into his pocketbook, then spent nearly a quarter of an hour experimenting with the door controls. Finally he set up a time sequence that would open the doors for ninety seconds at nine a. m. every day till the power was shut off.

He fed Greer; the man ate sullenly, said at last:

"You're going out, I see. You could at least make it possible for me to free myself if anything should happen to you."

Neelan said nothing. But under Greer's anxious eyes, he put a timer on the force-line machine, and set it for seventy-two hours. Then he loaded the man, force lines and all, onto an antigravity plate, and carted him upstairs to one of the bedrooms above the control room. His watch said a quarter to seven, as he emerged into the street. His mind was intent on the evening ahead, when he reached Mrs. Dendley's. He went straight up to his room. Funny how weary he was, as if his

brain had been lashed to exhaustion. It had been a long day, and it wasn't over yet. A little nap, and then—

His doorbell tinkled. It was the prim little maid. "Madam says she noticed that you didn't look at the letter box, and that a letter came for you this afternoon by special delivery. It's from Mars."

As he closed the door, Neelan saw that his hand holding the letter was trembling. He stood like that for an instant staring down at the unfamiliar handwriting and at the red sign of Mars in the upper right-hand corner. Then, shaking, he went to the bed and lay down. It was restful lying there, and, slowly, his heart eased from its violent pumping. A measure of strength crept back into his muscles.

The first coherent thought came. It couldn't be a normal answer to the letter he had written twenty days before to his Martian postoffice address, asking them to forward any mail that had arrived for him during the past year. The mail liners from Earth to Mars took from eighteen to sixty days for the trip, depending on changing planetary position. On the day he had written, the trip was scheduled to take twenty-four days. Twenty-four days there, twenty-four back.

That wasn't the answer. And, besides, if Gil had written him before he died, this wasn't the letter. It wasn't his handwriting. *Besides*, no one on Mars knew his address. His curious weakness passed. He sat up, tore the letter open and emptied the contents onto the quilt. There were two items inside: Another letter and a note. The note was from the Weapon Shops, and it read:

DEAR MR. NEELAN:

After your call this morning, I recollected our first conversation in which you described the various actions you had taken to trace your brother. Among other things, I remembered that you stated you had written to Mars for any mail that might have accumulated there for you.



As you probably know, the Weapon Shops have a vibratory transmission system that is practically instantaneous over planetary distances. I utilized this to procure for you the inclosed letter. Please destroy this note.

The note was unsigned. Neelan held it over the atomic-powered hearth and watched it frizzle away. Then, and not till then, he picked up the letter that had been with the note. He was thinking grayly, he'd waited a whole year, so there was no rush.

The letter was from Gil; and it read:

DEAR DAN:

Now I can tell you about the greatest invention in the history of the human race.

I had to wait till now, a few hours before we leave, because we could not take the risk of the letter being in any way intercepted. We want to present the world with a *fait accompli*. When we come back we intend to shout our news from the housetops, and have endless film and other records to support our story. But to get down to fact:

There are seven of us, headed by the famous scientist, Derd Kershaw. Six of us are science specialists; the seventh is a fellow called Greer, a sort of general handy man who keeps the books and the records, who turns on the automatic cookers, and so on. Kershaw is teaching him how to operate the controls, so that the rest of us can be relieved of that chore—

Neelan paused there, sick to his soul. "The children!" he muttered huskily, "those damn grown-up children."

After a moment, he thought, so Greer was a handy man! No wonder the man had known nothing basic about science, the lecherous, egotistical—

He read on, but there was an odd blur over his vision that made the words hard to see:

The way I got into the affair is that Kershaw noticed an article of mine in the *Atomic Journal*, in which I described that I had been doing some contra-terrene research exactly along the lines of an idea that he had for the development of his invention.

Right here I might as well say that the chance of this invention being rediscovered is practically nil. It embraces, in its conception, too many specialized fields. You know what we were taught during our training period, that there are nearly five hundred thousand special science fields, and that undoubtedly by skillful co-ordination of knowledges, countless new inventions would be forthcoming, but that no known mind training could ever co-ordinate a fraction of these sciences, let alone all of them.

I mention this to emphasize once again the importance of secrecy. Kershaw and I had a midnight conference, and I was hired under the most confidential terms.

Dan, listen—the news is absolutely stupendous. We've got a drive that's so fast it's like a dream. The stars are conquered. Almost as soon as I finish this letter, we leave for Centaurus.

I feel sick and shaky and cold and hot at the mere idea of it. It means everything. It's going to blow the world wide open. Just think of all those people who were forcibly dumped on Mars and Venus and the various moons—it had to be done, of course; somebody had to live there and exploit their wealth—but now there's hope, a new chance on greener, finer worlds.

The worlds will be there, all right; Choicer's Law of Planets proved that. From this point onward, man will expand without limit, and put an end forever to all those petty murderous squabbles over territory and ownership of property. Henceforth there will always be more than enough.

The reason we have to be so careful is that the Isher Empire cannot hope to survive the unprecedented emigration that would set in, and the Empress

Innelda will be the first to realize, the first to attempt our destruction.

One more thing: Kershaw and I have discussed the possible effect of light years of distance on yours and my sensory relation. He thinks that our speed of withdrawal from the solar system will give the effect of an abrupt break, and of course, there will be the agony of acceleration. We—

Neelan stopped there, his mind rotating like a power-driven wheel, faster, faster. Why, that was what he had felt: the agony, then the break—

*Gil wasn't dead.*

Or rather—Neelan felt as if his head was coming off from the sheer violence of his thought—Gil hadn't died that day a year ago. Somewhere during the journey, Greer had—

Neelan's thought contorted. Deadly memory came of the dream he had had, of Gil in a desert on a nightmare world, racked by incredible storms. *The* sensory connection still existed. Tenuous, imperceptible during waking hours, it had manifested itself to that supersensitive structure that is the human body during sleep hours. And at a time when, for the first time in more than a year, he had relaxed his tired nerves.

He tried to remember just how he had felt the previous night, the sense of being finished with the whole business, the swift way he had fallen into deep, restful sleep; and then, the dream—

And it had happened *last night*.

Gil was alive.

Now he must get back to the ship, force that monstrous villain, Greer, to disgorge the truth about where he had marooned the first men to fly to the stars and—

With a terrible effort, Neelan caught his twisting brain, and held it hard in one spot. No use getting excited. He couldn't possibly get back into the ship till morning; so carry on as planned. Visit the Weapon Shop, and tell the man what had

happened. Buy a Lambeth, call up Professor Rayburn, perhaps take in a show to quiet the jumpiest case of nerves he'd ever had; and then, in the morning, start off for far Centaurus.

Neelan found himself repeating the fabulous name out loud, as if it was a melody, a pure music sound. It was a long moment before he remembered that he hadn't finished the letter. There was only a paragraph:

. . . We will probably be separated for the first time since we were born. It's going to feel very empty and lonely.

I know you're envying me, Dan, as you read this. When I think of all the thousands of years that man has dreamed of the stars, of how it has been proven time and again that it can't be done, I know exactly how you feel. Particularly you who were the adventurer of our family.

Wish me luck, Dan, and watch your tongue.

Your other half,

GIL.

It was the final warning that brought the real spurt of uneasiness. Abruptly, he didn't like his position. His best bet, Neelan thought, was to get away from this house where he was registered. If the empress was keeping any watch on Greer's spaceship, the presence of a stranger aboard would certainly have been reported. It might even be advisable to try to get hold of an invisibility belt, and so sneak aboard the ship when the doors opened in the morning. But first, memorize the letter, then burn it. Take no chances anywhere.

Outside, the air was fresh and cool. Night was nearer, he saw. More lights were coming on. The city was putting on its costume jewelry; and the result was a developing glitter that titillated his eyes. Neelan walked along alertly, his hand near his gun. All weariness seemed gone from him. Wonderful what a good mental bracer could do to tone up the body. He had a purpose, hope; he would do his damndest.

He saw the carplane swoop down to the curb beside him, but that was normal enough. It was a regular stop, and four men were waiting for it besides himself.

The door of the machine opened, and at that penultimate second, Neelan snatched his gun. Marvelous instrument that it was, it leaped from its holster to meet his reaching fingers. But even that was too late.

The four men had him—wrists, legs, body. They bundled him into the darkened interior. The machine hurtled upward.

# C H A P T E R

# VI

**A**ROUND NEELAN WAS DARKNESS. Acceleration pressed him hard against his seat. Skillfully interlaced force lines held him there firmly. Of the men who had jammed him into the artificially blackened interior, there was not sound nor sign. He had time to feel ill. He was caught, completely. The empress' forces must have been watching the hangar and its super-ship day and night; and now, the universe was lost.

As swiftly as it had accelerated, the carplane began to slow. It was still decelerating as it landed; and then, its interior still in darkness, taxied at great speed down what seemed a long, curving incline. It stopped finally with a lurch; and for the

first time there was movement, low voices, a drift of meaningful and meaningless sound:

“—search him . . . then . . . at once. . . . She’s waiting—”

In the artificial night, fingers fumbled over Neelan. He felt his gun, that had automatically returned to its holster, jerked away. The pocket in which were the thousand credits lightened. Hands grabbed him at last.

“This way.”

It was brighter outside, but only by comparison. Glowing wisps clung to the roof of the corridors along which he was led, point sources of light that held their tiny radiance in tight loops, as if fearing to shed it afar. A door opened, and a glare tortured Neelan’s eyes. When he could see again, he saw that he was in a large, tastefully furnished room, and that a woman sat on a settee before a tea table. She was pouring tea from a platinum teapot, and she said in a softly rich voice:

“Do you take cream, milk or lemon, Mr. Neelan?”

She had green eyes, this woman, and a distinctively long face. Unmistakable, famous face. The sight of her shocked Neelan to his bones. Government, yes,—he had expected that, but not her, *personally*.

It was the echo of her quiet words that braced him, eased his tensing nerves, made it possible for him to meet the moment with only that one instant of falter.

Neelan bowed slightly. “Milk,” he said, “your majesty.”

He came forward warily, and saw that the empress was gazing up at him slant-eyed. Neelan thought tremblingly, Thank God, he knew the truth, oh thank God. Otherwise, this cozy little trap might have caught him. It wouldn’t have taken much, without Gil’s letter, to make him give up the whole miserable business.

The woman was inclining her head. “Sit, please,” she said.

Neelan sank into the chair indicated, and took his cup of tea, and waited.

And waited.

The empress sat sipping her drink—she had, he noticed, taken lemon in hers—and staring into space. After a while, Neelan began to admire her patience. Inwardly, she must be straining. What was it Gil had said:

“The Isher Empire cannot survive the unlimited emigration that would set in, and the empress will be the first to realize, the first to attempt our destruction—”

Get back to the ship, Neelan thought, get back safe. Nothing else mattered. For somewhere out there in immensity were Gil and Kershaw, and only he of all the human race could save them. Only he, who had invented nothing, could help mankind to attain the remote stars and ultimate destiny.

Abruptly, the silence racked his nerves, the tremendousness of the stakes hurt his brain. He shifted uneasily in his chair and—

The empress spoke gently: “Mr. Neelan, you occupy a unique position in the world of great affairs. Your government, your—empress—require your loyal and faithful services.”

Neelan tried to look puzzled. “I shall be only too happy,” he said, “to do anything that is required of me. I am a loyal subject of your majesty. But I think a mistake must have been made. What unique position do I occupy?”

She was looking at him from under half-closed lashes; and the intensity of her gaze gave Neelan a tingling start. His eyes positively glowed, as she said, more sharply:

“What were you doing aboard the spaceship of Rel Greer?”

Neelan felt no great satisfaction in the brief surprise he mustered for the question. But he explained in an even tone about the ad, his need for a job. The woman listened without interruption till he had finished, then she said to somebody behind him:

“Zeydel, was there such an ad?”

“I am, your majesty,” said a man’s harsh voice, “already trying to get the Public Ad Service.”



Neelan turned slowly. There was an alcove, hidden by a long screen, behind which sat several men. He couldn't be sure whether there were four or five.

The voice of Zeydel was hammering into a telestat. There was a pause, a *click*, and then: "Yes, your majesty, there is such an ad."

"Is?"

It was the woman; and Neelan felt impelled to answer the implication in that single-worded question:

"If you mean by that, your majesty, that the position is still open, I assure you it is not. I am definitely hired, and he was so anxious that, although tomorrow is Rest Day, I agreed to return at nine in the morning."

There was silence; and Neelan had time to realize that the tea party was over. And the way they had pounced on an infinitesimal variation showed what he was in for.

It was going to be a long night.

Silence settled again, like a weight. The woman sat with a vague smile on her face, her eyes veiling her thoughts. The teacup in her fingers remained unnaturally motionless in one position, as the minutes dragged. At last, she set the cup down; and it was as if a rehearsed drama had received its cue. In the background, the voice of Zeydel began to intone:

"The information is now coming through, your majesty. His name is Daniel Neelan, one of twins, born 4758 Isher, thirty-three years ago, to Edee Neelan. Their father died before they were born; and accordingly, their mother, unable to guarantee support, put them under contract to the Eugenics Institute—"

Neelan listened intently, as the word picture unfolded. It was all there, in essence: His leaving Earth, his gambling career, the fact that he had killed several men in self-defense, the discovery of himself and Carew of the "heavy" beryllium meteorite, and finally his return to Earth to look for his

brother. When Zeydel's voice finally died away, the empress said softly:

"I see that you are one of us, Mr. Neelan, one of the lucky born. A man who knows how to live, and how to die."

In spite of himself, in spite of the greatness of the issues, Neelan began to feel fascinated. The Imperial Innelda was different, different from anything he had ever pictured. Not cold and stiff and regal, but warm and human.

"I have," she continued, "divided human beings into two general categories: Those who spend their lives obsessed by fear, and those who do not. I cannot honestly feel too sorry for the former no matter what happens. Only the latter count in the scheme of things."

The strange thing about her words was that he seemed raised by them, and compelled henceforth to live in the upper of the two realms she had described. Neelan found his voice:

"I would say the classification is a little severe, particularly because bravery is a matter of early training."

The green eyes were steady on him, as he spoke, enigmatic. Neelan had a sense of gazing into fathomless depths, and he thought: Careful, careful.

The woman said in her luscious voice:

"I want to talk to you. I want to convince you. What I desire from you is too important for there to be the slightest doubt about your actions."

"Your majesty," Neelan protested, "if you would tell me—".

She cut him off, imperiously: "I must make myself clear; you must understand. This morning, Dan Neelan, when I was informed that a strange young man . . . that is, you . . . had entered the Greer spaceship, I immediately ordered the execution of a Captain Hedrock, a Weapon Shop spy, whom I had previously tolerated in the palace."

Her voice, so abruptly ablaze, burned on: "I tell you this to illustrate graphically the completeness and extent of the precautions I am prepared to take to insure that my will shall

prevail. Consider his fate as symbolical of what will befall anyone who dares to oppose me in this matter, or who bungles his part of the job.

"Here is what you must and will do: Tonight, before you leave this room, you will be fitted with an invisibility belt, a miniature telestat, and a revolver that shoots bullets. The reason for such a gun is that Greer probably carries a Weapon Shop energy gun, which has the power of protecting its wearer from any small-powered atomic revolver. The reason for the telestat is that we will then know exactly what you are doing or saying every second of the time between now and the accomplishment of your task.

"As a further means of educating your honesty, the telestat will have in it an energy charge which, by remote control, will blow you to bits if you start talking or writing out of turn. The telestat will also apprise us of the exact instant that you complete your work. Before you can have an opportunity of, for instance, running off with the spaceship, great mobile energy guns will be tearing enormous gaps in the walls of the hangar and the ship; and within ten minutes my men will be swarming inside.

"Your task is simple, straightforward: At an opportune moment during the day, you will render yourself invisible and, thus protected, approach Greer and put a bullet through his head. If you fail, or in any way deceive us, you die. And now—"

Her tensed body relaxed; the flame died from her gaze. There was suddenly a warm and generous smile in her eyes, and around her lips. She said in her earlier, quieter voice:

"I hope, Dan Neelan, that I have made myself clear."

There was no doubt of that. The tigress had unsheathed her claws; and they were made of steel and quiescent violence.

The soul of this woman must be pure fire.

Neelan sat very still, forcing himself to picture what she had said—going to the spaceship. His thought kept coming back

to that in little flashes of mental intensity. All was not lost. They intended to let him return to the ship, under terrible restrictions to be sure, but—return! With Greer impotent and enchained, something must be possible, some way out, however dangerous or involved. The worst part was that energy bomb.

The men were coming out of the alcove, out of the dimness into the light; and there were five, not four. Not that the number mattered. A billion more out there in the great world would eagerly take their place. But these looked mature, capable. All were easily in their late thirties, the oldest, Zeydel, possibly as much as forty-five. Zeydel had slate-colored eyes, a thin beak of a nose, and lips that formed a long slit across his face. He bowed to the woman, a faint, grim smile on his raffish countenance.

“Your majesty!”

“Speak.”

“It will be necessary to undress Mr. Neelan partially in order to fit the invisibility belt.”

The empress’ eyes smiled at Neelan sardonically. “I am sure Mr. Neelan realizes that I am the mother of nineteen billion people. I have reached the age,” she finished coolly, “when only bad manners shock me. I must see that everything is done right. Proceed.”

Zeydel said, “Your upper clothes only. The invisibility belt fits directly over the waist. We won’t feed it power until you’re inside the spaceship; all you have to do then is pull this switch.”

Neelan watched the flat, flexible, flesh-colored thing being strapped around his waist. It was quite heavy, and it felt unpleasant. He could not shake off the unwholesome impression that he was being fitted with his death raiment.

“And here,” said Zeydel from that sword-edge-shaped mouth of his, “is the telestat.”

Neelan stared at the thing. A necktie! By all the gods, a necktie! A little thicker than it should be, a little stiff for cloth,

but the color pattern, the general appearance, was quiet perfection. It hung around his neck, lighter than he had expected after the weight of the invisibility belt. But it made him feel hot, then cold, then hot again, as spasmodic memory burst on him that in it was the energy charge.

He pictured the explosion tearing his head off— And then a fountain pen was being shoved into his vest pocket, and the gritty voice of Zeydel was explaining:

“That’s the gun. Simply point it, and press on the clip. It has two bullets in it; and now—”

The slate eyes surveyed Neelan with icy detachment. The man’s voice had a flat quality, as he continued:

“You have heard our glorious ruler’s commands. You must consider yourself a soldier who has been called to duty against a man for whom there can be no sympathy.

“This scoundrel, Greer, has deliberately set himself against the Crown. He has an invention which endangers the State, and which must be completely withheld from the knowledge of the public. Greer presumes to regard himself as a negotiator of equal rank with the government, and, from a position of temporary immunity, to argue arrogantly, demand impossible terms, and otherwise conduct himself in a treasonous manner.

“It further appears that he had hired you to repair the ship, which he was offering for sale, apparently with the purpose of sneaking off in some fashion after he had secured the money he demands. The very type of long-lasting repair he requires shows the careful nature of the betrayal he is planning.

“Accordingly, you are herewith charged to destroy him as ordered in the name of Her Imperial Majesty, Innelda, Empress of the Solar System, Grand Descendent of the House of Isher. And now, if you wish to ask any questions—”

“None,” said Neelan. “I understand everything.”

It was immensely more than that. He felt better. His world was righting before the lifting consciousness of imminent freedom. There would be precious time to think things over.

"One more precaution, Mr. Neelan." It was the empress, and Neelan faced her slowly, as she went on, "One precaution, and then you will be shown the room where you will spend the night."

She turned to her henchmen. "Zeydel, bring on the Lambeth."

Neelan was glad after a moment when a man's voice—he wasn't sure whether it was Zeydel—directed him to sit down.

He sank heavily into his chair, and watched the glittery little instrument being set up. He wondered if he looked as sick as he felt. He should have known of course, but he hadn't expected a Lambeth. Hadn't when he came right down to it grasped that his death had been inevitable from the beginning. As soon as they discovered that the doors of the spaceship would open at nine in the morning, and that Greer could offer no resistance, why, they would dispense with intermediaries.

His one advantage, so vital that it hurt even to think about it, was about to be stripped from him by a machine that needed only the proper questions to elicit the correct answers; and accordingly he had one chance—one slim chance. He must agree to the main points. And mean it so the machine would believe him. Believe him beyond all possibility of the registering needles being tremulous and uncertain.

Neelan's eyes narrowed to slits. He must be prepared to kill Greer, if necessary. The problem of what he would eventually do with the man had been a dim question far back in his mind. But now there was no alternative. Greer must die.

He saw that the instrument was being separated, divided into two parts. The focusing section stood on the tea table, its cone-shaped, radiant muzzle pointing at him. The empress held the receiver, with its bank of registering needles, on her lap. She looked up. Her lips parted for speech. And the time had come. He lived or died according to his ability to control the next few minutes.

"Your majesty, may I speak?"

She gave him a quick look. Puzzlement was in that glance, and a swift suspicion. The grim thought came to Neelan that he was dealing with one of the sharpest, most agile minds in the Isher Empire.

The woman nodded finally, stiffly. "Very well."

As he began, he saw her gaze flick down to the needles. He had the sudden sensation that he was walking a tightrope with closed eyes, but there could be no hesitation.

"Naturally, I've been thinking over your commands. As you say, I have killed men before, and undoubtedly I can do it again. I don't like to shoot even an animal without giving it a chance but—"

He paused there, riffing over the words in his mind to see if so much as a single one of them didn't fit both his situation and theirs. They all did. Neelan went on:

"I'm not sure exactly all you want to know, but I swear that I learned of the job with Greer through the Public Ad Service. And I would like to say that, circumstances being what they are, I am prepared to kill Greer. I shall kill him with the revolver you gave me. There, is that what you want?"

It was of course, basically. He watched her, trying not to make it a glare of anxiety. To his relief he saw that she was not looking at him, but at the needles. The empress said abruptly, sharply:

"Zeydel, come over here, and watch."

To Neelan, she said even more sharply: "Repeat that about killing Greer."

Neelan complied, silently cursing the efficiency of the machine that must be registering at least fractionally the cross-currents in his thought. It was Zeydel who broke the silence, respectfully:

"He means it, high majesty, but it's not clear. I would suggest that he is a man who will have to nerve himself to killing coldbloodedly, and he won't do that until the time approaches."

The empress shook her head, impatiently dismissing that solution. There was more color in her cheeks. She stood up, began to pace the floor, her long skirt rustling. Several minutes passed, and then she faced Neelan. Her eyes were icy, her voice was an edged weapon that jabbed at him:

“Why did you volunteer that information, rather than wait for my question? You’re hiding something, aren’t you?”

She grabbed at the Lambeth receiver with feline eagerness. “Answer me that question,” she said avidly. “Are you hiding something?”

Neelan sighed. He felt old and tired. Here was the dead end to all his hopes, and only courage remained. Courage and the knowledge of what defeat would mean.

“I refuse,” he said slowly, weightily, “to answer that question.” He added after a moment: “Or any other question.”

There was a hush that filled the room, an incredulous pause, heavy with suppressed shock. The climax, Neelan realized, had come upon them too suddenly. Their minds wouldn’t adjust. The men looked at each other. The woman stood stone-still, her head bent forward, and her face had not a semblance of the smile that had graced it before. She said at last, almost sighing the words:

“You realize what you are doing? You are pitting yourself against the Crown, your lawful government.”

Neelan tried to picture that as she meant it; and it was an unnerving picture. The Isher emperors and empresses had, to a vast extent, the affection of their subjects. Even those who opposed them recognized how great a family it was; *even* the Weapon Shops had never tried to overthrow them.

Neelan steadied himself. “I would like to point out that I have agreed to do what you ask. What I am hiding is a personal matter.”

He was cut off by a tinkle of laughter. He stared, startled by the sound, and by the look on the empress’ face. The woman’s



laughter continued, musical but strangely unpleasant. It ended finally on an unnatural note.

"If it's a crime," she said, "however horrible, I absolve you from it. I pardon you. Do you hear that? No matter what it is, no court will ever try you for it. But I must know. Tell me."

Almost, she didn't look human. Her eyes flamed. Her face was a white mask of intensity. She stood straight and tall. Neelan said:

"I have agreed—"

She cut him off in astounded rage: "Are others involved? Then they too, are guiltless. No court shall touch them. No investigation shall be made. If one is under way, it will be dropped. I pardon them. I forgive them everything, any crime, murder, lust, robbery, treason—*anything*."

There was nothing to say. Neelan sat in his chair, stiff, conscious of the woman pacing up and down in front of him, and that in her eyes was a stark disbelief.

"I'll give you," her voice burned, "a hundred million credits. Do you understand? More money than you can ever spend or gamble away. It will be deposited to your account in any bank this minute. Simply yield yourself to all questions, and everything that you can ever ask for from this world will be yours."

It was her utter desperation that did it. The tight, terrible feeling inside Neelan began to ease. He had never expected anything like this: The Empress of Isher acting like a mad woman. *She needed him*. That was the reality behind her bloodthirsty threats, her wild offers. She couldn't get her men into the spaceship while Greer was there. Or rather—while her fevered brain imagined Greer was there, and in a position to launch the great ship into space.

"You mean, you won't do it?"

Her voice was a whisper. She swayed as if she was about to faint. Her eyes were wide. For a moment, she looked ill unto death.

"Your majesty—" It was Zeydel, anxious-toned.

"Silence!" Her voice was a whipsnap of sound. She waved at Zeydel, as if she was striking him.

She came forward, close to Neelan, peering down at him where he sat as at some incomprehensible monster. Her voice, that remarkable, flexible voice, was suddenly almost caressing:

"You don't look insane. You look normal, a handsome young man. You have no reason to want to die."

"Your majesty," Neelan said, "surely the fact that I have agreed—"

He must keep pressing that; it was the great hook that kept him hanging on this side of the death line. Desiring so much, she must accept the less, if more was not to be had.

She seemed not to have heard. Her voice, still soft, gentle, cut across his: "There are ways of making people talk."

That was chilling. The very quietness made the threat the more deadly. Neelan said:

"No drug will work on my definitely opposed will. I have the three advanced mind trainings, for memory, for control, for—"

"I was not thinking," the empress said caressingly, "of drugs."

She whirled. "Zeydel!" Her voice pierced the great silence of the room. "Zeydel, bring on the sensory vibrator."

She caught herself, and turned slowly back to Neelan. Her face was as pale as snow, her eyes looked old and bleached green.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Neelan," she said quietly. "You may not believe this, but I have never before had a man or woman physically tortured. Killed, yes, but not tortured. And yet I must overcome this fantastic refusal of yours. Won't you please be reasonable?"

Her appeal seemed without meaning. He felt remote, cold, and there was an awful sardonicism in him, that grew and

grew to monstrous proportions until, finally, looking at her, he said:

“Your first torture, is it?” He laughed, and knew from the naturalness of that laugh that he was no longer quite sane. He finished coolly, “I am sure your majesty will survive the experience.”

Her manner froze visibly. “Yes,” she said at last through clenched teeth, “yes, *I* will survive.”

# C H A P T E R

# VII

**A**S HEDROCK STOOD ON THE PALACE roof facing that score of men, his mind, adjusted to victory, could not accept the threatening defeat.

Here were enough men to handle anything he might attempt. But attempt he had to! The empress *must* have known when she gave this positive order to intercept him that he could only draw the worst conclusions, and resist with every power that he could muster.

Past was the time for subtlety, injured innocence and cleverness. His deep baritone clashed across the silence.

“What do you want?”

There were great moments in the history of the world when that bellow of his had produced a startled lull in the will to

action of better men than any that stood here before him. It had no such effect now.

Hedrock stood stunned. His muscles, tensed for the run that was to take him through the ranks of the men while they stood paralyzed, sagged. The large carplane which had seemed so near a moment before, only twenty-five feet, tantalized him now. His purpose, to reach it, collapsed into a staggered awareness of his desperate situation. One man with one gun against twenty guns! True, his was an Unlimited, and like all Weapon Shop guns projected a defensive half circle around him, sufficient to counteract the fire of eight ordinary weapons but—

His hard, mental assessment of his position ended as the huskily built young man who had pronounced him under arrest stepped forward from the group, said crisply:

“Now, don’t do anything rash, Mr. Weapon Shop Jones. You’d better come quietly.”

“Jones!” said Hedrock; and shock made the word quiet, almost gentle; shock and relief. For a moment, the gap between his first deadly assumption and the reality seemed too great to bridge without some superhuman effort of will. The next second he caught hold of his reeling brain, and the tension was over.

His gaze flashed with lightning appraisal toward the uniformed palace guards who were standing on the fringe of the group of plain-clothes men, interested spectators rather than participants. And he sighed under his breath as their faces remained blank of suspicion. He said:

“I’ll go quietly.”

The plain-clothes men crowded around him, and herded him into the carplane. The machine took off with a lurch, so swiftly was it maneuvered into the air. Breathless, Hedrock sank into the seat beside the man who had given him the Weapon Shop password for that day. He found his voice after a minute.

"Very bravely done," he said warmly, "very bold and efficient. I must say though you gave me a shock."

He laughed at the recollection, and was about to go on when the odd fact struck him that his hearer had not smiled in sympathetic response. His nerves, still keyed to unnatural sensitivity, examined that small, jarring fact. He said slowly:

"You don't mind if I ask your name?"

"Peldy." Curtly.

"Who thought of the idea of sending you?"

"Councilor Peter Cadron."

Hedrock nodded. "I see. He thought if I had to fight my way to the roof, I'd be needing help by the time I got there."

"I have no doubt," said Peldy, "that that is part of the explanation."

He was cold, this young man. The chill of his personality startled Hedrock. He stared gloomily down through the transparent floor at the unreeling scene below. The plane, conforming to speed regulations, was slowly heading deeper into the city. Two-hundred-story skyscrapers seemed to graze the bottom of the machine as Hedrock thought bleakly:

Suppose they were suspicious of him. It was not impossible. In fact—Hedrock smiled with humorless certainty—all that had ever been needed was for some of the Weapon Shop mental wizards to turn their full attention to his case. Abruptly, that was depressing. For despite all his years of experience, these Weapon Shop supermen with their specialized training had inexorably forged ahead of him in a dozen fields. He could not even plan for his own protection, because the techniques of education that had molded their brains from childhood were useless applied to his mind, which had been cluttered with confused, unplanned integrations ages before the techniques now so dangerous to him were invented. Some of the weariness of his long years sagged over his spirit, the strain of his transcendental purpose, which required that he keep from all men the knowledge that he was immortal.

Hedrock roused himself. "Where are you taking me?"  
"To the hotel."

Hedrock nodded. The Hotel Royal Ganeel! City headquarters of the Weapon Makers—to be taken there meant definitely something was up. He watched the plane settle toward the broad garden roof of the hotel, his mind stiff as an iron bar with the realization that the Weapon Shops took no chances. They *couldn't!* Their whole existence depended on their secrets remaining secrets. If they ever doubted anyone who knew certain basic things about their organization, as he did, the life of one man would be considered as nothing before the safety of all in an implacable world.

There was, of course, the hotel. The Hotel Royal Ganeel was about two hundred years old. It had cost, if he remembered correctly, seven hundred fifty billion credits; and its massive base spread over four city blocks. From this beginning, it went up in pyramidal tiers, streamlined according to the waterfall architecture of its age, leveling off at twelve hundred feet into a roof garden eight hundred feet long by eight hundred wide, the hard squareness of which was skillfully alleviated by illusion and design.

He had built it in memory of a remarkable woman who was also an Isher empress, and in every room he had installed a device which, properly activated, provided a vibratory means of escape.

The activating instrument, unfortunately, was one of the three rings he had left behind him in the palace. Hedrock grimaced in vexation, as he headed with the others from the plane to the nearest elevator. Because, after all the careful moments he had spent deciding not to wear more than the ring gun, lest suspicion fall upon those remarkable secret machines of the Weapon Shops, here was need for the one ring he would not have taken anyway. There were other rings in secret panels scattered through the hotel, but it was doubtful if a man with twenty guards escorting him straight down to the great section

of the building occupied by the Imperial City headquarters of the Weapon Makers would have any leisure for side trips.

His reverie ended, as the elevator stopped. The men crowded him out onto a broad corridor before a door on which glowing letters spelled out simply:

## THE METEORITE CORPORATION

### HEAD OFFICES

The sign, Hedrock knew, was only half false. The gigantic mining trust was a genuine firm, doing a vast metal and manufacturing business. That it was also an unsuspected subsidiary of the Weapon Shops was aside from the main point, except, as in the present instance, where its various offices served as fronts, behind which facets of the Weapon Shop world glittered in uninterrupted, unhindered activity.

As Hedrock walked into the great front offices, a tall, fine-looking, middle-aged man was emerging from an opaque door fifty feet away. Recognition was almost simultaneous; the man hesitated the faintest bit, then came forward, his smile friendly.

"Well, Mr. Hedrock," he said, "how's the empress?"

Hedrock's smile was stiff. The great No-man's hesitation had not been lost on him. He said, "I am happy to say that she is in good health, Mr. Gonish."

Edward Gonish laughed,, a rich-toned laughter. "I'm afraid there are thousands of people who are always saddened when they hear that. At the moment, for instance, the council is trying to use my intuitive training to track down the secret of the empress. I'm studying Pp charts of known and potentially great men; it's miserable data to go on, far less than the ten percent I need.

"I've only reached the letter M as yet, and I have only come to tentative conclusions. If it's an invention, I would say interstellar travel; but that isn't a full intuitive."



Hedrock frowned. "Interstellar travel! She would be opposed to that—" He stopped; then, in an intense voice: "You've got it! Quick, who's the inventor?"

Gonish laughed again. "Not so fast. I have to go over all the data."

His laughing eyes grew abruptly grave. The No-man stood frowning at Hedrock, said finally, anxiously:

"What the devil's up, Hedrock? What have you done?"

The secret police officer, Peldy, stepped forward, said quickly: "Really, Mr. Gonish!"

The proud face of the No-man turned coldly on the young man. "That will do," he said. "Step back out of hearing. I wish to talk to the prisoner alone."

Peldy bowed. "I beg your pardon, sir. I forgot myself."

He backed away, then began to wave his men off. There was a milling, and murmured questions. In less than a minute, however, Hedrock was alone with the No-man, the first shock fading in a series of little, mental pain waves. A prisoner! He had known it of course in a kind of a way, but he had tried to think of his position as one which, if he pretended not to recognize it, and the suspicion was not great, the Weapon Shop leaders might not force the issue into the open.

Actually, that stage was long past if indeed it had ever existed. The suspicion was already beyond the inner circle of the council. Definitely, the sands of his time were running out. But Gonish was speaking again, swiftly:

"The worst part of it is, they refused to listen when I suggested that the whole business be left over for me to investigate in my capacity as No-man. That's bad. Could you leave me some idea?"

Hedrock shook his head. "All I know is that, two hours ago, they were worried that I might be killed by the empress. They actually sent a rescue force, but it turned out I was, and am, under close arrest."

The tall Gonish stood thoughtful. "If you could only put them off some way," he said. "I don't know enough about the individual psychologies of the councilors or about the case to offer one of my intuitive opinions, but if you can possibly twist the affair into a trial of evidence and counterevidence, that would be a partial victory. They're a pretty highhanded outfit, so don't just knuckle under their decision as if it was from God."

He walked off, frowning, toward a distant door, and Hedrock grew aware of Peldy striding forward.

"This way, sir, the council will see you immediately."

"Eh?" said Hedrock. The sense of warmth produced by the No-man's friendly intent faded. "You mean, the council is in the local Chamber?"

There was no answer; nor did he really expect one. The sharp questions had been purely rhetorical. But put it off indeed!

Men sitting at a V-shaped table, on a dais—that was the scene, as he came alone through the door, and heard it close behind him with a faint click. It seemed strange to be thinking that two years before he had refused a seat on the council. The councilors were of every age, ranging from the brilliant thirty-year-old executive, Ancil Nare, to hoary-headed Bayd Roberts. Not all the faces were familiar to him.

Hedrock counted noses, thinking about what the No-man had said: "Make it a trial!" That meant, force them out of their smug rut. He finished his counting, shocked. Thirty! The full council of the Weapon Makers. What could they have found out about him, to bring all of them here? He pictured these leaders at their headquarters far and near, on Mars, Venus, on those moons that rated so exalted a representative—*everywhere* councilors stepping through their local vibratory transmitters, and instantly arriving here.

And all for him. Abruptly, that was startling again. And steadyng. With head thrown back, fully conscious of his

leonine head, and of his unmistakably notable appearance, aware, too, of the generations of men like this who had lived and died, and lived and died, and died, and died, since his own birth—Hedrock broke the silence:

“What’s the charge?” he asked resonantly. And into those words he put all the subtle, tremendous power of his trained voice, his vast experience in dealing with every conceivable type and group of human beings.

The three vibrantly spoken words were immeasurably more than just a question. They were an all-out expression of will and determination, the very essence of pride and grand superiority. And dangerous as death itself. Radical, simple, tremendous words, accepting in full the implication that his very presence here meant execution, and designed to take uttermost advantage of a great basic reality, the natural, time-proven reluctance of highly intelligent men to destroy a human being recognizably their peer.

Here before him were the supremely intelligent men. And who else in all the universe could better act, feel and think superior than the one man immortal sprung from Earth’s proud race?

There was a stirring along that gleaming V-table. Feet shuffled on the dimly glowing dais. Men turned to look at each other questioningly. It was Peter Cadron who finally climbed to his feet.

“I have been asked,” he said quietly, “to speak for the council. It was I who originated the charge against you.”

He did not wait for a reply, but turned slowly to face the V-table, said gravely:

“I am sure that everyone present has suddenly become acutely aware of the personality of Mr. Hedrock. It is interesting to note how exactly this exhibition of hitherto concealed power verifies what we have discovered. I must confess my own amazement of the vivid force of it.”

"That goes for me, too," interrupted the heavy-faced Deam Lealy. "Until this minute, I thought of Hedrock as a soft-spoken, reserved sort of fellow. Now, suddenly, he's cornered, and he flashes fire."

"There's no doubt," said the youthful Ancil Nare, "that we've uncovered something remarkable. We should strive for a thorough explanation."

It was disconcerting; his entire action enlarged upon beyond his intent, distorted by an expectation that he was not what he seemed. The truth was he was no more superior to these men than they were to each other. The knowledge that he was immortal had always given a dynamic, *pinglike* quality to his confidence. And there was, of course, that genuinely supernatural, over-the-ages development of his personality, an electrical, abnormal manifestation of aura that he could suppress, and nearly always had suppressed, by an unasumming mien. The devilish thing was that by revealing its full force, when they were looking for it, had made them think him alien.

Here was a dangerous backfire, requiring instant modification. He said:

"This is ridiculous. An hour ago I was in the gravest danger of my five years of service with this organization; so grave that I think I can truthfully say: no one else would have come out alive.

"Within minutes after undergoing that nerve-racking strain, I find myself arrested by my friends on an unnamed charge. Angry?"

"Of course I'm angry. But what particularly gets me is this curious nonsense about my inhuman personality. Am I standing before the High Council of the Weapon Makers, or by some primeval fireside where the voodoo doctors are busily exorcising demons? I demand to be treated as a loyal Weapon Shop human being without a single black mark against his record; as a man, not a monster. But now I repeat: *What is the charge?*"

There was a flat silence. Then Peter Cadron said:

"You will learn that in due time. But first—Mr. Hedrock, where were you born?"

So they had got *that* far.

He felt no fear. He stood there, a little sad, conscious of amusement that his oldest bogy was at last come home to roost. For a long moment, all the names he had ever had made a kaleidoscopic picture before his mind's eye. How carefully he had chosen them in the early days, with a meticulous attention to assonance, rhythmic quality, and how they looked in print. And then impatience with high-sounding nominals had produced a whole series of satiric reactions: Petrofft, Du-brinch, Glinzer. That phase, too, had passed until now, for ages, simple names unadorned by any really pleasing attributes had distinguished his unchanging form.

There was, of course, the fact that every name had always required a birthplace and a host of relevant data, a very wearing business; and it was possible—Hedrock frowned—just possible that he had been careless.

He said: "You have my records. I was born in Centralia, Middle Lakeside States."

"You took a long time answering that question," snapped a councilor.

"I was," said Hedrock coolly, trying to imagine what lay behind the question.

Cadron said: "What was your mother's name?"

Hedrock studied the man's even-featured countenance in the beginning of puzzlement. Surely they didn't expect to get him on anything so simple as that. He said: "Delmyra Marlter."

"She had three other children?"

Hedrock nodded. "My two brothers and sister all died before reaching their majority."

"And your father and mother died when?"

"Dad eight years ago, mother six."

Amazingly, that came hard. For a bare moment, it was difficult to employ those intimate terms for two pleasant middle-aged people whom he had never met, but about whom he had forced himself to learn so much.

He saw that Cadron was smiling with dark satisfaction at the other councilors.

"You see, gentlemen, what we have here: A man whose people are deceased, who has no living relatives, and who five years ago, *after his family was all dead*, entered the Weapon Shop organization in the usual manner—and by means of talents considered extraordinary even then when we didn't know how much of himself he was holding back, quickly rose to a position of great trust. Furthermore, it was a position of his own making, created as a result of sustained personally conducted propaganda, and agreed to by us because we had become alarmed that the empress might do us harm unless she was watched more carefully than previously. One of the important factors in all this is that it is doubtful if, in all our vast organization, with its tens of thousands of able men, a single other person could have been found who was capable of sustaining the interest of the extraordinary Empress Innelda for six long months."

"And even now," Hedrock intruded, "has only been temporarily banished from her circle." He finished sardonically, "You have not been interested, but *that* was the result of the turmoil in the palace today. The time involved, if I may add the information, is two months."

Peter Cadron bowed at him politely, then turned back to the silent men at the V-table: "Bear that in mind while I question Mr. Hedrock about his education."

His gray gaze glowed at Hedrock. "Well?" he said.

"My mother," said Hedrock, "had been a university professor. She taught me privately. As you know, that has been common practice among the well-to-do for hundreds of years, the controlling factor being that periodic examinations must

be passed. You will find that I handed in my examination certificates with my application."

The dark smile was back on Cadron's face. "A family on paper, an education—on paper; an entire life history verifiable only by documents."

It looked bad. Hedrock did not need to look at the faces of the councilors to realize how bad. Actually, of course, it was unavoidable. There never had been an alternative method. To have trusted to a living person to back up his identity in a crisis would have been suicidal. People, however much they liked you, however much you had paid them, could always be made to tell the truth. But no one could ever more than cast suspicion on a properly executed certificate. And he'd be hanged if he'd believe that they had guessed near the real truth.

"Look here!" he said violently, "what are you trying to prove? If I'm not Robert Hedrock, who am I?"

He gained a bleak content from the baffled expression that crept over Cadron's face. "That," the man rapped finally, "is what we are trying to find out. However, one more question:

"After your parents were married, your mother didn't keep in touch with her university friends, or any former colleagues?"

Hedrock hesitated, staring straight into the councilor's glinting eyes. "It fits in, doesn't it, Mr. Cadron?" he said at last in a tight, hard voice. "But you're right. We lived in apartments. My father's work kept us moving every few months. It is doubtful if you can find anyone who will remember having met them or me. We truly lived a shadow existence."

There was a subtle psychological victory in having spoken the indictment himself but—Hedrock smiled grayly—if ever he had heard a damning build-up of innuendo, here it was. He grew aware that Cadron was speaking:

"—We recognize, Mr. Hedrock, that this is not evidence, nor is that what we are after. The Weapon Shops do not hold

trials in any real sense. They pass judgments; and the sole criterion always is, not proof of guilt, but doubt of innocence.

"You know that, in our position, we *cannot* do other. Fortunately for our peace of mind, we have more than suspicion. Is it possible that you have anything to add to what has already gone?"

"Nothing," said Hedrock.

He stood very still, letting his mind settle around the situation. It was almost instinct, that attunement, but behind it was the synthesization of experience that recognized the possible importance of every phase of his whole immediate environment. Somehow, he had to seize the initiative, *had to!* He saw the floor, the walls, the panel to his right—and there he paused in ironic bitterness. He had originally, by secret maneuvering, persuaded the Meteorite Corp. to take offices near the roof of the Hotel Royal Ganeel because it had seemed to him that their unsuspected Imperial City headquarters would be safer in a building of his than anywhere else.

For his own protection, however, he had had removed out of their part of the building all those ring activators and vibratory devices which now he needed so desperately. If he hadn't had that idiotic forethought, there would now be a ring behind *that* panel.

Peter Cadron was speaking, the charge at long last. It was hard at first for Hedrock to keep his mind on the man's words. They seemed to move about, eluding his hearing. Or else he was too jumpy, too conscious of his own necessities. There was something about dispatching the rescue force, and simultaneously setting psychologists the task of fixing the exact moment for the landing, on the basis of Hedrock's statement that the issue would be forced into the open by the empress during lunch. Naturally in arriving at their decision, the psychologists made a swift though careful examination of his psychology chart. It was this examination that brought out an extraordinary fact.



Peter Cadron paused. His gaze fixed on Hedrock's face, and for a moment he seemed to be probing in its lineaments for secret information. He finished weightily:

"There was a variation between your courage in action and the Pp record of your potential courage. According to the Pp you would never even have considered staying for that dangerous luncheon at the palace."

Cadron stopped, and Hedrock waited for him to finish. The seconds passed, and suddenly he was startled to see that dozens of the men were leaning forward tensely, sharp eyes bent on him. They were waiting for his reaction. It was all over. This was the charge. For a moment, then he felt like a man delivered. Why, it was ridiculous.

The dream yielded to the reality of the presence of the thirty. They wouldn't be here, never would they be here, sitting in full dress judgment, unless a great Basic of the Weapon Shops was threatened.

The Pp record technique! Hedrock tried to concentrate his mind on remembering what he had heard about the damned machine. It was one of the original inventions, many thousands of years old. In the beginning it had been similar to the Imperial Lambeth Mind Control. There had been improvements from time to time, a widening of its scope, the power to assess intelligence, emotional stability, and other things. But it had never worried him, who had a partial ability to control his mind. At the time of the examination he had simply attempted to synchronize his intellectual attributes with the character he had decided would best suit his purpose among the Weapon Makers.

Hedrock shook himself like a stag at bay. Damned if he'd believe they had anything.

"So," he said, and his voice sounded harsh in his own ears, "so I'm five percent braver than I ought to have been. I don't believe it. Bravery is a matter of circumstances. The veriest coward can become a lion given the proper incentive."

In spite of himself, his voice was suddenly more forceful; some of the fire of his convictions, his dark anxieties, thickened and deepened his tone.

"You people," he snapped, "do not seem to be alive to the tremendousness of what is going on. What is happening is no idle whim of a bored ruler. The empress is now a mature personality in all except minor meanings of the term, and it must never be forgotten that we are now entering into the fifth period of the House of Isher."

"At any hour mighty events could erupt from the undercurrents of human unrest. Twenty billion minds are active, uneasy, rebellious. New frontiers of science and relations among men are just beyond the horizon, and somewhere out of that chaotic mass will grow the fifth crisis of cosmic proportions in the history of Isher civilization.

"Only such a superdevelopment could bring the empress to such sustained, forceful action at this stage of her career. She said that in two months she would call me back, and suggested it might be less. It *will* be less. My impression, and I cannot emphasize it too strongly, is that we shall be lucky to have two days. Two weeks is the absolute outside limit."

He was roused now. He saw that Cadron was trying to speak, but he plunged on, unheeding. His voice filled the room:

"The entire available trained strength of the Weapon Shops should be concentrating in Imperial City. Every street should have its observer. The fleet should be mobilized within striking distance of the city. All this should be already in ceaseless operation. But what do I find instead?" He paused, then finished scathingly, "The mighty Weapon Shop council is frittering its time away on some obscure discussion of whether or not a man should have been as brave as he was."

He ended, drably conscious that he had not influenced them. The men sat unsmiling, cold. Peter Cadron broke the silence quietly:

"The difference," he said, "is seventy-five percent, not five. That's a lot of bravery, and we shall now discuss it briefly."

Hedrock sighed his recognition of defeat. And felt better. Wryly, he recognized why. Against all reason, there had been hope in him. Now there wasn't. Here was the crisis, product of a scientific force which he had thought under control. And it wasn't. It had become one more of a whole pattern of superbly accurate techniques that had created a steadily widening gap between their positive menace to his person and his capacity for counteraction. He must still try to stall along but— He listened darkly as Cadron began to speak.

"I assure you, Mr. Hedrock," the man said with quiet sincerity, "we are all distressed by the duty that devolves upon us. But the evidence is relentless.

"Here is what happened: When the psychologists discovered the variation, two cerebro-geometric figures were set up on the Pp machine. One used as a base the old record of your mind; the other took into account *a seventy-five percent increase in every function of your mind*, EVERY FUNCTION, I repeat, not only courage. Among other things, this brought your I. Q. to the astounding figure of two hundred seventy-eight."

Hedrock said, "You say, *every function*. Including idealism and altruism, I presume?"

He saw that the men were looking at him uneasily. Cadron said, "Mr. Hedrock, a man with that much altruism would regard the Weapon Shops as merely one factor in a greater game. The Weapon Shops cannot be so broadminded. But let me go on. In both the cerebro-geometric figures I have mentioned, the complicated figurate of the empress was mechanically woven into the matrix, and because speed was an absolute essential, the possible influence on the situation of other minds was reduced to a high level Constant, modified by a simple, oscillating Variable—"

In spite of himself, Hedrock found himself becoming absorbed. His conviction that he ought to interrupt as often as was psychologically safe yielded before a gathering fascination in the details of a science that had so greatly outstripped his capacity even for learning about it. Graphs of brain and emotional integers, curious mathematical constructions whose roots delved deep into the obscure impulses of the human mind and body. And bloomed triumphantly into flowers of fact; flowers whose life was never lost in some vagrant breeze, some unexpected mishap, but which like some supergreenhouse development bore exactly the anticipated perfect fruit.

Beautiful but poison fruit that seemed on the verge of poisoning him. He listened, and watched, intently, as Cadron went on with his damning words:

“The problem, as I have said, was to insure that the rescue party did not arrive at the palace too soon, or too late. It was found that the graph based on your old Pp proved that you would never leave the place alive, unless an Unknown of the third order intervened in your favor. That figurate accordingly was instantly abandoned. Science cannot take account of possible miracles.

“The second projection centralized on the hour of 1:40 p. m., with a concentric error possibility of four minutes. The landing was, therefore, effected at 1:35, the false Imperial credentials were accepted within two minutes. At 1:39, you emerged from the elevator. You will agree, I think, that the evidence is conclusive.”

It was a nightmare. All these years while he had been living and planning, carefully building up the structure of his hopes, he had actually already committed his fortunes to a marvelous machine whose mindless predictions had innate in them the character of a juggernaut. What madness to have discounted the greatest invention that ever was in the field of the human mind. Distractedly, Hedrock realized that one of

the councilors, not Cadron, but a little gray-haired man, was speaking, saying:

"In view of the fact that this is not a criminal case in any real sense of the word, and particularly because of Mr. Hedrock's past services, I think he is entitled to assurance that we are taking seriously what the empress is doing. For your information, young man, our staff here has been enlarged fivefold. Perhaps in your personal anxiety at the time, you did not notice that the elevator from the airport went down much farther than usual to reach here. We have taken over seven additional floors of the hotel and our organization is in ceaseless operation.

"Unfortunately, in spite of your stirring appeal, I must agree with Mr. Cadron. The Weapon Shops, being what they are, must handle cases like yours with cruel dispatch. I am compelled to agree that death is the only possible sentence."

There were nods along the table, voices murmuring: "Yes, death—death—immediate—"

"Just a minute!" Hedrock's voice made a strong pattern above the quiet medley. "Did you say that this council room is now in a part of the hotel not previously occupied by the Meteorite Corp.?"

They stared at him blankly, as he ran, not waiting for a reply, straight at the ornamental panel on the darkly gleaming wall to his right. It was simpler than he had expected in his wildest imaginings. No one stopped him; no one even drew a gun. As he reached the panel, he adjusted his four fingers, accurately fitted them against the panel, twisted—and the ring slid out on its hidden groove onto his index finger. In one continuous, synchronized motion, he turned its pale-green fire on the vibratory device—and stepped through the transmitter.

Hedrock wasted no time examining the familiar room in which he found himself. It was located in underground vaults twenty-five hundred miles from Imperial City, filled with softly pulsing machines and glittering instruments. His hand closed

on a wall switch. There was a hiss of power as he plunged it home.

He had a brief mind picture, then, of all the rings and devices in the Hotel Royal Ganeel dissolving out of existence. They had served their purpose. One escape was all he could ever hope to make from the Weapon Shops. He turned, walked through a door; and then, at the last instant, saw his deadly danger, and tried to leap back.

To late. The twenty-foot monster pounced on him; its sledgehammer paws sent him spinning along one wall, dizzy, sick, half unconscious. He tried to move, to rise—and saw the gigantic white thing darting toward him, its great teeth bared for the kill.

# C H A P T E R

# VIII

**N**EELAN KEPT FAINTING. THE AGONY would come at him out of a swirling world of darkness, and would grow and grow, and then abruptly night would return mercifully to overflow the pain. He lay finally, vaguely conscious, and, far away, *the* woman's voice was saying:

“You mean—the recorder says he won't yield to any degree of torture. That's impossible. No one— Very well, take him to the bedroom—”

Her voice faded into distance; and there was no more direct pain, only the twitching of past anguish. When he wakened again, the woman's face came out of the mist, and she was saying:

"Do you still agree to kill Greer? If you do, all will be well."

His thought was immeasurably slow, but one fact was like fire. He had to, HAD TO get on the ship. He muttered:

"I'll stick to what I said."

"Good. But the main plan is now changed. We're going to take the tremendous risks of him getting away. As soon as you get aboard, and he is out of sight, go below, and cut the main drive from the engines. There will be an emergency drive, of course, but we shall have tractor beams on the whole ship, capable of tugging against any normal drive.

"The moment the main drive is disconnected, we will attack; Greer will naturally head for the control room, where you will seek him out to kill him, or interfere with him in any way you can. We need three minutes to blast our way into the ship. Is that clear?"

"Yes, yes—"

"You'll do it?"

The mist was fading a little more; and Neelan saw that Zeydel was standing beside the empress holding a Lambeth, its cone-shaped receptor pointing at his head where it lay on the pillow.

Neelan's eyes narrowed. Even now they were after him, and one thing was utterly clear. He couldn't in his present condition decide on the details of further promises.

"I'll stick to what I said." He spoke doggedly. "But I'll go down to the engine room. I'll prepare for your attack."

That, at least, was true. Prepare he would.

"Oh, you—"

Above him, the empress clenched her hands; her eyes were green pools of angry frustration. Then she drew back. The last thing Neelan heard was:

"What an incredible man to come up against at such a time. It's like fate. So listen well: be prepared to contact Greer in the event that our attack fails. Tell him his terms will be met



today. As soon as he recovers from his fright, he'll agree to that. But we must win. We must!"

There was a blank lull in Neelan's thoughts, but somewhere he discovered that he was not bound or held down in any way. It seemed a long time before realization came that there were things to do. He sat up shakily. The movement made him dizzy, but after a moment a measure of strength came back. He took off his upper clothes, then, and studied the invisibility belt. At first his vision kept blurring, his fingers seemed inadequately muscled. But he strained determinedly, and finally the stiff catch of the buckle worked loose.

He expected the necktie-telestat to sound forth with objections, as he carefully exposed the inner workings of the belt to view, but there was complete silence.

Neelan worked earnestly and without haste, going over the intricate design of finely woven, interlocking plates. It was investigation pure and thorough; and the principle by which the belt operated—similar to the de-lighting in artificial darkness—was important only insofar as a complete understanding of what was legitimate enabled him to search the more articulately for the bomb. The empress hadn't said that there was an energy charge in the belt as well as in the tie. But the course of wisdom favored personal verification.

He put the belt back on finally, satisfied that it was innocuous. But it was not until he had stretched out on the bed once more that he realized the extent of his relief. It left him only one thing to fight. From this moment he could devote his attention to the problem of getting rid at the proper moment of the telestat-tie.

His confidence dimmed only as he stood before a mirror examining the tie. It was a flexible, artificial-magnesium alloy, and it was a snug fit under his collar. An atomic cutter could clip that closed coil of metal but nothing else. A thin bead of sweat trickled down Neelan's forehead. The special systems of mind training that had instilled science into his mind, and

kept it there, an undiminished force, had also provided him with a sense of timing.

It was that that fazed him now. For how was he going to get hold of a cutter, clip off the tie, throw the damnable thing a hundred feet, and leap behind something big and super-hard, all before an alert watcher at the other end of the telestat twitched the button that would dissolve the energy bomb? And in addition to all that, how could he possibly climb more than three hundred feet of stairway to the control room, and launch the ship—the whole operation to be accomplished in three minutes? It was not a matter of hoping that, at the last moment, he would perform a miracle of speed. It *couldn't* be done. Here was death unless he could think of something radically different.

His mind wouldn't work on that. He had a sense of ultimate exhaustion. He lay down on the bed, and he must have slept.

When Neelan wakened, sunlight was streaming through the window, and a man was serving breakfast at a small table from a steaming tray. Beyond the man, the empress sat in a deep chair before a bank of telestats. Zeydel stood beside her, looking like a particularly uncompromising guard of honor.

Neelan sat up: and the empress said in her most golden-toned voice:

“Dan Neelan, I came personally to swear to you that the energy charge in the tie will not be exploded unless you by outrageous action attempt to defeat our enterprise. I swear further that you will not be molested afterward, but that, if all goes well, you will receive the sum of ten million credits this very day. That is my sacred word of honor.”

Neelan nodded a wry acceptance of her guarantee. He was pretty sure she meant it, but there was one thing that nullified her words as completely as if they had never been spoken. Himself. His unalterable purpose. He intended to defeat her if it lay within his power to do so.

One of the telestats before the empress came alive, and cut off Neelan's thought; a man's voice saying curtly:

"Your majesty, the eight one-hundred-million-cycle guns are now being floated into position under the mantle of invisibility."

"Report noted," said the empress. "Traffic is still normal, is it?"

"Yes, we haven't closed off the street yet."

"Good."

She had scarcely spoken the word, before another of the telestats broke into sound:

"Imperial majesty, the first sector battle fleet is now at stations. Nine thousand warships cruising in assigned position."

"Splendid. Keep your ships well up, and wait for the signal. That is all."

Neelan grew aware that the empress was looking at him from half-closed eyes. She caught his glance, and said in a silken tone:

"Perhaps you are beginning to realize that I am in earnest."

Neelan was silent, as he walked over and seated himself before the breakfast table. He had listened to the staggering conversations with a sense of unreality, and only now that she had spoken did it strike him that some of this was for his benefit, and that there was at least one wrongness. He said slowly, grimly:

"Since when has it been possible to make one-hundred-million-cycle guns? I was taught that no metal could withstand such power except in a vacuum."

The empress smiled a tight-lipped smile, as she answered: "Each unit will fire one shot, dissolving as it does so. Eight units smashing at one narrow portion of wall will cause a break-through within three minutes. That is the plan."

Curiously, Neelan's mind concentrated on the cost of such weapons. But the tens of millions of credits that were automatically involved in certain functions of each unit, stultified

his thought. But he was convinced. The guns *were* there, as stated, abnormal evidence of the forces that were gathering against him. More and more his position was—one man against the world.

A telestat broke into life: "Your majesty, an urgent news message has just come through from the Middle West. A giant-human being, one hundred and fifty feet tall is destroying the business section of the city of Denar."

"*What?*"

"If you wish, majesty, I will show you the scene. The giant is retreating slowly before the attacks of mobile units and—"

"Never mind—" Her voice was cool and incisive; and Neelan could only stare at her in amazement. Empress she was now, woman of steel, untouched by surprise, like a metal spring in her reaction. The news itself seemed senseless, as meaningless as life itself. Neelan listened, as she finished her curt dismissal:

"Report later. I cannot give my attention at the moment."

"Very well."

During the silence that followed, she sat like a statue, her face whitely immobile, her eyes peering forth like green jewels. She seemed oblivious of the presence of others, as she whispered:

"Can it be some manifestation of the revolution the Weapon Shops have been predicting?"

She shook herself. She seemed to become aware of her surroundings. She looked at Neelan calmly.

"You will have to hurry," she said steadily. "It's a quarter to eight now. By the time you're completely ready, and get over there, it will be nine o'clock."

It was. Neelan's watch showed one minute to nine, as he walked gingerly up to the door of the spaceship hangar, and rang the bell. He stood there then, cold, trembling a little. Consciousness of death was strong in him, but it was an oddly warm sensation. He looked up into the blue, cloudless sky. Not

a ship was in sight. Of all that vast mass of waiting warships, there was no sign. The world looked lazy and peaceful, almost timeless. Nor was there any evidence around him of the guns that, within minutes, would unleash their inconceivable fire upon the walls of the ship he was about to enter. He felt suddenly breathless, and not at all unhappy, a man on the very edge of eternity, peering over. The impression faded slowly. He thought finally with all his mind and all his body:

Gil, don't give up. Hang on. I'm coming. I'm coming.

There was a faint metallic click. He saw that the outer door was opening.

Neelan walked slowly through the doors. It seemed to him that a whole army of invisible men could slip in behind him during the minute and a half that the doors were set to remain open. But there was no sound except his own. He paused, startled by the enveloping silence, and listened.

Vainly. Except for the faint, faint sound of his breathing, he might have been in a tomb with the dead of the forgotten ages, gone forevermore into the mists of oblivion. He half turned as he reached the third door, as if to look back. And he was still twisted like that when he entered the control room. Twisted away from the great control board to the right. Whoever was at the other end of the teletat-tie wouldn't be able to see that no one was at the control board, or even that this was the control center.

A faint wheezing sound made Neelan turn completely. The doors were closing. He had timed his pace well. Except for Greer, he was alone in the ship, safe, except for a damnable teletat-tie that carried an atomic bomb.

If only he had known yesterday what he knew now. If he hadn't been so blindly obsessed, so remote from the greater realities that had, he could see now hopelessly, clamored for his attention, literally thrust themselves at him. All the universe to feed man's vaulting spirit, Gil's life—his to give and

his to save; and he had been like some mindless fanatic, almost willfully heedless of the power that was his for the taking.

Silence.

He thought: What would they be wondering? The empress, of course, would be there before her bank of telestats, keeping her in touch with the men on the battleships and the man beside the invisible cannon. And all of them would be waiting. So far, his pause would seem natural. Why shouldn't he wait for Greer to show himself, and speak?

His own plan hadn't exactly included a halt here. But then that plan itself was a vague hodgepodge, dependent on unfolding opportunity and will to endure, and overwhelmingly upon grim determination to win. Nothing mattered but that. Nothing. He began to walk toward the stairway to the extreme right; and he was halfway down the first leg of steps when a voice whispered under his neck. He was so intent that he jumped, and it was a moment before he recognized that it was *she*.

"What's the matter? Where's Greer?"

Neelan whispered furiously: "How should I know? For Heaven's sake, your majesty, he may be listening."

She was cool. "That's impossible. All these ships are built to standard specifications. There are no sound devices on stairways. But proceed! You are heading for the engine room?"

"Yes," Neelan whispered. "Yes."

In spite of the fact that the situation hadn't really changed, Neelan felt shaken by the interruption. For it showed that the remarkable woman had now nerved herself to take risks. The words had brought with them, too, something of the deadly will that was out there, lusting to break into this ship, the masses of men and machines waiting like destroying juggernauts, like armies of old poised to plunge into bloody battle.

For a moment it seemed incredible that one woman could set so much power into motion, could by her slightest act influence the entire future of the world. If Gil was right, there

would be no repetition of this invention. Here was the end or the beginning of life.

He had been descending steadily; and now he saw that he was in the repair shop above the engine room. Instantly, all thought except his own immediate purpose washed from his mind as if it had never been. Get a cutter, an atomic hand-cutter for himself, while seeming to concentrate on lowering a great cable-cutter down to the engine room.

There was a hand-cutter, he saw after a frantic visual search, on the bench near the great, fenced-in well that looked down on the pack of engines below. It was the work of a few minutes to maneuver the mobile crane, so that it rolled weightily up to the bench, and from that position lowered the ten-foot cable-cutter down the well directly over the mound of metal that concealed the main drive.

The big cutter safely set down, Neelan leaned against the bench, took out his handkerchief, and wiped the sweat off his face. He was shocked to discover that his face was wet with perspiration. It took several seconds to clear off the cold dampness; and every instant his fingers were fumbling on the bench behind him. He gasped with relief as his hand closed convulsively over the priceless tool. It was at that tremendous moment that the empress hissed at him:

"What are you doing? Why the delay?" She paused; then, "Something is wrong. Did you kill Greer yesterday? Is that what you were hiding?"

She had, Neelan realized grayly, at this penultimate hour struck fire.

He could almost see pictorially how she had inevitably arrived at the conclusion. Everything fitted; the way the doors had opened—and shut behind him—automatically; the non-appearance of Greer, the way he, Neelan, had worded his promises of the night before, and his refusal to go beyond them. A single reaching of the mind, a mental flash of comprehension. *She* would need nothing more.

But she couldn't be sure.

"Sssshh!" Neelan whispered huskily. "I think I hear something."

The wretched thing, then, was that he stood there. Now that the time had come, his muscles seemed immovable, his mind lost in funk. The final action, and what lay beyond, seemed suddenly too great an obstacle for a single human being to overcome. The empress was speaking again, in an intense whisper:

"Dan Neelan, at this final hour, I make you another appeal. No matter what you are hiding, it doesn't matter. No matter what you want, I shall accede to it, provided it leaves me in full control of the ship and the invention. If there is any truth in what I have just said about Greer being dead, yield verification, and you shall have one billion credits within the hour. Do you realize how much money that is? Can your imagination conceive the wealth that will be yours?"

And still there was nothing he could say. Her one proviso—"Leave me the ship"—put their two purposes as far as the two poles of the galaxy. It was that opposition, so fundamental as to make all argument meaningless that released Neelan from the thrall that held him. Like mechanical springs, suddenly set free, his arms jerked up behind him. With one hand, he caught the metal of the tie, where it came around the back of his neck under his collar.

At that last instant, it struck him that he ought to speak, to say something, hold off for fractional seconds he demoniac woman out there, who must be on the very verge of decisive action.

"Your majesty," Neelan gasped. "You're quite mistaken. Greer is alive. He—"

"Then what are you waiting for? Hurry! Cut the drive cable. Are you mad to stand there? *What are you doing?*"

It was, Neelan reflected grimly, a good question. He had brought up his right hand, which held the small cutter, and



adjusted the power edge over the metal band of the tie. There was a tiny physical blow, as he pressed the control; and then—

“Break in!” the empress was crying, her voice like a deep violin note. “All forces act. Break in!”

Convulsively, Neelan snatched the tie, flung it down the well into the engine room, and threw himself flat on the floor.

There was a red, billowing flare of fire.

Instantly, he was on his feet, racing for the stairs, exultant because—because the first cannon blow had yet to come. Surely, oh, surely, he could muster the physical strength for three hundred and sixty feet of stairway, and do it in less than a hundred and eighty seconds of sustained climbing.

Three minutes, the empress had said, three—

The first shot struck then. It shook the ship. It was violent beyond his wildest preconception. It brought a moment of horrible daze, and the mind-racking thought that he had forgotten concussion. He raced on up, up, the appalling fear already in his heart. The second titanic shot sent him reeling back. But he recovered, and plunged on, conscious of lassitude.

The third shot raged; and blood spurted from his nose; a warm stream trickled out of his ears. The fourth shot—he was dimly aware that he was nearly halfway up those endless stairs—crumpled him in a heap. He half rolled down a whole section of stairway. And the fifth shot caught him as he was staggering erect.

He knew his defeat now, a sick and deadly knowledge, but he kept moving his legs, and felt mazed when he reached the next level. The sixth intolerable explosion caught him there at the head of that long stair; and sent him spinning down like a leaf engulfed in a storm. There was a door at the bottom; and he closed it with automatic intention, mindlessly. He stared dully as the great door lifted off its hinges, grazed him as it fell, and clanged to the floor. That was the seventh shot.

Like an animal now, he retreated from pain, down the next line of steps, instinctively locking the lower door. He was

standing there, infinitely weary, half leaning against the door when the shouts of men aroused his stunned mind. Voices, he thought then, inside the ship. He shook his head, unbelievably. The voices came nearer; and then abruptly the truth penetrated.

*They were in. It had taken only seven shots.*

A man shouted arrogantly from the other side of the door, where he was standing: "Quick, break it down. Kill Neelan on sight. That's orders."

The empress had the ship.

C H A P T E R

IX

**N**EELAN BEGAN TO RETREAT. IT WAS a slow business, because his mind wouldn't gather around any one thought, and his reflexes were all shot to pieces. And that, he thought in a paroxysm of coherence, was almost literally true. He had been reduced to an inchoate nervous organism by the greatest concentration of energy fire ever leveled at a machine containing a man.

His knees trembled, as he kept on going down the stairs. Down, down—the clumsy feeling came that he was climbing deeper into his grave. Not, he realized grayly, that there was much farther to go now. The storerooms were past. Next was the insulation room, then the repair room, then the engine room, then the drive chamber; and then—

*And then—*

Hope came. Because there was a way. A way so simple that it seemed incredible that he hadn't thought of it before. The ship was lost, of course; and Gil, and those other poor devils four and a third light years away were lost. And all the billions of human beings who might have carried the torch of civilization to the farthest stars of the universe—their chance, too, their destiny, their hope of greater happiness was gone, unless—

Neelan smiled bleakly at the impossibility, but the thought stayed with him, and gradually formed a remote spur to his weary muscles: Everything that mattered was lost unless the empress, at this moment of her victory, gave up her secret willingly or by compulsion. He reached the engine room, and forgot all else but the work that had to be done. It took a precious minute to discover which of the motors was working. so slight was the drain of power that went into the ship's lighting system and other power functions. During that minute the floors shuddered as another of the doors he had locked went down with a distant clang before the hissing roar of a mobile unit. Instantly, the shouting of men came nearer.

Neelan began to pull switches. First, went the telestat control. At least he would no longer be watched from hidden 'stats. All the upper lights went next. It should take them several minutes to get more lights. With a swift, thrusting motion, he reached under his shirt, and switched on his invisibility belt. Nothing happened, but he had expected them to shut his power off. The answer was to tune in on *this* engine. He grasped the essential dial, twirled it. His belt tugged like a motor, and the whole scene changed subtly. Colors blurred, transformed curiously; metal-gray became darker, white shaded.

There was a rule that a person going invisible should pause for sanity's sake to let the body adjust. But he had no time for that. With frantic fingers, Neelan jerked the switch that

locked the tuning dial in place, then hastily unscrewed the switch and put it in his pocket. The screw hole of the switch he seared with an automatic solder beyond all immediate use. He simply stuck the solder iron into the socket of the engine control, and left it there, burning away, making it impossible for anyone to shut off the engine in the near future.

He had already visually located the six-foot drill he wanted; he floated it out on its antigravity base, pushing it urgently down the two flights of stairs from the repair room, where it had been, down past the engine room, into the great drive chamber that was the final room of the big spaceship. And there, in spite of himself, in spite of urgency, Neelan paused and stared like a sick man at what must be the stellar drive itself.

Here was the treasure that all the fighting was about. Yesterday—how long ago that seemed—he hadn't so much as come down to this room. Instead, he had wandered about like an egotistical idiot, gawking knowingly at all the things that didn't matter.

Trembling, Neelan snatched the transparency bar of the giant drill, and focused its penetrating light at that thirty-foot-thick drive shaft. He saw dark mist—and groaned with his failure. The metal was too hard, too thick. There were too many interlayers and reflectors. No known transparency would ever approach the core of that drive.

Defeated, Neelan whirled and began to run, pushing the drill which, weightless though it was, nevertheless offered a "mass" resistance to his straining muscles. He got through the first door of the bottom lock, then the second, then the third, and then he stood there gulping in wild surmise.

He had been gathering his reserves of strength and will for the job of drilling a six-foot hole through the earth on a steep slanting thrust for the surface. He didn't have to. The hole, the passageway, was there. A line of dim ceiling lights made a straight but upward slanting path into the distance.

And there was not a second, not an instant, to think of explanations. Neelan grabbed the transparency bar, squeezed past the now unnecessary drill, and raced along the tunnel. It was much longer than he would have had time to drill. The angle of ascent was only about twenty degrees. But actually the greater distance was all to the good. The farther he got away from the ship before emerging into the open, the better.

He reached the end suddenly. It was a metal door; and, using the transparency, he could see that beyond it was an empty cellar. The door had a simple latch, that opened at his touch and closed behind him like amorphous metal sinking tracelessly into a solid wall. It was the perfection of workmanship that startled him. Neelan paused, tensely, inside the cellar, and studied the door. There was an implication here that Greer had been back from Centaurus for a long time. So much preparation for his negotiations with the empress, this outlet, and that secret address at the Trellis Minor Building, must have taken weeks to arrange for. Or was there another explanation?

Neelan's face cleared. Of course. That was it. Not Greer, but Kershaw and the others, had built this. They, too, had been cautious about their contacts with the outside world. It was possible that Greer had not even known of this passageway. In fact—Neelan felt suddenly positive—the man would never have left him alone in the engine room yesterday morning, so near an exit, if he had known. The other, the telestat contacts with the outside world had probably been handed into Greer's control as general handy man by those brilliant nitwits, Kershaw and Gil, who thought of every precaution against outside interference, but never once cleaned their inner house against back-stabbing schemers.

The thought, now that all was lost, was bitter. Depressed, Neelan headed for a set of stairs to his left. Halfway up, the stairs branched. The left way led up to a rather ornate door,

beyond which his transparency showed a vacant kitchen; the right way—

Very carefully Neelan laid the transparency down on the steps. He wouldn't be needing it any more. He straightened then like a man bracing himself. Finally he opened the second door and stepped into bright sunlight.

He was in the back yard of a large, vacant house. There was the usual green wonder of lawn, the perpetually flowering garden, the carplane garage, and a high fence with a gate. The gate opened easily from inside onto a back-alley boulevard, the kind where the sidewalks hug the sides of the street. Farther along, Neelan could see a broad thoroughfare.

He hurried toward it, anxious to identify it so that he could judge how far he was from the spaceship. Knowing where he was would give him a better idea of what he must do, *could* do, next. There would be a cordon of guards. But just how far they extended from the center of operations, and what degree of watchfulness they were exercising, was another matter. Suppose they had invisibility viewers.

They did. There was a uniformed guard at the corner, and he wore the glittering viewer headpiece. He waved at Neelan from a distance.

"How're things going?"

"We're in!" Neelan called. "Keep your eyes peeled."

"Don't worry. There's a solid line of us out here."

Neelan turned away, shuddering, and walked hastily back the way he had come. Trapped. The streets would be covered for blocks; and, in minutes, a yelling crew would smash the last of the hard doors that barred their way in the spaceship, realize what had happened and the search with its certainty of capture would be on. Or worse still, perhaps they were already by the final barrier, and in minutes would break from the house, where the tunnel ended, and, seeing him, swoop for the kill.

He began to run. He vaulted a high fence into another backyard. There was a line of viewer-helmeted men along the front of the house. But now that he was heading for the ship, with the fantastic hope it suddenly offered, the spirit of fear and of retreat that had made sodden inroads on his courage faded like an evil dream.

Nobody tried to stop him. And, after a taut moment, Neelan smiled with a dark moodiness at the psychology that permitted a man to head toward a center of infection, but not away from it. He crossed boldly to the corner of the street, from where he could see the needle-shaped hangar just down the block. There was a store at the corner with a loud-speaker that blared suddenly:

“A special statement has just been issued by the Weapon Makers’ council denouncing the hundred-and-fifty-foot giant, who has now devastated the business districts of the cities of Denar and Lenton. The Weapon Makers state that the rumor that a giant is a Weapon Shop machine is absolutely false, and they emphasize that they will do all in their power to help capture the giant. As was reported earlier, the giant ran—”

Neelan pressed on. The words scarcely touched his mind. He felt a vague shock at the realization that he had completely forgotten about the meaningless titan with his seemingly senseless program of destruction. But that was all. He hurried on, shaking the last wisp of the impossible picture out of his head. He reached the ship. No one tried to stop him, as he climbed gingerly through the jagged gap the cannon had made, and so into the control room.

The lights were on; that was the first thing Neelan noticed. The lights he had turned off in the engine room were on. The hunters had reached the engine room. Then why wasn’t there a surging tide of men exploring every nook and cranny in the ship? Neelan grew taut, then slowly relaxed before the fact. Men stood around in the control room. Some of them



wore the helmets, but though they glanced at him there was no suspicion.

To them he was just one more member of the plain-clothes secret police, wearing an invisibility belt. They were too long away from battle, these men. Too many thousands of years had passed since the Isher Empire had engulfed the solar system and ended all internecine life, and ended, too, the peculiar abnormal alertness that went with it. The existence of the Weapon Shops had kept the army alive, but being an officer or a soldier had for ages been one of the sought-after sinecures by all the ne'er-do-wells who had the pull or the bribe money.

And here they stood, and here they sat, idlebrained morons, waiting for the silly business to get over with, so they could go back to their mistresses and their games and the easy routine of their existence.

*Crash!* The sound came from deep in the ship and galvanized Neelan. *That must be the door to the drive chamber.* His freedom was just now being discovered. In seconds, the alarm would clamor forth.

Neelan walked without haste toward the stairway, jostled past several men waiting there, and began to climb up. It was as simple as that. There were men on each level, but they didn't seem to be guarding anything. Briefly, Neelan had the distinct conviction that they had come up here to avoid any possible fighting. He forgot them, as his swift search of the lifeboat revealed that it was untenanted. With a sigh, he sank into the multipurpose chair before the control board, drew a shaky breath, and pressed the launching lever.

Like a ball rolling down a glass incline, the little ship slid up into the air.

The old and wonderful city, seen from the height of half a mile, sparkled in the sun. It seemed very close, some of the spearheads of buildings almost scraping the bottom of his ship, as he flew. Neelan sat almost without thought. His first wonder that the warships had not attacked him had already

yielded to the belief that they were on the lookout for an eight-hundred-foot spaceship; this tiny craft resembled at a distance a public carplane, or a dozen types of pleasure craft.

His purpose, too, was a remote appendage of his mind. He was going to contact the Weapon Shops.

It was a dark spot on the upper rim of the rear-view 'stat that brought Neelan jarringly out of his almost mindless lassitude. The spot hurtled down out of the blue, became a ship, became a thousand-foot cruiser; simultaneously, his general call 'stat broke into life. A rasping voice barked at him:

"Didn't you hear the universal order to ground? Carry on straight ahead, stay on your present level till you come to the military airport beacon due east. Land there, or be blown to bits."

Neelan's fingers, reaching for the white accelerator, froze in midair. The command showed no suspicion of his identity. His gaze flashed to the telestat plates again and the truth burst upon him. Except for the cruiser, he was alone in the air. All traffic *had* been forced down. Was it possible that no one had yet glanced into the lifeboat cradle and noticed its absence?

The thought came then, for the first time, sharp as a steel splinter, that this was the relation-factor of the curious Weapon Shop talk about revolution. In spite of all her energy and will, the empress could only act through others. Every command she could utter must take a feebler and feebler status as it penetrated into the night of self-centered minds that surrounded her.

Neelan held his ship steady, and sat there toying with the idea of actually landing at the military field. There must be a very swarm of planes down there, and he might conceivably lose himself among them. A grim smile touched his lips, as he recognized the plan for the heady madness it was. They wouldn't be as dumb as that. The moment the news was flashed about the missing lifeboat, somebody in the cruiser would remember the lone ship that had been herded toward the field.

Neelan flashed a frowning glance at the cruiser on the 'stat plate. It showed directly above him and startlingly close. Too close. His eyes narrowed. It blocked an entire section of the upper sky from him. He realized the truth, as a second cruiser slipped down to his right, and a third cruiser slid to his left; and a small swarm of destroyers rocketed into view behind and in front of him.

The first ship, in almost hugging him, had screened the approach of the others. And there was no doubt that, whatever the army may be, the fleet was not so dumb. The funny thing was that he felt nothing. He seemed beyond emotion, fear, or any sense of desperation. There was only the reality and the action he *must* take.

A second time, his hand closed toward the white accelerator, clenched it and then paused as the long, patrician face of the empress appeared on the general call plate. Her gaze flashed toward his fingers. She turned pale.

"Wait, Dan Neelan!" Her voice was low and intense. "Think before you commit yourself irrevocably to ruin. My offer is still open. Your courage, your audacity have won you this final chance. Simply land that lifeboat, as directed and—"

There was a clash of interrupting sound; and then a strong clear, ringing man's voice resonated into the control cabin:

"Neelan, we have just learned of your earlier visits. And our No-man Edward Gonish, has just discovered that interstellar travel is at stake! Weapon Shop warships are coming. In two minutes you will have absolute protection against any power. Hang on!"

The man's voice seemed to fall away, as he finished; and then there was the empress, calm now, steady as a steel bar:

"Destroy him!"

Two minutes! The thought came to Neelan as from a great distance. Two minutes was immeasurably too long to wait for succor in this frail armored craft. For an instant, then, he sat smiling gravely at the white lever on which was engraved the

words: "INFINITY DRIVE." The smile faded. With a touch of his foot, he tilted the ship toward the southern hemisphere in the general direction of where he had roughly figured Centaurus to be—and pulled the lever all the way over. "Gil," he thought, "Gil, old man, I'm com—"

There was a blow as from a sledge hammer.

C H A P T E R

X

**T**HE MORNING DRAGGED. SHE PACED the floor of her office in front of the mirrors that lined the walls, a tall, handsome young woman.

She thought once: "How strained I look, like an overworked kitchen maid. I'm beginning to feel sorry for myself and all the hard things I have to do. I'm getting old."

She felt older. For the dozenth time, she turned on one of the bank of telestats and stared at the men working in the drive chamber of the Greer spaceship. She had a frantic sense of wanting to shout at them, to urge them to hurry, *hurry*. Didn't they realize that any hour, any minute, the Weapon Shops might discover where the ship was hidden, and attack with all their power?

A score of times during that long morning, she thought: "Destroy the ship now, before it's too late."

But each time she caught that desperate defeatism with a tight-lipped resistance, the deadly consciousness that the House of Isher could not afford to destroy such a secret. Some day, it might play a vital part in preserving the Imperial House from resurgent enemies. She smiled at the intensity of her indecision. And there was no doubt in her mind that, so long as the ship remained in existence, the hours would seem long, and the Crown would be in mortal danger.

With a nervous flick of her finger, she turned on her news 'stat, and listened to the clamor that roared out at her:

"—Giant has again appeared. . . . Weapon Shops charge that the empress has secret of interstellar travel. . . . Giant destroying. . . . Weapon Shops denounce giant, and demand that the empress release to the people the secret of—"

She clicked it off, and stood briefly startled by the sharp silence. After a moment, she felt better. They *didn't* know. That was the essence of the reports. The Weapon Shops didn't know the secret. It was true that one of their incredible Nomen, Edward Gonish, had divined what she had.

But too late. Minutes and minutes too late. That was the reality behind the barrage of demands they were making, the wild fury of their verbal attacks. As soon as the ship was destroyed—she felt another flare of anxiety—there would remain the one doubtful point, one man, the incomprehensible Dan Neelan.

The thought was like a signal. Her buzzer sounded. A woman's voice said:

"Chan Boller, the physicist, to see you, your majesty. You said—"

"Yes, yes, send him in." She wondered if she sounded too eager.

Boller was an intense young man with dark eyes and a crisp manner. "I have, your majesty, completed the report on interstellar travel, for which you asked."

He stopped and stared at her sharply; and the thought came to her that he knew all about the news flashes—who didn't?—and that he was wondering how much truth was in them. Her green eyes measured him coolly.

"Go on," she said.

She listened intently, as he began, pushing the sound of his voice away from her thought, ignoring even the exact words, letting only the meaning come through.

Alpha Centauri, the physicist explained, was about four and a third light-years from Earth. It was a four-star system, and it was known to have planets. The fastest ship built to date could cover the distance in about a hundred and thirty years, or an average of five hundred miles a second. Such a flight had never been attempted.

To accomplish the journey in eleven days, "the figure your most gracious majesty mentioned," would mean an average speed of twenty-eight million miles a second. The effect on the human system of the full acceleration involved, given the present imperfect antiacceleration efficiency of ninety-nine point nine percent was impossible to evaluate.

"Impossible!" the woman ejaculated with a sharp dismay.

Boller explained: "The difference between one hundred percent and ninety-nine point nine dot percent is .0000000 plus with the one swimming somewhere short of infinity, but just where it is arithmetically impossible to state."

But it would be a factor under really high accelerations, particularly as even the strongest men died from the shock of less than fifteen gravities. As for interstellar navigation, that required a known fixed point as a base. Once that contact was lost, so was the ship.

When the physicist had gone, she sat with her eyes half closed. Neelan was dead, or lost. During the two seconds that

his little ship had been within range of her telestat, she had seen that he had become unconscious the moment he jerked the white lever on his control board. The acceleration pressure that had produced the unconscious state would continue for an indefinite period.

Let the Weapon Shops rave and rant on the airways. The House of Isher had survived greater storms than this. She turned on the telestat connecting her with the Greer spaceship. But the men were still working in their laborious fashion. The greater danger remained.

It began to work on her mind again. The mental picture of the ship and the disaster that would follow its seizure by the Weapon Shops, stayed with her as she went to the eleven o'clock cabinet meeting about the giant. It was that fear in the back of her thought that made her mood chilling, as she listened to the latest reports. The giant himself was an unreal figure. She had watched him twice in the 'stats in a blank wonder, and she couldn't concentrate on the idea of the special danger he represented. There was only the ship.

She saw that the councilors were wary and soft-spoken. They acted as if she were about to explode. It had never struck her before what a barrier of fear existed between herself and even these high officers. Abruptly, that was startling. She pictured herself alone in the world, served by fools and cowards, who would turn against her if ever that intangible force which created an heirarchy was subjected to strong enough blows. Rats, she thought in a flame of anger, damned scurrying rats! She flared finally:

"But what's being done? All I hear when I turn on the 'stat is a babble of commentators vying with each other to spread reports of ruin, and to give out Weapon Shop propaganda. Stop it. Take control of all public communication. Organize a campaign of denial of the Weapon Shop charge that I am withholding the secret of interstellar travel, and launch counterpropaganda accusing them of revolutionary intent.



Make a blanket charge that the giant is a tool of the Shops, and simultaneously keep asking the giant what he wants."

She stalked out of the meeting. When she reached her office, the telestat was barking that rioting had broken out in the devastated cities, and that people were surging through the streets, yelling for the secret of interstellar travel. Her lip curled. The silly fools! Didn't they realize that a city could be built in a week in these days? Next thing they'd be hanging her in effigy.

After a moment, that hurt. She bit her lip, and because the worry was real, turned on the 'stat plate showing the giant ravaging a city street. He was like a gigantic madman, juggernaut; and she stared at him in purest fascination of horror, almost disbelief. Buildings crashed before his incredible advance. He shone in the sun like a monstrous knight in dazzling armor.

As she watched, a destroyer flashed near him, firing with all forty of its guns; and the flame splashed off of him in an incandescent chromatic fury, as if he were a solid energy screen in himself. But she noticed with narrowed eyes that, after the attack, he stepped aside behind a tall building; and, as the destroyer flashed back, partially crouched behind it. Baffled, the ship refrained from firing. It returned a minute later with two others, but the giant was farther away, a trail of destruction behind, a devastation of shattered buildings. He held up a small shop between himself and the ships' fire, and seemed immune and even unaware of the spumes of energy that bounced onto him.

The woman thought, "He doesn't like direct fire, but he can stand it. Indirect energy doesn't bother him at all."

With a shudder, she snapped off the 'stat and the scene. She sat fighting to regain her self-assurance, and finally called up Prince del Curtin's apartment. She said dryly to his anxious greeting:

"If the giant and the Weapon Shops are not the same, at least they're working together beautifully."

"I'm on my way to lunch, Innelda," the young man answered. "Are you coming?"

She was surprised. "Is it so late? But no, I'm having lunch brought here. I'm waiting for word about . . . about something."

"Did you call me up for a reason?"

"Yes. Before you go to lunch, commandeer telestat space for a statement in my name to the effect that all devastated areas will be rebuilt under a financial policy to be announced later. Be reassuring. You're well known, well liked. It should go over nicely."

"Fine!" He looked at her intently. "See here, Innelda, there are lines in your face. You're not letting this get you going."

"I've never," she replied, "played a more careful game."

A few minutes later, she listened to his statement, and smiled with pleasure at his earnestness of manner, his fine bearing. Why not he, she thought tensely? Nothing would have a greater effect on the present crisis than a swift but imposing marriage.

She paused there, frowning with the memory of Dr. Neel's blunt words about just that subject. The old fool! Her lips came together defiantly. After a moment, she sighed her rejection of Del Curtin. Captain Hedrock had been right when he had said that the Imperial family did not commit racial suicide even by degrees, not knowingly anyway. Long ago, she had decided that the prince was too closely related to be eligible. She mustn't allow herself to be stampeded by events into marrying even her likable cousin. Actually, there was no one yet unless—She shook herself. Ridiculous. The man was simply a clever, presumptuous interloper. Even now it was difficult to grasp why she had let him get away with as much as she had.

An automatic glance at the 'stat, which was attuned to the Greer spaceship, jarred her mind back to her basic danger.

For a long minute, she stared at the uncompleted work. Then, trembling, she broke the connection. It was a nightmare, she thought, this waiting.

She ate a sandwich, and drank a glass of something that seemed tasteless; that was all she remembered of it. It was heartening to listen to the early-afternoon news. It was more reassuring, scarcely a mention of the giant, and everything about the Weapon Shops was against them. She mustered a wry smile. How low she had sunk when her own propaganda could cheer her up.

But it did. So much so that her nerves quieted sufficiently for her to feel up to an interview she had been putting off all morning. The interview of Greer. She sat cold as rock while the frightened wretch poured out his story. The man was almost beside himself with terror, and his tongue kept running off into pleas of mercy. For a time that didn't bother her. There was only the thread of his tale about Kershaw and Neelan and—

*And Neelan!*

She sighed her understanding. What an impregnable wall of purpose she had smashed up against. And what a man! What a lion of a man! Within half an hour of boarding the spaceship he had had control of it. It had not been his fault that he had not suspected the ramifications of plotting and scheming that were going on. No one could have done more about it than he when he finally did discover it.

She came out of her reverie, said softly: "And where did you leave Kershaw and the others?"

The man broke into a frenzy of babbling, something about there being seven habitable planets altogether, three of them lovelier than Earth— "And I swear I left them on one of those. They'll be all right. The first ship will pick them up. All I wanted was to get back here and sell the invention. It's a crime of course. But these days everybody's out for himself."

She knew he was lying about where he had left the men. She felt cold and merciless. People who were afraid always did that to her. She had a sense of loathing, as if something unclean was near her. It didn't really matter whether such people lived or died; and he probably knew more than was good for her.

She hesitated in spite of the simple logic, and the simpler impulse involved. It took a long second to realize why. It was because, fantastically, she was afraid too. Not in the way he was. Not for herself. But for the House of Isher. It was strange to sit here and admit that fear to herself. Almost repellent to have a sense of kinship with this creature who had been blatant and threatening when he was safe behind a fortress of steel and latent velocity, and now shivered for the rag that was his life.

She shook herself. "Take him back to his cell," she said. "I shall decide later what to do with him."

But she knew that she was going to let him live. Contempt burned in her at the weakness. She was become one with the lurking beasts of the field and the mobs that raged through the streets of giant-ravaged cities, panicky fear of the future in their hearts.

What was it the first Isher had said in his speech to the army of freedom on the morning that he was crowned emperor of the world? "A ruler must be like the wind, like Nature herself, immune to all the softer music of the heart. Sometimes, great cruelty to the few will save a million lives as we soldiers have discovered. The quality of mercy can be strained in dealing with individuals to the radical disadvantage of an entire race." Those of course had been turbulent times.

Her personal 'stat buzzed. She clicked it on; and her eyes widened as she saw that it was Admiral Dirn.

"Yes," she managed to say finally, "yes, I'll be right over."

She climbed to her feet with an unnatural sense of urgency. The spaceship was ready, waiting now for her to drain its

secret. But in an affair like this, with the mighty Weapon Makers opposing her, one minute could be too late. She almost ran for the door.

The Greer spaceship—she continued to call it that irritably for want of a better name—seemed a tiny thing in that vast military hangar. But as her carplane with its attendant patrol vessels flew nearer, it began to take on size. It towered above her finally, a long, mottled-metal, cigar-shaped structure lying horizontally on the cradle in which it was berthed. She could see the gaping holes where the big energy guns had smashed through to conquer for her.

She forgot that as she climbed into the control room. Now that the ship was horizontal, the stairways had automatically drawn back against the wall; and it didn't take long to walk the four hundred feet through door after shattered door. Her eyes studied the gigantic drive shaft. She saw that the plates had been loosened but not removed. And after a moment she looked questioningly at the uniformed officer who stood a respectful distance behind her. The man bowed.

"As you see, your majesty, your orders have been carried out to the letter. Nothing inside the drive has been touched or seen, and the workmen, who disconnected the plates are the ones who were chosen by you personally from case histories submitted this morning. Not one has sufficient science knowledge to analyze even an ordinary drive let alone a special type."

She nodded, then allowed herself a smile, which she tried to make warm.

"You have done well, admiral. You will receive a bonus of one million credits."

His pleasure gave her a brief fillip. Then he was speaking again:

"Not one of these men has been allowed near a telestat all day. They are unaware of the turmoil outside."

"Good. Send them in as you go out."

For a minute, then, she was alone. She stood, a faint smile on her long, Isher face, content growing into her tired body. It shouldn't take too long. The men who, millenniums ago, had planned the education of the members of the Imperial family had rightly judged that no ruler could survive in the age of science without some course of training that would synthesize all knowledge and discovery into one brain. The training had evolved very slowly. It was far from perfect. Captain Hedrock had told her that it was similar to that of a Weapon Shop No-man, resembling the latter much as a caricature resembled a photograph.

It was a bitter comparison, but she still felt pleased with it. Hedrock had—

Her mind paused. She frowned. There she was again thinking of that curious man. A sound interrupted her. She turned, and saw that a troop of men was coming in. They all saluted. She nodded, flashing her public smile.

The men, she saw, had their orders. They began to remove the loosened plates with a quiet efficiency. In two hours the job was done. The secret of the drive was carefully integrated into her brain. She stood finally behind a ray shield watching an energy gun dissolve the drive core into a mass of sagging, then molten metal. Her patience had no end. She waited until there was a splotchy mound of white-hot metal on the floor; and then, satisfied at last, climbed into her carplane.

Dark clouds rode the late-afternoon sky, as she returned to the palace. A minute after she reached her office, her private 'stat winked on. It was Prince del Curtin, looking and sounding very worried.

"Innelda, have you seen the latest reports?"

She countered: "The news doesn't seem to be so bad."

"Good heavens,, have you been listening to that dish water of propaganda the Department of Information is turning out? From that point of view our situation is perfect. It's the giant."

She felt a sudden emptiness, a dizzy wonder: Was it possible that in her absorption with the ship, she had actually been giving her attention to the lesser of two evils? It struck her that she had not really thought of the giant all the time she was on the spaceship. It seemed hard for her to grasp that such a menace had come out of nothingness only that morning, and was now threatening the nature of things Isher.

She managed finally: "What about him? I've been busy."

"Thirty-four cities, Innelda. Only one person killed yet, and that an accident. But think of it. It's real; it's no joke. The continent's beginning to boil like a toppled ant hill. He destroyed small establishments only, leaving the big companies untouched. A regular tidal wave of rumors have started about that, and I don't think any amount of propaganda is of value, so long as that damned thing is at large."

He broke off: "Listen Innelda, what's this about you hiding an interstellar drive? Is there any truth in it?"

She hesitated; then, "Why do you ask?"

"Because," he said grimly, "if it's true, and if that's what's behind the giant, then you'd better start thinking seriously of handing the secret over with the best possible grace. You can't stand another day of the giant."

"My dear"—she was cold, determined—"we'll stand a hundred days, if necessary. If an interstellar drive should be developed, the House of Isher would under present circumstances be opposed to it!"

"Why?"

"Because"—her voice was a resonant force—"our population would shoot off in all directions. In two hundred years, there'd be thousands of upstart royal families and sovereign governments ruling hundreds of planets, declaring wars like kings and dictators of old. And of all the people they would hate most would be the ancient House of Isher, whose living presence would make their loud pretensions ridiculous. Life

on Earth would become one long series of wars against other star systems."

She went on tautly, "It may seem silly to think of a situation as it would be two hundred years hence, but a family like ours that has ruled in unbroken line for more than forty-seven hundred years has learned to think in terms of centuries."

She finished: "On the day that an administration method is developed whereby controlled stellar emigration is possible, on that day we could regard with approval such an invention. Until then—"

She stopped because he was nodding, his lean, strong face thoughtful. "You're right, of course. That angle never occurred to me. No chaos like that can be permitted. But our own situation is becoming more serious every hour. Innelda, let me make a suggestion."

"Yes."

"You're going to be shocked."

A tiny frown creased her forehead. "Go ahead."

"All right. Listen: The Weapon Shops' propaganda is benefiting from the giant's handiwork, and at the same time they keep denouncing the giant. Let's take them up on that."

"What do you mean?"

"Let me get in touch with them. We've got to identify the people behind that giant."

"You mean, *work* with them?" She found her voice in an explosive outburst: "After three thousand years, an empress of Isher begs the aid of the Weapon Makers. Never!"

"Innelda, the giant is at the present moment destroying the city of Lakeside."

"Oh!"

She was silent. For the first time, she felt stunned as well as dismayed. Glorious Lakeside! Second only to Imperial City in all her great realm. She tried to picture the shining giant crashing through the wonder city of the lakes. And, slowly, she nodded agreement.



There was no longer any doubt. After one short day, the giant with a single exception, was become the most important factor in a shattering world.

She hesitated; then, "Prince!"

"Yes."

"Captain Hedrock left me an address. Will you try to get in touch with him, and ask him to come to the palace, tonight if possible?"

Her cousin looked at her thoughtfully, said finally, simply, "What's the address?"

She gave it, and then sat back, forcing herself to relax. It was relieving after a minute to realize that she had made so *many* great decisions.

# C H A P T E R

# XI

**W**HEN HEDROCK SAW THE TWENTY-foot rat coming at him with bared teeth, he gathered his strength with a desperate will. In his grim fashion, he waited till the last possible moment. And then the roar of his voice filled the room with its threatening echoes.

There was a massive squealing as the rat dodged aside into the far corner. It crouched there, and he could see that its violent movement had incremented its already speeded up life processes. Slowly, it began to keel over. Its glazed eyes peered at Hedrock, as he staggered over to the rat inclosure, straight for the line of power switches. It made no effort to follow him; and, in a moment, he had pulled the lever that furnished the force for its size.

More slowly, he walked back into the large room. He had already noticed where the wall had been smashed, but he did not pause to examine the break. It required half a minute to find the creature, now that it was no longer physically magnified. But he finally saw the six-inch glint of dirty white, where it had crawled partly under a broken chair.

It was still alive, a very old-looking rat. It twisted weakly as he picked it up and carried it through the rat inclosure into the laboratory beyond. The feeling that came to him then had very little to do with the miserable creature he was placing in his data-gathering machine. It was pity, but on a vast scale, not for any individual; the compassion embraced all life. He felt, suddenly, alone in a world where people and things lived and died with a heartbreaking rapidity, ephemeral shadows that blinked in the strong light from the sun, and then faded, and were gone forevermore.

With an effort, he fought off that black mood, and, turning away from the data machine, went to examine his rat inclosure. The four rat houses were doing well. Each had a new batch of young ones, and from the size of them he guessed that they had been born since the mechanical process had been interrupted by the rat that had broken out.

It took an hour to repair the break in the big metal pen, but the whole process resumed with automatic precision the moment he threw the switches back into position.

The process was simplicity itself. He had begun it a thousand years before by introducing a dozen rats (six males and six females) into each of four specially constructed houses. Food was provided at intervals. Filth was removed by an ingenious pusher device that worked on a gear system. Nature had her own automatic methods, and every little while youngsters appeared and grew up, adding to the weight of the delicate balances that held up the floor.

As soon as the weight of rats on the poised floor reached a set point, a little door would open, and, sooner or later, a rat

would go into the narrow corridor beyond. The door would close behind it; and no other door in any of the four houses would open until it was disposed of. At the far end of the corridor was bait, inside which was a tiny Weapon Shop magnifier. When swallowed, the magnifier warmed from the rat's body heat, and set off a relay, which opened the door into an inclosure forty feet long, wide and high. It also set the little corridor floor moving. Like it or not, the rat was precipitated immediately into the open. That door shut too, blocking the way back.

More food in the center of the room activated the power that set off the magnifier. With a bang, the rat plummeted into size, becoming a twenty-foot monster, whose life functions speeded up in almost direct proportion to the difference in size. In that accelerated life-world, death came swiftly. And, as the corpse cooled below a certain temperature, the magnifying power was shut off, the floor tilted, the small white body slid onto a conveyor belt, which transported it to the data-gathering machine, from whence it was precipitated into a ray bath and disintegrated.

The process then repeated. And repeated and repeated and repeated. It had been going on for a millennium; and its purpose was tremendous. Somewhere along the line, the enlarging rays of the vibrator would do to a rat purposely what they had done accidentally to Hedrock fifty-five centuries previously. A rat would become immortal, and provide him with a priceless subject for experiment. Some day, if he succeeded in his search, all men would be immortal.

The data card of the rat that had so nearly killed him turned up in the "special" rack. There were three other cards with it, but the special quality about them was the continued functioning of some organ after death. Long ago, he had explored similar freak happenings to exhaustion.

The fourth card excited Hedrock. Ninety-five years, he thought tensely; it had lived the equivalent of ninety-five

years. No wonder it had had time to break out. It must have lived several hours as a giant.

He calmed himself because—because he couldn't go into the matter now. The rat would have been precipitated, not to the dissolver, but into the preserver with the other specials, and would be waiting for his examination at some future date. Right now, there were things to do, vitally important things affecting the existing human race; and he, who worked so hard for the future, had never yet let the might-be interfere at decisive moments with the *now*. There were things to do, and only one afternoon to prepare for the most sustained campaign in his career.

It seemed abruptly too short a time because—damn it all—the preliminary wasn't going to be any walk-over either. He had delayed too long. In spite of plans laid as long ago as seven hundred years, the crisis had smashed at him in a few short hours; and now he *had* to cram a year's work into half a day. Imagine facing men like Nensen, Deely Triner on a day like this. Smiling grimly, he walked back to his Transport room, and began a detailed study of a very large 'stat which occupied one corner. The 'stat was lined with row on row of glow points, slightly more than fifteen hundred.

It took quite a while to punch out the score of individual numbers that he wanted, and only seventeen turned a rich green. The other three flashed red. The three men involved were probably out. He'd get them later. Hedrock straightened from his job of selection, faced the 'stat plate as it started to glow.

"Take a good look at me," he said. "You will probably be seeing me today."

He paused coolly, mentally scrutinizing his next words. It would be silly to let on that he was talking to more than one. Undoubtedly, some of those shrewd men probably knew that other firms were in the same position as their own, but confirming their suspicion would be gratuitous folly.

Satisfied, Hedrock went on, "Your firm will remain open until tomorrow morning. Provide sleeping quarters, and games, and food for the staffs. Continue with normal business until the usual hour, or until further notice. Employees must be paid a twenty percent bonus for this week. For your private information, a great emergency has arisen, but if you do not hear further by seven a. m. tomorrow, consider the matter closed. Meanwhile, read Article 7 of your incorporation papers. That is all."

He clicked off the 'stat, grimaced at the lateness of the hour, and felt impatience at the thought that at least thirty minutes must elapse between his verbal and his first physical call. He shrugged finally. There was no other way. It was impossible that he appear in person a minute after his 'stat message. The message would have caused a big enough sensation as it was, without adding the complication of instantaneous arrival.

Besides, he had his "business" suit to get into, and the magnifier to swallow. He stood finally with narrowed eyes, considering the potentialities of the interviews that he had to make. Some of the executives out there would be as tough to handle as Fursching steel. They'd been big bosses too long. His policy of letting a family operate for generations, merely paying into a central fund, but otherwise without control, had progressively weakened his authority. It couldn't be helped. Control of so many was a practical impossibility.

Hedrock smiled darkly. Certain of the men, he had been intending to do something about for a long time. The half-hour up, Hedrock plugged in a transmitter, examined the gleaming corridor that showed beyond. And stepped through. The door he came to finally said:

STAR REALTY CO.  
TRILLION CREDITS IN PROPERTIES  
OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT  
J. T. TRINER  
TRESPASSERS FORBIDDEN

With his ring, Hedrock actuated the secret mechanism of the door. He walked in, straight past the pretty girl at the great reception desk, who tried to stop him. The rays of his ring automatically unlocked the second door. He was inside a large and imposing office. A big, pale-faced, pale-eyed man rose from behind a curving monster of a desk, and stared at him.

Hedrock paid him no attention. One of the other rings that he had put on his finger was tingling violently. He turned his hand slowly. When the tingling stopped, the ring stone was pointing directly at the wall behind the desk. It was a good job of camouflage, Hedrock decided admiringly. The wall design was unbroken, the atomic cannon behind it perfectly hidden. Without his finder ring, he would never have spotted it.

Abruptly, he felt grimmer. He allowed himself the icy and swift thought that his discovery only confirmed his opinion of the man. An atomic cannon hidden in his office—what damnable stuff! His private case history of Triner showed that the fellow wasn't merely self-centered and ruthless—those were common traits in an age of gigantic administration trusts. Nor was he simply amoral; hundreds of thousands of valuable and kindly Isher citizens had committed as many murders as Triner, but the difference in motive was like the difference between right and wrong. Triner was a prurient wretch, a lecherous skunk, a very hound of evil, who should have been de-frosted years ago.

The man was coming forward, holding out his hand, a hearty smile on his wan face, a hearty tone to his voice, as he said:

"I don't know whether to believe in you or not, but at least I'm willing to listen."

Hedrock strode coolly toward the outstretched hand, as if to shake it. At the last instant, he simply stepped past the man, and in a moment had seated himself in the big chair behind the curving desk. He faced the startled executive, think-

ing savagely, So Triner was willing to talk, was he? That was just dandy. But first he'd get some psychological bludgeoning, and a lesson in straightforward ruthlessness with emphatic punctuation of the fact that there were tougher men in the world than J. T. Triner. Keep pushing him; keep him off balance. Hedrock said curtly:

"Before you sit down *in that chair*, Mr. Triner, before we talk, I want you to start your staff on the job you're going to do for me—are you listening?"

There was no doubt about it, Triner was not only listening; he was shocked and angry and bewildered. Like so many strong men subjected for the first time to the full force of a personality aura that was almost an energy in itself, he seemed unable to adjust his mental and physical functions to the staggering reality.

Not that he looked cowed. Hedrock knew better than to expect fear. Triner's expression simply grew cautious, with a mixture of curiosity thrown in. He said:

"What is it you want done?"

That was too important for ruthlessness of manner. Hedrock drew a folded paper from his pocket. "There," he said earnestly, "are the names of fifty cities. I want all my business properties in those cities listed according to avenues and streets. Never mind who's in them. Just get the street numbers, two, four, six, eight and so on. And only in cases where there are many in a row, like a whole block, at least a dozen altogether. Do you follow that?"

"Yes, but—" Triner looked dazed; and Hedrock cut him off:

"Give the order." Hedrock paused, then he leaned forward, his eyes narrowed to slits. "I—hope—Triner—that you have been living up to Article 7 of your constitution."

"But, man, that article was promulgated nearly a thousand years ago. You can't mean—"



"Listen," said Hedrock flatly, "can you provide that list, or can't you?"

Triner was sweating visibly. "I guess so," he said finally. "I really don't know. I'll see."

He stiffened abruptly, added through clenched teeth: "Damn you, you can't come in here and—"

Hedrock realized when he had pushed a man far enough. "Give the order," he said mildly, "then we'll talk."

Triner hesitated. He was a badly shaken man, and, after a moment, he must have realized that he could always countermand any instructions.

"I'll have to use the desk 'stat."

Hedrock nodded, and watched and listened while the order was transmitted to a startled underling chief. The man at the other end of the 'stat protested, but giving orders was more in Triner's line than receiving them. He barked like a sea lion, and seemed to recover more of his aplomb with every word. When he finally cut off the 'stat, he was completely himself. He drew up his chair alongside the desk. He smirked at Hedrock.

"What's the dope?" he asked in a confidential tone. "What's it all about?"

The man's very seeming acquiescence gave him away. Hedrock sat grimmer, colder. So the controls of the gun were in the desk, somewhere beside where Triner had drawn his chair.

Hedrock studied the physical situation thoughtfully. He was sitting at the desk, his back to the cannon, and with Triner to his left. The door leading to the outer office was about fifty feet away, and beyond it was the reception girl. The wall and door would protect her. Anybody else who came in would have to be kept well to the left, preferably behind and beside Triner. Hedrock nodded with satisfaction. His gaze had never left Triner; and now he said:

"I'm going to tell you everything, Triner"—that was an appetizer for the man's undoubted curiosity, and should restrain

his impatience. Hedrock went on—"but first I want you to do one more thing. You have an execution accountant in the head offices here, named Royan. Ask him to come up. After I've spoken to him, you'll have a better idea as to whether he'll be in the firm after today."

Triner looked puzzled, hesitated, and then spoke briefly into the 'stat. A very clear, resonant voice promised to come up immediately.

Triner clicked off, and leaned back in his chair. "So you're the man behind that mysterious wall 'stat," he temporized finally.

He waved his hand at the design on the wall beside him, then said suddenly, his voice intense: "Is the empress behind us? Is it the House of Isher that owns this business?"

"No!" said Hedrock.

Triner looked disappointed, but said: "I'm going to believe that, and do you know why? The House of Isher needs money too badly and too continuously to let a treasure like this company vegetate the way it's been doing. All that stuff about dividing the profits with the tenants periodically, whatever else it is, it isn't Isher."

"No, it isn't Isher," said Hedrock; and watched the baffled look that came into Triner's face. Like so many men before him, Triner didn't quite dare defy the secret owner so long as there was a possibility that the owner was the Imperial family. And Hedrock had found that denial only increased the doubts of the ambitious.

There was a knock at the door, and a young man of about thirty-five came in. He was a big chap with a brisk manner. His eyes widened a little as he took in the seating arrangement of the men in the private office. Hedrock said:

"You're Royan?"

"Yes." The young man glanced at Triner questioningly, but Triner did not look up.

Hedrock motioned to the decoration that was the wall telestat. "You have been previously informed as to the meaning behind this 'stat?"

"I've read the incorporation articles," Royan began; and then he stopped. A wild understanding poured into his eyes. "You're not that—"

"Let us," said Hedrock, "have no histrionics. I want to ask you a question, Royan."

"Yes?"

"How much money"—Hedrock articulated his words—"did Triner take out of the firm last year?"

There was a little hiss of indrawn breath from Triner, then silence. The two men, Royan and Triner, looked at each other steadily for a long moment, an unmistakable and violent clash of minds. Finally, Royan laughed softly, an almost boyish laugh, and said:

"Five billion credits, sir."

"That's a little high, isn't it?" Hedrock asked steadily, "for a salary?"

Royan nodded. "I don't think Mr. Triner regarded himself as being on salary, but rather as an owner."

Hedrock saw that Triner was staring fixedly down at the desk, and his right hand was moving casually toward a tiny ornamental statue.

Hedrock said: "Come over here, Royan." He motioned with his left hand, waited until the young man had taken up a position to the left of Triner, and then manipulated the ring control of his own magnifier.

The magnification involved was very small, not more than an inch all around. He could have gained the same physical effect by sitting up and swelling out his chest. What was important about it was that it changed the basic structure of his "business" suit and of his own body. Both became virtually as impregnable as a Weapon Shop itself. Six months before, on entering the palace, he had racked his brain for a method

whereby he might safely take the suit in with him. But the danger of having it stolen by alert palace spies while he was not wearing it had made that impossible.

From its structure, any competent physicist could have analyzed at a glance the basic vibrational secret of the Weapon Shops. The suit not only carried the considerable power plant necessary to such an intensive form of magnification, but its innate construction served to confine the entire process to itself and to what it inclosed, a very necessary precaution.

Hedrock felt the greater rigidity of his body; and his throat was stiffer, his voice slower, as he said:

"I would say the salary was much too high. See that it is cut down to five million."

There was a wordless sound from Triner, but Hedrock went on speaking to Royan in that slow, steely voice:

"Furthermore, in spite of its co-operative structure, this firm has acquired an unenviable reputation for remorselessness, and the policy of its president of having pretty women picked up in the street and taken to his various secret apartments is—"

He saw the final movement as Triner convulsively grasped the statuette. Hedrock stood up, as Royan yelled a warning.

The fire from the cannon disintegrated the chair on which Hedrock had sat, spumed off the metal desk, wrenched the ceiling with flame. It was immensely violent, at least ninety thousand cycles of energy, but it was not so strong that Hedrock did not notice the flash of Royan's gun. After a moment, then the sequence of events was clear. Triner had manipulated and fired the cannon at Hedrock, then whirled, drawing his Imperial gun with the intention of killing Royan. Only Royan, using a Weapon Shop defensive model, had fired first.

Where Triner had been was a shiningness that twinkled and faded. In the office, between Hedrock and Royan, silence settled. Finally:

"I don't see," said Royan, "how you escaped."

The man looked excited. His voice trembled. He was white as a sheet and he obviously needed patient handling for a few minutes. Only, there wasn't time; there wasn't time. Already, it seemed to Hedrock, he had spent far too many precious minutes in one office. Hedrock switched off his magnification, said hurriedly:

"You're the new president of the company, Royan. Your salary is five million a year. What kind of mind-training course are you giving your son?"

The man was recovering more rapidly than Hedrock had expected. "The usual," he said.

"Change it. The Weapon Shops have recently published the details of a new course, which is not very popular as yet. It includes the strengthening of moral functions. But now . . . when will the lists be ready that Triner ordered for me? Or do you know about them?"

The speed of the conversation seemed to be dazing Royan again, but he carried the load. "Not before six. I—"

Hedrock cut him off. "You are going to get some awful shocks tomorrow, Royan, but bear up. Don't lose your head. We have incurred the wrath of a powerful secret organization. We are to be given a lesson. There will be great destruction of our property, but do not under any circumstances let on to anyone that it *is* our property, nor begin reconstruction for a month, or until further notice."

He finished grimly, "We must take our losses without outcry. Fortunately, tomorrow is Rest Day; the people will be away from their shops. But remember, have—those—lists—ready—at—six!"

He left the man abruptly. The secret organization stuff was as good a story as any, and when the giant started moving, all its weaknesses would be dwarfed by the horrendous reality. But first, now, some other calls, a few of the easier ones, then eat, then the arrogant Nensen, and then—

In his retreat an hour later, he prepared a meal, and frowning, reviewed his main other weakness. Tomorrow was Rest Day. The only possible day on which he could act without killing thousands. And he didn't know the issues at stake. There was, of course, what Gonish had said about it being interstellar travel. There was the tremendous logic that the empress, mature as she was today, wouldn't act as she did unless it was something of immense importance. But he didn't know.

He must prepare, lay the entire groundwork, and wait for information. Waiting, he visited the rest of the twenty. Nensen, he killed by the simple method of reflecting the energy of the man's own gun back at him. The once indomitable Deely turned out harmless, a reformed monster of an old man, who resigned swiftly when he saw that Hedrock was not interested in so delayed a conversion. The other men were obstacles whose curiosity and mental inertia had to be overcome. It was a quarter to seven the next morning when Hedrock took a sleeping pill and lay down for half an hour to let it work on his weary body. And still there was no new information anywhere.

He adjusted his magnifier finally to full power, and went out because a few hours of busting buildings that he owned would force whatever situation existed into the open and because it was—Rest Day.

By noon there was no turning back. The Weapon Shop confirmation that it was interstellar travel at stake steeled his nerves and his heart for the colossal destruction still ahead. At five o'clock came the automatically relayed and recorded message from the empress asking him to come to the palace. That was startling. It was hard to believe that the glorious Innelda had become so panicky about the future of the House of Isher. But the chance couldn't be missed. All previous plans must accordingly be shoved twenty-four hours ahead. Hedrock tuned into the secret wave length of the Weapon Makers coun-

cil, or rather the wave length they thought secret; and, disguising his voice, said:

“Members of the Weapon Makers council, I am sure that you have already realized the great advantage to your cause of what the giants are doing.”

It seemed to Hedrock that he must keep stressing that there were more than one involved. The Weapon Shops knew only too well that a normal human being aged five years every thirty minutes when enlarged. He went on with intense urgency:

“The giants need immediate assistance. The Weapon Makers must now take over, must send out volunteers to play the role of giant for fifteen minutes or half an hour per person. They do not have to destroy, but their appearance will give an effect of continuity, and will lend psychological support to Weapon Shop propaganda.

“It is essential that the first giant appear sometime early this evening. For your sake, for the sake of the progressive forces of man, do not fail.”

He was still in his hide-out fifteen minutes later when the first of the giants appeared, so quick was the response. It was too quick. It showed private plans. It showed that the greatest force in the solar system was reacting like a finely poised steel spring—and he’d better get to the palace fast.

But first the time had come to bring into use one of his secret inventions. To begin with, a little trip through the one he had here in his hide-out. Later, when the crisis came, he could make an attempt to utilize a replica that, long ago, he had secreted in the tombs of the palace. The next twelve hours would be decisive.

**T**HE WARM, CLOUDY NIGHT WAS ablaze. The long street, the notorious Avenue of Luck, scintillated like a jewel, as Gonish walked along it. Mile on mile of jewel, fusing in the remote distance in either direction to a shimmer of mingled white and color. Signs glowing at the No-man, a glory of light-engraved messages:

WIN A FORTUNE  
WALK IN WITH TEN CREDITS  
WALK OUT WITH A MILLION

THE DIAMOND PALACE  
10,000,000 DIAMONDS BLAZON  
INTERIOR



## TRY YOUR LUCK IN A SETTING OF DIAMONDS

There were more of that type as Gonish walked on: THE RUBY PALACE—GOLD PALACE—EMERALD PALACE—intermingled with hundreds of no less gaudy structures. He came finally to his destination.

### LUCK EMPORIUM BETS AS LOW AS FIVE PENNIES NO LIMIT

The No-man paused smiling gravely. It was fitting that the empress had selected as their rendezvous one of her properties that catered to the masses. He must find out if she knew where Hedrock was, get the information out of her, and escape with his life.

Gonish's eyes studied the crowds of predominantly young people who were streaming in and out of the garish building. Their laughter, the rich young voices of them, quickened the splendor of the blazing night. It all seemed normal, but he stood with practiced patience measuring the faces that moved by, assessing the characters of the loungers from their expressions; and it didn't take long to grasp the reality. The sidewalks swarmed with Imperial Government agents.

Gonish stood grim. The Weapon Makers council had insisted that the place of meeting be public. It was understandable that great precautions should be taken by the secret government police, and also that her majesty would not be keen on having it known that she was dealing with the Weapon Shops so soon after the appearance of the giant. The conference was scheduled for the small hour of 2:30 a. m. It was now—Gonish glanced at his watch—exactly 1:55.

He remained where he was, conscious of a gathering sadness that it was his duty to attempt to ensnare Hedrock. But the identification of Hedrock from his message, as the man behind the giants had been shockingly convincing and, it seemed to Gonish, fully justifying the fears of the council. It was un-

thinkable that a man who possessed the basic secrets of the Weapon Shops could be permitted at large. And if, as the council believed; the empress knew his whereabouts, the information must be cleverly extracted from her at the meeting which she herself had suggested. His friend Hedrock must die. And meanwhile he had better go inside and look around. The interior sparkled with gardens and fountains and mechanical games. It was bigger than it seemed from outside, longer. And it was crowded with about equal numbers of men and women. Many of the women wore masks. Gonish nodded with comprehension. So that was to be the method of concealment. The Empress Isher would be simply one more masked woman.

Gonish paused before a game that was all flashing fire, a spray of violently glittering numbers twisting over the velvet blackness of a great board. Thoughtfully, the No-man watched several games run their course, trying each time to impress the over-all structure of the game into the ultratrained region that was his brain. Finally, he placed ten credits on each of three numbers.

The fire slowed its gyrations in its coruscating fashion, and became a dazzling pillar of numbers piled one on top of another. The croupier intoned: "74, 29, 86, paying odds this time of 17 to 1."

As Gonish collected his five hundred ten credits, the croupier stared at him. "Say," he said in an astonished voice, "that's only the second time since I've been at this table that anybody's ever won on all three numbers."

The No-man smiled. "Mind over matter," he said gently; and disinterested, wandered off. He could almost feel the croupier's astounded gaze boring into his back.

What he wanted was a game he couldn't solve with his special abilities. And there was still nearly twenty-five minutes to find it. He came to an enormous machine with balls and an involved series of wheels under wheels. The balls, sixty of them, all numbered, started at the top; and, as the wheels

spun, the balls rolled gradually downward, progressing from wheel to wheel. The farther down they went, the more they paid; but the first half of that complicated though swift journey didn't count, and few ever got lower.

The great attraction, so far as Gonish could make out, was the sensation of watching one's ball go down, down, with hope not fading until the last second. It turned out to be too simple. His ball went farthest four times in a row. Gonish pocketed his winnings, and came finally to a game that was a sphere of black and white light. The two lights merged into a single, spinning beam, and came out all white or all black. The bet was, which would it be.

Not once was he sure. He finally laid his first wager on the gambler's basis that white was the symbol of purity. White lost. He watched his money whisked off, and decided to forget purity. Black lost. Beside him, a woman's rich laughter tinkled; and then, "I hope, Mr. Gonish, that you can do better than that with the giant. But please follow us to the private rooms."

Gonish turned. Three men and a woman stood there. One of the men was Prince del Curtin. The woman's face under its mask seemed long and the mouth itself was unmistakably Isher. Her eyes through the mask slits glinted green and her familiar, golden voice completed the recognition picture.

The No-man bowed low, said, "Im' sure I shall."

He took his time. There were questions he wanted to ask. The strange thing was, his casual references to Hedrock produced only silence. After a while, that was astounding. Gonish leaned back, studying the faces of the three men and woman, genuinely disturbed. He said at last, very carefully:

"My feeling is that you are withholding information."

It wasn't, he thought after he had spoken, that they could be doing it consciously. Their earnestness was unmistakable. And they couldn't possibly suspect that it was Hedrock he was after. Yet there seemed to exist among them a tacit understanding that nothing be said about Hedrock.

It was Prince del Curtin who made the denial. "I assure you, Mr. Gonish, you are quite mistaken. Among us four is every scrap of information that has come in about the giant. And, of course, any clue that may have turned up in the past as to his identity will probably be somewhere in our minds, too. You have only to ask the proper questions, and we will answer."

It was convincing. This was going to be harder than he had thought, and it was just possible that, dangerous though it was, he might have to come into the open. Gonish said slowly:

"You are mistaken in assuming that you are the only reliable sources of information. There is a man, probably the greatest man now living, whose extraordinary abilities we of the Weapon Shops are just beginning to appreciate. I am referring to Robert Hedrock, who holds the rank of captain in your majesty's army."

To Gonish's amazement, the empress leaned toward him; her gaze was intense, her lips parted breathlessly, her eyes shining.

"You mean," she whispered, "the Weapon Shops consider Robert . . . Captain Hedrock as one of the world's great men?"

She did not wait for a reply, but turned to Prince del Curtin. "You see," she said, "*you see!*"

The prince smiled. "Your majesty," he said quietly. "my opinion of Captain Hedrock has always been high."

The woman faced Gonish across the table, said in a strangely formal tone, "I will see to it that Captain Hedrock is advised of your urgent desire to interview him."

*She knew!* He had that much. As for the rest—Gonish leaned back in his chair ruefully. She would advise Hedrock, would she? He could just imagine Hedrock's sardonic reception of the information. Gonish straightened slowly. His situation was becoming desperate. The entire Weapon Shop world was geared to act on the results of this meeting. And still he had nothing.

There was no doubt that these people here were as anxious to get rid of the giant as the Weapon Makers were to get hold of Hedrock; and the irony was that the death of Hedrock would simultaneously solve both problems. With an effort, Gonish mustered his best possible smile, and said:

“You seem to have a little mystery among yourselves about Captain Hedrock. May I ask what it is?”

Surprisingly, the question brought a puzzled stare from Prince del Curtin. “I should have thought,” the man said finally, politely, “that in your fashion you would long ago have put two and two together. Or is it possible that, of all the people of the solar system, you are not aware of what happened tonight. Where have you been since 9:45?”

Gonish was startled. In his desire to keep his mind clear for this meeting, he had come early to Imperial City. At 9:30 he had gone into a quiet little restaurant. Emerging an hour later, he had attended a play. That ended at 12:30. Since then, he had wandered along sightseeing. He had ignored the news. He knew nothing. Incredibly, half the world could have been destroyed and he wouldn't know. Prince del Curtin was speaking again:

“It is true that the identity of the man in such a case is traditionally withheld, but—”

“Prince!”

It was the empress, her voice low and tense. The men looked at her, startled, as she went on, more grimly:

“Say no more. There is something wrong. All this questioning about Captain Hedrock has an ulterior motive. They're only partly interested in the giant.”

She herself must have realized that her warning was too late. She stopped and looked at Gonish, and the look in her eyes brought pity welling up in him. Until this moment, he had never regarded the Empress Isher as quite human.

But there could be no pity. With a jerk, Gonish brought his hand up near his mouth, tore back the sleeve, and said ringingly into the tiny radio that was strapped there:

“Captain Hedrock is in the empress’ personal apartment—”

They were quick, those three men. They bowled him over in one concerted rush; and then they were on top of him. Gonish offered no resistance, but simply lay there. After a moment, he felt relief that he, who had been compelled by inexorable duty to betray his friend, would now die, too.

# C H A P T E R

# XIII

**I**T WASN'T THAT THE DARKNESS LIGHT-ened. Neelan sagged for a long time with his eyes open. And the night was abysmal. But there was a difference. Why, of course, he thought finally, he was conscious.

It was hard for a moment, then, to grasp the idea of the two kinds of night involved. His brain seemed far away, his thought a dead-slow panorama. Memory came, but there was a remote quality to it, as if, not he, but some other facet of himself had experienced the *'physicae* involved.

Slowly, Neelan grew aware of a quietness around him, a lack of sensation, of movement. The elements of his mind gathered a little closer together. He straightened in the control chair, and glanced at the 'stat plates. He was staring into space.

In every direction were stars. No sun, nothing but needlesharp points of light of varying brilliance.

And no pressure of acceleration, no gravity. It wasn't an unusual experience; but this time it was different. He glanced at the Infinity Drive, and it was still in gear. That was the trouble. It *was* still in gear. And there was nothing. The speedometer showed impossible figures; the automatic calendar said that the time was 7 p. m., August 28, 4791 Isher. Neelan nodded to himself. So he had been unconscious for twenty-two days; and during that time the ship had gone—he glanced at the speedometer again—and turned away swiftly without hazarding even the beginning of an estimate.

The abrupt physical movement brought a whirling in his brain, and a blur of nausea. He sat for a while, being quietly but violently sick. Slowly, however, his body that had withstood so many strains, struck a metabolistic balance. And realization came that hunger had brought that painful dizziness. He made two attempts to get to his feet, and each time fell back ill and dizzy. The third time he lowered himself to the floor, and crawled toward the galley.

Eating required a full hour because, after the first few sips of a reviving dextrose liquid, he forced himself to a careful diet. Afterward, it struck him that he ought to sleep.

Neelan hesitated. There was the problem of his distance away from Earth, and the curious lack of acceleration pressure. Somewhere in the course of his flight, the stellar drive had attained a supernal oneness with some great basic force. And the Point 00000 . . . 1 of inertia had vanished like a time-set smoke screen. Frowning, he went back to the control board, switched off the lights again, and sat for long minutes manipulating the telescopic adjustors on the 'stats. A few stars waxed brighter, but none rushed into size. None showed any evidence of being really nearer. The speedometer still registered something over four hundred million miles a second. At that rate, he was covering the distance between Earth and



Centaurus every eighteen hours. The problem was to retrace his course.

Thoughtfully, he clutched the automatic half-circle into the steering shaft. It whirred and then went *ticaticatic* a hundred and eighty times, very fast. The stars reeled, but settled into steadiness as the stop watch showed three seconds. Neelan felt a glow. A perfect hairpin turn in twelve hundred million miles. At that rate he would be within sight of Earth's sun in another twenty-two days. No, wait!

Neelan shook his head. It wasn't as simple as that. He couldn't possibly subject himself again to the kind of pressure that had held him unconscious so long. After some mental estimations, he set the drive lever at three quarters reverse. And waited. Logic said he had recovered consciousness soon after the *presseure* stopped, but two hours passed, and still nothing had happened. His head kept drooping, his eyes closing. But the blow of deceleration didn't come.

A thought occurred to him, and he went back warily to look at the engines. But the meters showed a seventy-five-percent drain of power. The outer hide of the drive shaft felt natural: cold and tense. It was disturbingly obvious that he had been long in the supernormal force field that had nullified the remnants of his inertia, much longer than seemed reasonable or safe. Uneasily expectant, Neelan finally went to sleep on one of the couches.

There was a jar that shook his bones. Neelan wakened with a start, but he calmed swiftly as he felt the steady pressure on his body. It was strong, like the current of a very heavy wind. But now that he had taken the first shock, it was bearable. The only question was, where? At what point of speed had he emerged from the mysterious inertialess field, back into the world of deceleration pressures.

He ached to leap up, and examine the speedometer. But instead held himself where he was; he felt acutely conscious of the tingling readjustments going on in his body, the electronic,

atomic, molecular, neural, muscular readjustments. In Carew's and his old-type ship, he had always waited an hour before moving, but now he gave himself thirty minutes, and every instant he grew more conscious that he was alive and well. Somehow, that seemed to have more meaning now. He thought of Gil, but that left him cold and unemotional. For there was nothing to do about Gil except cover the years of miles that still intervened between them.

Memory of the empress narrowed Neelan's eyes. It struck him with clarity that one of his greatest weaknesses throughout his terrible fight against her had been the fact that he did not know the secret of the stellar drive. Neelan went to the control board first, and peered into the 'stats. But there was nothing there. The calendar said August 29th, 11:03 p. m.; and the speedometer was down to three hundred fifty million miles. He'd do the figuring on that later.

His conviction grew that things were at last on the way to being done, but the thought also brought a touch of caution. Better lie down a while, then eat, and not till then cut off the drive, take it apart and examine that superb instrument of speed. The secret of the drive first startled, then depressed Neelan. It was a marvelous little idea, involving electronic rearrangements, but in essence it was nothing but a variation of several very old discoveries.

"Why," he thought wearily, "if the right combination of men and knowledges had got together, we could have had this at least four thousand years ago."

As so many others had done before them, Kershaw and Gil had resurrected an old, discarded form of Nature's handiwork. Neelan sighed, as he compared the atom structure before him to the mathematical formula promulgated nearly five thousand years earlier.

Nature had not planned for such a being as man, and had long since rid herself of all the unstabler forms. Practically the entire science of atomic energy had been one long strug-

gle of rediscovery. The formula proved that there were several billion billion variations, and provided by the addition of an absolute transformation, an exact mathematical description of each variation.

There was even an institute that, Neelan recalled, had set itself to start at the lower limit with the intention of working doggedly through the entire range of variations. They would reach the interstellar drive, he estimated in about four million nine hundred thousand million years. By that time the energies of the solar system would have decayed, the glory of the sun would be dimmed and the Earth, tideless and inert, would no longer tolerate the race which for a moment had disturbed its solitude.

The mental picture brought Neelan melancholy. He finished replacing the plates, and again set the drive at three quarters reverse. His gloom grew as he sat staring into the 'stats. Everything seemed very far away, very far. Against this background of immensity, how futile seemed the blind, mothlike fluttering of men toward the light of ultimate truth. The very violence of the struggle to suppress, and, conversely, to force into the open, the secret of the stellar drive, seemed to take on meaningless qualities. In the face of the terrific night of the universe, it didn't really matter.

Suddenly, it was incredible that such a woman existed as the Imperial Innelda Isher, with her almost mindless will to safeguard the power of her clan. Neelan shook himself consciously, and stared out at the fixed stars. The conviction that came to him finally was darkly simple. The days and the hours of flight were going to be long for one man alone in vastness.

His velocity declined something less than twelve million miles a second during the next twenty-four hours. Neelan frowned over that. A faint fear came that the time the ship had been in the inertialess space had introduced an element of dangerous uncertainty. At his present deceleration, the life-

boat should come to a full stop in about thirty-two days, at most.

The third day also showed a reduction of more than eleven million miles a second. The hollow feeling went slowly out of Neelan's stomach as he watched the average of deceleration develop steadily hour by dragging hour. Increasingly clear now was the fact that above three hundred fifty million miles a second, increases and decreases in speed must be governed by far more potent laws than they were here. Four times as much at least, though there seemed to be an upper limit.

The figure of his present speed, and the decline thereof, constituted meat into which he could sink his mental teeth. And by the thirty-first day, he had his calculations down to a fine point of accuracy. With satisfaction, Neelan watched the light on the speedometer grow darker, darker, until the beam of force quivered gently, and stopped. A glowing sign flashed on the instrument board:

#### DRIVE OFF. SHIP AT REST.

His estimates were an hour and nineteen minutes askew, a bull's-eye at the distance he had flown. His satisfaction dimmed somewhat as he peered into the 'stat plates. He manipulated the telescope adjustors and the automatic estimators. The nearest sun showed approximately two light years to his left, and its prismatic register showed little relation to Earth's Sol.

It was too yellow. It was the color of a deeptoned egg. And the effect grew as his machine plunged toward it. At nine hundred million miles, it was a jaundiced ball of fire, whose ochered like no earthly eye had ever gazed on before him. That wouldn't have mattered so much except that the star seemed to have no recognizable distance connection with any of the nearer stars. It was seven light years from a faint red sun almost straight beyond it. There was a blue star seventeen plus years to the right. The third nearest star in any direction

that he could discover was more than forty light years beyond the blue sun.

He decided to check thoroughly. Space was ablaze, and it would be easy to miss Sol or Centaurus looking at the heavens from his present strange position. Three planets swam into his ken, but, as with the stars, Neelan knew there could be others. The telescope adjustors on so small a ship had not the capacity for first-class mangification. After critical examination, he selected a planet about eighty million miles from the Sun, seven thousand miles in diameter, which seemed to have an atmosphere.

It did. The lifeboat settled through a thick cushion of air, out over a sea, and then circled slowly back under his guiding fingers, toward a continent. Neelan came down within sight of the sea beside a virgin forest. Air pressure was seventeen pounds, oxygen content thirty percent, and nothing poisonous in deadly quantities. Neelan ventured forth gingerly and stood on a carpet of thick, gray grass. A faint wind was blowing, but there was silence around him, broken only by the lapping of water on the nearby sandy beach.

He took a swim, and then watched the yellow sun sink toward the horizon of heaving waters. Night came suddenly, and brought with it a loneliness more intense than any he had known in space. All night long, the sea mourned on the lifeless beach, the eternal dirge of water meeting land. And, in the morning, as he soared up to continue his journey, the planet spun behind him emptily through the dark waste around its sun, one more uninhabited hostage to the fortune of worlds that Nature had spawned in her attempt to create intelligence.

He had known, of course. Yellower was that planet's sun than old Sol would ever be. Yellow and strange and alien.

The blue sun hurtled nearer; and the hope that it would be Sirius died only when the 'stats confirmed definitely that there was no companion star. There *were* planets. A dozen pale orbs stood out in the first telescopic sweep, but they only

emphasized the reality. He was lost. Lost in a night that grew more meaningless every hour. He—

There was a jar that shook every vibrating plate in the life-boat. The little craft spun like driftwood in a whirlpool. It was the chair that saved Neelan, the all-purpose chair. Light as a thistledown, it twisted as fast as the ship, holding him always downward, steady; and with him the entire control board.

He forgot that. The surrounding space was alive with monstrously large torpedo-shaped ships. Every 'stat showed swarms of the mile-long things; and each stupendous machine was drawn up as part of a long line that completely enveloped his small craft. Out of that mass of machines came a thought. It boiled into the control room like an atomic gas bubble. It was so strong that, for an instant, it had no coherency. And, even when it did, it was a long moment before Neelan's staggered mind grasped that the titanic thought was not for him, but *about* him.

“—an inhabitant of . . . ! ! ! —meaningless. . . Intelligence type nine hundred minus. . . Study value Tension 1. . . Shall it be destroyed?”

The mad, private thought that came to Neelan, as he sat there with tottering reason, expecting death, was that this was the relation-value of all that desperate fighting on Earth to suppress the interstellar drive. It didn't matter. It was too late. Man was too slow by a measureless time. Greater things had long since grasped all of the universe that they desired, and the rest would be doled out according to their savage will. . . . Too late, too late—

# C H A P T E R

# XIV

**I**T COULD HAVE BEEN ONE MINUTE OR many that passed, as Neelan sat there. When he finally began to twist up from his funk, he had the sensation of emerging from an abyss of fear. It was startling finally to realize that he wasn't dead.

His will to live surged up into a bright pattern of purpose. His gaze narrowed on the 'stat plates; like windows they were, through which he peered out at the mass of spaceships that surrounded him. Almost, his terrible fear returned. There were so many, *too* many. The implications of their presence was too deadly.

But he was still alive. The conscious, second thought of life galvanized him. His fingers flashed toward the controls. He

glanced along the sighting guides, aimed at an opening between two of the massive vessels, plunged home the adjustor, waited an instant for the lifeboat to swing into line—and deliberately snapped the white accelerator far over.

Their control of him, he thought flashingly, would be a balance of forces based upon his partial acceleration, which would be overcome by putting on full speed.

His mind made a pause, for there was darkness, a gulf of darkness, not mental. Neelan tore the drive out of gear.

He recalled after a blank moment that there had been the faintest tug of movement. Now, there was nothing—no ships, no stars, not a sign of the fiery ball that had been the blue sun. Nothing at all. It wasn't that the 'stats were blank. They were on. But they registered blackness unqualified by light. After a moment, Neelan touched a button on the instrument board. Almost immediately a word glowed up at him. It said simply:

#### METAL

Metal! Surrounded by metal. That meant—He was inside one of the mile-long alien ships. He was *inside* one of the alien ships! Just how it had been done was a mystery, but if the Weapon Makers on Earth had a vibratory transmission system, whereby material objects could be sent through walls and over distances, then the absorption of his lifeboat into the hold of a bigger machine was well within the realm of possibility.

He felt torn by a soaring comprehension of his situation. He sank back against the chair, weakened and exhausted by the intensity of his emotions. After a while, steadier thought came. He was obviously a prisoner, and in due course would learn his fate. He settled back and waited. But the minutes ticked away with no sign of his captors. At last, hunger touched him. He turned on the cooking tubes and prepared a meal. It was while he was eating that he began to question



his instinctive policy of sitting tight, awaiting developments. After all, these were intelligent beings.

His mind poised. Intelligent! The word didn't fit. It had no meaning for what was here. The reality was not graspable by the human brain. Here were intellects so stupendous, a science development so great, that— He had to give up, had to, because his brain started to spin, his nerves tensed. He fought back to his own logic.

Actually, there was only one thing that counted here. They were letting him live. Which must mean that he had been found of some value. That they wanted something. Neelan finished eating, and then slowly climbed into a spacesuit. He felt strangely cold, but very determined.

Ready finally, he opened the air lock, stood for a moment thinking bleakly of how far he was from rescuing Gil. And then stepped gingerly down and out. There was no gravity; and so Neelan floated down under the impetus of a push on the lock. His flashlight blazed an intense path downward, revealing a flat plain of metal, with walls sharply delineated in the near distance, walls with doors in them.

The picture was normal, ordinary. He need only try all the doors, and, if one opened, follow through. His plan was as simple as that. The first door opened effortlessly. After a moment, his nervous reflexes caught up with his staggered mind, and he hissed with wonder.

He was staring down at a city from a height of about two miles. The city glittered and shone from a blaze of hidden light, and it was set in a garden of trees and things in bloom. And beyond was green countryside, alive with a profusion of brush and meadows, and sparkling streams. The whole curved gently upward into a haze of distance on the three sides that he could see. Except for the obviously limited horizon, it could have been Earth.

The second tremendous shock struck Neelan at that point. A city, he thought, an Earth-like city in a ship so big that—

His mind couldn't grasp it. His brain throbbed like a tuning fork. The spaceship, which had seemed a mile long, was actually at least fifty, and it was cruising through space with several hundred of its kind, each machine the size of a planetoid, and manned by superbeings.

Neelan remembered his purpose. He held his thought on a cold, practical level, as he mentally estimated the size of the largest door; and then went back to the lifeboat. There was a moment of doubt as to whether the mysterious beings would permit it to move. It all depended on what they wanted him to do. Doubt ended as the little machine slipped gently forward, cleared the door by several feet, and landed a few moments later on the outskirts of the city.

Safely landed, he sat there, letting the unpleasant thrill tingle along his nerves, the realization that this was what they wanted. There was no doubt that some over-all purpose was being worked on him; and, while precautions seemed ridiculous, nevertheless they must be taken. He tested the atmosphere. Air pressure was slightly over fourteen pounds, oxygen content was nineteen percent, nitrogen seventy-nine percent, temperature seventy-four, and gravitational pressure 1 G.

He stopped there, trembling with a deadly surmise. Earth, he thought, a perfect imitation. It couldn't be anything but an inhumanly marvelous set-up, a structure created in a flash for him.

They wanted something.

In spite of that earlier, negative assessment of him, something, some quality in him had changed their great minds and now they were watching. Neelan peered uneasily into his 'stats, but all he could see were empty streets that stretched on every side, a deserted city.

Neelan divested himself of his spacesuit. The possibility of resistance did not exist. Creatures who could casually, in minutes, recreate an Earth setting for him had him, *had* him. He stepped out of the lifeboat into silence. There was not a breeze,

not a movement. The nearby trees stood in the deathly quiet, their leaves curled stiffly, their branches steady. It was like a scene under glass, a garden in a bottle, and he the tiny figure standing rigidly. Only he wasn't going to stand there.

The first building was a white, glistening thing, wide and long, but not very high. He could hear the doorbell *brrring* faintly inside, as he pressed the activator. His knock made a hollow sound, and after a while he tried the latch. The door opened, and revealed without any preliminary of vestibule or hallway what might have been a furnished bedroom on Earth. It was large and it was tastefully decorated and, what was more, it looked familiar.

Frowning, Neelan walked inside, and stood trying to comprehend the essence of that familiarity. He was still standing there when it happened. He was no longer alone. A woman and a man were standing beside the bed, bending over a man who lay under the quilts. He could see the face of the man in the bed clearly from where he stood, a contorted, pain-twisted face.

Neelan's knees threatened to give as he ran. He kept stumbling, then picking himself up. He reached the door in a physical haze, and half fell across the threshold onto the walk beyond. He lay there striving to force understanding into a head that seemed too small for the thing it must comprehend.

There was not a doubt in his mind as to what he had seen. The man and the woman bending over the figure in the bed were Zeydel and the Empress Isher. The room was the palace room where he had been tortured nearly two months ago. The man in the bed was himself.

Neelan felt a measure of strength and sanity creep back into his limbs and into his brain. He climbed shakily to his feet, and the strong light around him, the city, the trees, quickened his recovery. A figment, he thought then, tautly, a scene out of his memory recreated in some fashion. But why that one? Why any?

He knew what he must do. He felt repelled. He forced himself to peer through the door. The room was empty. He walked swiftly into the city, and felt the silence and the desertedness closed again around him, a pall of unnatural environment. It was no use letting it get him. He was here. He must face every facet of strangeness that his unseen captors had in store for him. They weren't friendly; that was certain. The suggestion that he be killed had come too swiftly, too easily. Death's delay must be rooted in some ice-cold purpose that might at any second lose their abnormal interest. Whereupon the end would come.

Let it come. Force issues. Anything was better than this silence. Neelan turned abruptly into a small skyscraper, a thirty-story marble structure. The imposing door opened like the one in the first building he had entered, not into an ante-room, but directly into a room.

It was small, all metal. There was a control board and a multipurpose chair. The resemblance to his own lifeboat interior was so startling that he accepted it as fact. Steely cold, Neelan stood there, trying to pin down from the appearance of the ship what moment of his life, what exact event was being duplicated here.

His greater alertness stood him in good stead. The flashing arrival out of nothingness into solid existence of an exact replica of himself, clothes and all, in the control chair only jarred his mind much as a nearby explosion might, without actually shattering him. He forced himself to stand staring, feeling the icy fingers crawling up his spine, forcing himself finally to walk over.

He expected the body to vanish as he approached. But it didn't. He expected his hand to pass through the other version of himself. *But it didn't.* The feel of the clothes was unmistakable; and the flesh of the face was warm with life as he touched it with his fingers. The Neelan who was in the chair

paid no attention but continued to stare fixedly at the general 'stat plate.

Neelan would have had to turn partially about to follow that gaze, and now that he was concentrating on the body, his mind was a steel bar of purpose. One thing at a time, he thought relentlessly. He braced himself. He caught his other self by the shoulders, and bringing all his great strength into play, tried to tear the replica out of the chair.

It didn't budge. Not by a flicker of a muscle or a nerve did it show awareness. The eyes continued to stare intently at the 'stat plate; the head was slightly, stiffly bent forward. Slowly, Neelan faced in the same direction. He sighed when he saw what was on the plate. The empress' passionately anxious face. So that was what this scene was, a re-enactment of the Imperial Innelda's final order to him, without sound effects, without her vibrant voice urging him to what she considered sanity. How little she had realized the blood urgency that was driving him.

The sudden thought of Gil brought a great sadness. Poor Gil! After fifty-five days in that hell of desert and storm, there wouldn't be, couldn't be, much hope. Neelan had closed his eyes in that brief anguish of thought. He opened them with a start as fine, hot sand laced against his face. Opened them onto madness.

He was no longer in the control room, or in a building. There was no city. He twisted in a spasm of muscular reaction and realized that he was lying on a flat red desert under an enormous bulging sun. Far to the left, through a thick haze of dust, another sun, much smaller, but looking almost the color of blood in that world of powdered sand. Some men lay nearby on the sand. One of them turned weakly, a big fine-looking man, whose lips moved. There was no sound, but curiously the man's turning the way he did brought into Neelan's line of vision boxes, crates, metal things. He recognized a watermaking machine, a food case and— The rest blurred as Neelan's glance fixed again on the man himself.

"Gil!" Neelan shrieked, "Gil, *Gil*, GIL!"

"Dan!" It seemed to come from far away. It was more a wisp of thought in his mind than a sound. It was a tired sigh that bridged the great night. It began again, faint, far-away but clear, and directed at Neelan, "Dan, you poor mug, where are you? Dan, how are you doing this? I don't feel that you're close. . . . Dan, I'm a sick man, dying. We're on a freak planet that's going to pass close to one of the Centauri suns. The storms will grow worse, hotter. We— Oh, God!"

The break was so sharp, it hurt like fire. It was like an over-stretched elastic, giving. Countless light years rushed inexorably to fill the gap.

Just when the transformation came, Neelan wasn't sure. His first awareness was that he was no longer lying on sand or metal. But for some reason, that was only dimly puzzling. His mind, his being, was wrapped up in thought of Gil and of the miracle that had been wrought. Somehow, these mighty captors of his had intensified the flimsy bond between himself and Gil beyond all previously conceivable limits, and made a thought connection across light centuries, an incredible, instantaneous connection.

Funny, it was dark, a blue-dark all around him. Neelan lifted himself from his prostrate position and fell down again, as his hands went through the floor. He saw that there was a blue haze of semidark space below him. He reared up instinctively, and this time he realized how great was the strangeness. The metal floor was gone, and the sand. Or had that been a crazy illusion of the minute of sensory oneness with Gil on his remote hell of a planet?

Panic struck like a physical blow. Instead of the floor, there was a fine crisscross of wires like the rigging in the ships that sailed the seas of Earth in olden days, like the web of some nightmare-sized spider, like— His thought paused in awful contemplation. A monstrous chill spread down his spine— *Like a spider's web.*

It was. In one jerk, Neelan whipped over onto his back, and lay there like a collapsed sack. The city *was* gone. And the brilliant sky. In its place, was an unearthly, dark, dark-blue world, and webs, miles and miles of webs. They reared up toward the remote ceiling, invisible in that dimness. They spread out in all directions, fading into the semilight like things of some nether world. And mercifully they were not inhabited at first.

He had time to brace his brain for the most terrible shock that its highly trained structure would ever have to face. He had time to grasp that this was the real interior of the ship, and that there *must* be inhabitants. Far above him, there was suddenly a flicker of movement. Spiders! So, a bunch of bloated spiders were Nature's prize package, the supreme intelligence of the ages, rulers of the universe.

The thought seemed to sag in his mind a very long time. He grew aware finally that a faint light was being played over him from some hidden source, and then a thunderbolt of mind vibrations rocked every cell in his brain, and sent intense repercussions roaring down along his nerves. In a moment, his whole body was swaying like a tree in a strong wind to that mighty chorus:

“—examination negative. . . . No physical connection—”

“But the tensions were augmentable by energy. The connection was contrived with his brother across -xxx?!! distance.”

“—no physical connection!” Coldly.

“I was merely expressing amazement, mighty -xx—!! (meaningless name). Here is undoubtedly a phenomenon closely related to the strange emotional behavior of this race. Let us ask him—”

“MAN!”

Neelan's brain, already straining under the buckling weight of those enormous thoughts, cringed before that direct and monstrous wave.

“Yes?”

He spoke aloud. His voice made a feeble sound against the blue-dark vastness, and was swallowed instantly by the silence.

“MAN, WHY DO YOU WISH TO RESCUE YOUR BROTHER?”

Neelan shrank from the roar, shrank hard back against the web. Blankness came. The question seemed the most meaningless he had ever heard. Why rescue Gil, he thought in puzzlement. Why, because Gil and he had been pals as youngsters, because . . . because—damn it all, because Gil was his brother and—

Before he could explain the ultrasimple elements of human nature involved, the titanic thunder raged down again at his mind:

“MAN, WHY DID YOU REFUSE THE TREASURE THE FEMALE OFFERED? MAN, WHY DID YOU BEAR THE TORTURE WHEN IT WOULD HAVE BEEN TO YOUR ADVANTAGE TO YIELD?”

Neelan shook himself dazedly, but in spite of the tattered state of his mind, a light was beginning to streak through. These spiders were trying to understand man's emotional nature *without having themselves a capacity for emotion*.

He felt an abrupt pity. There was no other word to describe that surge of sensation. For here were blind things asking to have color explained to them, stone-deaf creatures being given a definition of sound. The principle was the same. His pity transformed into contempt. He recognized it for what it was, the kind of contempt that man from time immemorial has felt for lesser creatures. These poor, brain-heavy botches of Nature, what a drab existence must be theirs in that bleak and terrible mental realm where they had their consciousness.

Above him, the clamor of thought cut across his personal thought. This time it was not directed at him, but the very first blast stunned Neelan with its import.

“—REGRETTABLE THAT HIS BROTHER DIED, BREAKING THE CONNECTION—”



“THAT NEED BE NO DETERRENT. WE ARE ON THE RIGHT TRACK. A MAJOR OPERATION IS IN ORDER—”

“X—XX?!X PROCEED—AT ONCE.”

The funny thing was, Neelan needed no thought. Gil dead—operation— His mind jumped all the in-between gaps straight to action. His hand flashed up to the pencil gun the empress had given him to kill Greer. He jerked the tiny weapon hard against the side of his head. The two explosions made one, drawn-out, shattering sound.

# C H A P T E R

# XV

**T**HE RUINS CONSISTED OF A BREAK-through into a main corridor of the palace, and of gaping energy holes along the corridor itself where the fighting had taken place.

Beside her, Prince del Curtin said anxiously, "Hadn't you better get some sleep, your majesty? It's after four. And, as the Weapon Makers have not answered our repeated calls, there is nothing more that can be done tonight about your husband . . . about Captain Hedrock."

She waved him away, vaguely. There was a thought in her mind, a thought so sharp that it seemed to have physical qualities; so painful that every moment it existed was a bit of

hell. She must get him back; no matter what the sacrifice, she must have Hedrock back.

Strange, she thought finally, how she who had been so cold and steely and calculating, so almost inhumanly imperial—strange how in the ultimate issue she should prove to be just like all women. As if the first shock of committing herself to one man literally changed the chemistry of her body. When Hedrock had been announced at eight o'clock the night before, her mind was already made up. She thought of her decision as intellectual, product of the need for an Isher heir.

Actually, of course, she had never thought of anyone but Hedrock as the father. In the first audience she had granted him six months before, he had coolly announced that he had come to the palace for the sole purpose of marrying her. That amused, then angered, then enraged her, but it put him in the special category as the only man who had ever asked for her hand. The psychology involved had always been plain; and she sometimes felt acutely the unfairness of the situation for other men who might have the ambition or desire. Court etiquette forbade that they mention the subject. The tradition was that she must ask. She never had.

In the final issue she had thought only of the man who had actually proposed; and, at eight o'clock he had come in response to her urgent call and agreed instantly to an immediate marriage. The ceremony had been simple but public. Public in that she took her vows before the telestat, so that all the world might see her and hear her words. Hedrock had not appeared on the telestat. His name was not mentioned. He was referred to as "the distinguished officer who has won her majesty's esteem." He was a consort only, and as such must remain in the background.

Only the Ishers mattered. The men and women they married remained private persons. That was the law; and she had never thought there was anything wrong with it. She didn't now, but for nearly five hours she had been wife; and during

those hours her mind and metabolism adjusted. The thoughts that came had no relation to any she had ever had before. Curious thoughts about how she must now bear the chosen man's children, and mother them, and of how the palace must be transformed spiritually so that children could live there.

Nearly five hours, then she told him of her appointment to meet Edward Gonish. And went off with the memory of the odd expression in his eyes—and now this ruin, and the gathering realization that Hedrock was gone, snatched irresistibly from the heart of her empire by her old enemies. She grew aware that someone, the court chancellor, was recounting a list of precautions that had been taken to prevent leakage of the news that the palace had been attacked.

No reports had been permitted to be broadcast. Every witness was being sworn to silence under strict penalties. By dawn, the repair work would be completed without trace, and thereafter any story that did come out would seem a barefaced rumor, to be laughed at, and ridiculed. It had been, she realized, fast, effective suppression, immensely important. The prestige of the House of Isher might have been dealt a damaging blow. But the very success of the censorship made it all remote, secondary. There would be rewards and honors to dole out, but the only thing that mattered now was, she must get him back.

Slowly, she emerged from her dark mood. Her party, she saw was clear now of the muttering repair machines, and was moving along the wrecked corridor. Her mind withdrew further from itself, grew more intent on her surroundings. She thought: the important thing was to find out what had happened, then act. Frowning from her new purpose, she examined the mutilated walls of the hallway. Her green eyes flashed. She said with a semblance of her old sardonicism:

“From the slant of the ray burns, our side seems to have done all the damage, except for the initial breach in the main wall.”

One of the officers nodded grimly.

"They were after Captain Hedrock only. They used a peculiar paralyzing ray that toppled our soldiers over like ninepins. The men are still recovering with no harmful effects visible, much as General Grall did after Captain Hedrock seemed to cause him to die from heart failure at lunch the other day."

"But what happened?" she demanded sharply. "Bring me someone who saw everything. Was Captain Hedrock asleep when the attack came?"

"No—" The officer spoke cautiously. "No, your majesty, he was down in the tombs."

"Where?"

The soldier looked unhappy. "Your majesty, as soon as you and your party left the palace, Captain Hed . . . your consor—"

She said impatiently, "Call him Prince Hedrock, please."

"Thank you, majesty. Prince Hedrock went down in the tombs to one of the old storerooms, removed part of one wall—"

"He what? But go on!"

"Yes, your majesty. Naturally, in view of his new position, our guards gave him every assistance in removing the section of metal wall and transporting it to the elevators, and up to this corridor."

"Naturally."

"The soldiers who reported to me said the wall section was weightless but it offered some quality of innate resistance to movement. It was about two feet wide and six and a half feet long; and when Cap . . . Prince Hedrock stepped through it and vanished, and then came back, it—"

"When he what? Colonel, what are you talking about?"

The officer bowed. "I regret my confusion, your majesty. I did not see all of this, but I have pieced together varied accounts, my mind of course persists in regarding as more important what I myself saw. I actually saw him enter the detached wall shield, disappear, and return a minute later."

The empress stood there, her mind almost a blank. There was consciousness in her that she would get the story eventually, but right now it seemed beyond her reach, buried deep in a muddle of phrases that had no meaning in themselves. Captain Hedrock had gone to the tombs deep below the palace, removed a section of wall, and then what?

She put the question incisively; and the colonel said, "And then, your majesty, he brought it up to the palace proper and stood waiting."

"This was before the attack?"

The officer shook his head. "During it. He was still in the tombs when the wall was breached by the concentrated fire of the Weapon Shop warships. I warned him personally in my capacity as chief of the palace guards of what was happening. The warning only made him speed his return to the surface, where he was captured."

Briefly again, she felt helpless. It wasn't that the description wasn't clear enough. It was simply that it made no sense. Hedrock must have known something was going to happen, because he had gone purposely down into the tombs immediately after her own departure to meet Edward Gonish. That part was all right. It seemed to indicate a plan. The dumfounding thing was that he had come up and, right before the eyes of the Weapon Shop forces and the palace guards, had apparently used the wall section to transmit himself somewhere, as the Weapon Makers were reputed to be able to do. But, instead of staying away, he had come back. Insanely, he had come back, and permitted the Weapon Makers to take him prisoner.

She said finally, hopelessly, "What happened to the section of wall?"

"It burned up right after Prince Hedrock warned the Weapon Shop councilor, Peter Cadron, who led the attackers."

"Warned—" She turned to Del Curtin. "Prince, perhaps you can obtain a coherent story. I'm lost."

The prince said quietly, "We're all tired, your majesty. Colonel Nison has been up all night." He turned to the flushing officer:

"Colonel, as I understand it, guns from Weapon Shop warships breached the gap in the outer wall at the end of the corridor. Then one of the ships drew alongside, and sent men into the corridor, men who were immune to the fire of our troops—is that right?"

"Absolutely, sir."

"They were led by Peter Cadron of the Weapon Makers' council, and when they reached a certain point in the corridor, there was Prince Hedrock standing waiting. He had brought some kind of electronic plate or shield, six feet by two feet, from a hiding place in the tombs. He stood beside it, waited until everybody could see his action, then stepped *into* the plate, vanishing as he did so.

"The plate continued to stand there, apparently held in place from the other side; this would account for the resistance it offered when the soldiers carried it up from the tombs for Prince Hedrock. A minute after his disappearance, Prince Hedrock stepped back out of the shield, and, facing the Weapon Shop men, warned Peter Cadron."

"That is correct, sir."

"What was the warning?"

The officer said steadily, "He asked Councilor Cadron if he recalled the Weapon Shop laws forbidding any interference, for any reason, with the seat of Imperial Government, and warned him that the entire Weapon Shop council would regret its high-handed action, and that it would be taught to remember that it is but one of two facets of Isher civilization."

"He said *that!*" Her voice was eager, her eyes ablaze. She whirled on Del Curtin. "Prince, did you hear that?"

The prince bowed, then turned back to Colonel Nison, "My last question is this: In your opinion did Prince Hedrock give

any evidence of being able to fulfill his threat against the Weapon Makers?"

"None, sir. I could have shot him myself from where I stood. Physically he was, and I presume is, completely in their power."

"Thank you," said the prince. "That is all."

There remained the fact that she must rescue Captain Hedrock. She paced up and down, up and down. Dawn came, a gray muggy light that peered through the huge windows of her office apartment shedding dirty pools of light in its shadowy corners, and making no impression at all where there were artificial lights. She saw that Prince del Curtin was watching her anxiously, and she slowed her rapid pacing, said:

"I can't believe it. I can't believe that Captain Hedrock would say things out of bravado. It is possible that there exists some organization of which we know nothing. In fact—"

She faced him wildly. "Prince," she said in an intense voice, "he *told* me that he was not, never had been, never would be a Weapon Shop man."

Del Curtin was frowning. "Innelda," he said pityingly, "you are exciting yourself uselessly. There can't be anything. Human beings, being what they are, sooner or later manifest any power they may have. That is a law as fixed as Einstenian Gravitation. If such an organization existed, we would have known of it."

"We have missed the clues. Don't you see?" Her voice trembled with the desperation of her thought. "He came to marry me. And he won there. That shows the caliber of the organization. And what about the section of wall that he removed from the storeroom in the tombs—how did that get there? Explain that."

"Surely," said the prince in a stately voice, "the Ishers cannot but be mortal enemies of any secret organization that may exist!"



"The Ishers," said the woman icily, "are learning that they are human beings as well as rulers, and that the world is a big place, too big for one mind or group of minds to comprehend in its entirety."

They stared at each other, two people whose nerves were frayed to the uttermost. It was the empress who recovered first. She said wearily:

"It seems incredible, prince, that you and I who have been almost truly brother and sister, should be on the verge of a quarrel. I'm sorry."

She came forward and placed her hand on his. He took it and kissed it, there were tears in his eyes as he straightened.

"Your majesty," he said huskily: "I beg your forgiveness. I should have remembered the strain you are undergoing. You have but to command me. We have power; a billion men will spring to arms at your command. We can threaten the Weapon Makers with a generation of war. We can destroy any man who has dealings with them. We can—"

She shook her head hopelessly. "My dear, you do not realize what you are saying. This is an age that would normally be revolutionary. The necessary disorganized mental outlook exists. The evils are there: selfish administration, corrupt courts, and rapacious industry. Every class contributes its own brand of amoral and immoral attributes, which are beyond the control of any individual. Life itself is in the driver's seat; we're only passengers.

"So far our marvelous science, the immensity of machine production, the intricate and superb organization of law, and the existence of the Weapon Makers as a stabilizing influence have prevented an open explosion, but for a generation at least, we mustn't rock the boat. I am counting particularly upon a new method of mind training recently released by the Weapon Shops, which strengthens moral functions as well as performing everything that other methods are noted for. As soon as we get rid of the menace of the giant organization, we—"

She stopped because of the startled expression that flashed into the prince's lean face; her own eyes widened. She whispered:

"It's impossible. He . . . can't . . . be . . . the giant. Wait . . . wait, don't do anything. We can prove it all in a minute—"

She crossed swiftly to her personal 'stat, said in a tired, flat voice:

"Bring the prisoner, Edward Gonish, to my office."

The No-man answered her question steadily, "I don't understand the electronic shield through which you say he disappeared, but yes, your majesty, Captain Hedrock is one of the giants or"—he hesitated, then added slowly—"or, and this thought has just come, *the* giant."

The significance of the hesitation was lost on her. She swayed wearily. "But why should he want to marry the woman whose empire he is trying to ruin?"

"Madam"—Gonish spoke quietly—"it was only two days ago that we discovered Captain Hedrock was deceiving the Weapon Shops. It was the accidental disclosure of his absolutely superior intelligence that proved him to be a man to whom the Isher line and the Weapon Makers are but a means to an end. What that end is, I am only beginning to suspect. If you will answer a few questions, I shall be able to tell you in a few minutes who Captain Hedrock is, or rather was!

"I say 'was' of necessity. I regret to say that the intention of the Weapon Makers was to question him in a specially constructed room; then immediately execute him."

Silence settled over the room. Actually, the capacity of her body for shock, was gone. She stood, cold and numb, without thought, waiting. It struck her finally what a distinguished-looking man the No-man was. She studied him absently, and then forgot his personal appearance as he began to speak:

"I have, of course, all the available information about Captain Hedrock that is known to the Weapon Makers. My search led into very unusual byways, that seemed meaningless. But if

similar curious paths exist in the Isher annals, as I believe they do, then the section of wall Hedrock removed from the tombs is only the final clue— But let me ask:

“Is there any picture, film, *any* physical record available of the husband of the Empress Ganeel?”

“Why—no!” The breathlessness was accompanied by a dizziness, almost a spinning of her brain; for her mind had made an impossible leap. She spoke blurrily, “Mr. Gonish, he said that, except for my dark hair, I reminded him of Ganeel.”

The No-man bowed gravely. “Your majesty, I see you have already plunged into these strange waters. I want you to run your mind back and *back* through the history of your line, and remember—whose pictorial record is missing, husband or emperor?”

“They’re mostly husbands of empresses,” she said slowly, steadily. “That is how the tradition began, that consorts should remain in the background.” She frowned. “So far as I know there is only one emperor, of whom picture, portrait or film record is not available. That one is understandable. As the first of the line, he—”

She stopped. She stared at Gonish. “Are you crazy?” she said. “Are you *crazy?*”

The No-man shook his head. “You may now regard it as a full intuition. You know what my training is. I take a fact here and there, and as soon as I have approximately ten per cent, the answer comes automatically. They call it intuition, but actually it is simply the ability of the brain to co-ordinate tens of thousands of facts in a flash, and to logicalize any gaps that may exist.

“One of the facts in this case is that there are no less than twenty-seven important pictorial records missing in the history of Weapon Shops. I concentrated my attention on the writings of the men in question, and the similarity of mental outlook, the breadth of intellect, was unmistakable.”

He finished, "You may or may not know it, but just as the first and greatest of the Ishers is only a name, so our founder, Walter S. de Lany, is a name without a face."

"But who is he?" said Prince del Curtin, blankly. "Apparently, somewhere along the line the race of man bred an immortal."

"Not bred. It must have been artificial. Had it been natural, it would have been repeated many times in these centuries. And it must have been accidental, and unrepeatable, because everything the man has ever said or done shows an immense and passionate interest in the welfare of the race."

"But," said the prince, "what is he trying to do? Why did he marry Innelda?"

For a moment, Gonish was silent. He stared at the woman, and she returned his gaze, the color in her cheeks high and brilliant. Finally, she nodded, and Gonish said gently:

"For one thing, he has tried to keep the Isher strain *Isher*. He believes in his own blood, and rightly so, as history has proven. For instance, you two are only remotely Isher. Your blood is so diluted that your kinship to Captain Hedrock can hardly be called a relation.

"Hedrock remarked to me once that the Isher emperors tended to marry brilliant and somewhat unstable women, and that this periodically endangered the family. It was the empresses, he said, who always saved the line by marrying steady, sober, able men."

"Suppose—" The woman did not think of her words as an interruption; the thought came; she spoke it. "Suppose we offered to trade you for him?"

Gonish shrugged: "You can probably obtain his corpse for me."

That burned and chilled by turns, but the brief fever left her colder, more remote from emotion. Death was something that she had seen with icy eyes, and she could face it for *him* as well as for herself.

“Suppose I were to offer the interstellar drive?”

Her intensity seemed to astound the man. He drew back, and stared at her. “Madam,” he said finally, “I can offer you no intuition one way or the other, nor any logical hope. I must admit that I am puzzled by the electronic shield, but I get nothing, no sense of what it could be, or why it should help him. Whatever he did when he was *within* it could not to my knowledge assist him to escape through the impregnable walls of a Weapon Shop battle cruiser, or out of the metal room where he was taken. All the science of the Weapon Makers and the Isher Empire is arrayed against him. Science moves in spurts, and we are in the dynamic middle of the latest one. A hundred years from now, when the lull has set in, an immortal man may begin to get his bearings, not before.”

“Suppose he tells them the truth?” It was Prince del Curtin.

“Never!” the woman flashed. “Why, that would be begging. No Isher would think of such a thing.”

Gonish said, “Her majesty is right, but that is not the only reason. I will not explain. The possibility of a confession does not exist.”

She was only vaguely aware of his words. She whirled on her cousin. She held herself straight, her head high. She said in a thrillingly clear voice:

“Keep trying to contact the Weapon Makers. Offer them Gonish, the interstellar drive and legal recognition, including an arrangement whereby their courts and ours establish a liaison, all in exchange for Captain Hedrock. They would be mad to refuse.”

The passion sagged. She saw that the No-man was gazing at her gloomily. “Madam,” he said sadly, “you have obviously paid no attention to my earlier statement. The intention was to kill him within a maximum of one hour. In view of his previous escape from the Weapon Makers, that intention will not be deviated from. The greatest human story in history is over. And madam—”

The No-man stared at her steadily. "For your sake, it is just as well. You know as perfectly as I do that you cannot have children."

"What's this?" said Prince del Curtin in a vast amazement. "Innelda—"

"Silence!" Her voice was a lashing thing of mortified fury. "Prince, have this man returned to his cell. He has really become intolerable. And I forbid you to discuss your sovereign with him."

The prince bowed. "Your majesty commands," he said coldly. He turned. "This way, Mr. Gonish."

She had wondered if she could be hurt further; and here it was. She stood, after a moment, alone in her shattered world. Long minutes dragged before the realization came that sleep at least would be kind.

C H A P T E R

XVI

**I**T WAS NOT SO MUCH A ROOM IN which Hedrock found himself, as a metal cavern. He stopped short in the doorway, beside Peter Cadron, a sardonic smile on his face. He saw that the councilor was watching him from narrowed eyes, and his lips curled.

Let them wonder and doubt. They had surprised him once by an unexpected arrest. This time it was different. This time, he was ready for them. His gaze played boldly over the twenty-nine men who sat around the V table which the Weapon Maker council used in their public hearings. He waited until Peter Cadron, the thirtieth of that high council, had walked over and seated himself; waited while the commander of guards reported that the prisoner was stripped of all rings,

that his clothes had been changed and his body subjected to a transparency and found to be normal, with nowhere a hidden weapon. Having spoken, the commander and his guards withdrew, but still Hedrock waited.

He smiled as Peter Cadron explained the reason for the precautions; and then, slowly, coolly, he walked forward and faced the open end of the V table. He saw that the men's eyes were on him. Some looked curious, some expectant, some merely hostile. All seemed willing for him to speak.

"Gentlemen," Hedrock said in his ringing voice, "I'm going to ask one question: Does anyone present know where I was when I stepped through that shield? If not, I would suggest that I be released at once because the mighty Weapon Makers council is in for a devil of a shock."

There was silence. The men looked at each other. "I would say," said young Ancil Nare, "that the sooner the execution is carried out the better. At the present moment, his throat can be cut; he can be strangled; a bullet can smash his head; an energy gun disintegrate him. His body is without protection—if necessary we could even club him to death. We know that all this can be done *this instant*. We do not know, in view of his strange statements, that it can be done ten minutes from now." In his earnestness, the youthful executive stood up as he finished, "Gentlemen, let us act now!"

Hedrock's loud clapping broke the silence that followed. "Bravo," he said, "bravo. Such well-spoken advice merits being acted upon. Go ahead and try to kill me in any fashion you please. Draw your guns and fire; pick up your chairs and bludgeon me; order knives and pin me against the wall. No matter what you do, gentlemen, you're in for a shock." His eyes chilled. "And deservedly so.

"Wait!" His thunderous voice drowned the attempt of the solid-faced Deam Lealy to break into speech. "I'll do the talking. It is the council that is on trial, not I. It can still win leniency for its criminal action in attacking the Imperial



Palace by recognizing now, without further offense, that it has broken its own laws."

"Really," a councilor wedged in the words, "this is beyond toleration."

"Let him talk," Peter Cadron said. "We shall learn a great deal about his motives."

Hedrock bowed gravely. "Indeed you shall, Mr. Cadron. My motives are concerned entirely with the action of this council in ordering the attack on the palace."

"I can understand," said Cadron ironically, "your vexation that this council did not respect a regulation more than three thousand years old when apparently you had counted upon it and upon our natural reluctance to make such an attack, and accordingly felt yourself safe to pursue your own ends, whatever they are."

Hedrock said steadily, "I did NOT count upon the regulation or the reluctance. My colleagues and I"—it was just as well to suggest once more that he was not alone—"have noted with regret the developing arrogance of this council, its growing belief that it was not accountable for its actions, and that, therefore, it could safely flout its own constitution."

"Our constitution," said Bayd Roberts, the senior councilor, with dignity, "demands that we take any action necessary to maintain our position. The proviso that this be done without an attack on the person or residence of the reigning Isher, her heirs or successors, has no meaning in an extreme emergency such as this. You will notice that we did secure the absence of her majesty during the attack."

"I must interrupt." It was the chairman of the council. "Incredibly, the prisoner has succeeded in concentrating the conversation according to his own desires. I can understand that we all have a guilty feeling about the attack on the palace, but we are NOT required to defend our actions to the prisoner." He spoke curtly into his chair-arm 'stat, "Commander, come in here and put a sack over the prisoner's head."

Hedrock was smiling gently as the guard of ten came in. He said, "We will now have the shock."

He stood perfectly still as the men grabbed him. The sack came up and—

It happened.

When Hedrock, in the palace, half an hour before, had stepped through the section of wall, which he had brought up from the tombs, he found himself in a dim world. He stood for a long time letting his body adjust, and hoping that no one would attempt to follow him through that electronic-force field.

It was not a personal worry. The vibratory shield was tuned to his body and his alone; and during all the years that it had been part of the wall in the underground palace storeroom, the only danger had been that someone might unknowingly wander into it, and suffer damage. Hedrock had often wondered what would happen to such an unlucky innocent. Several animals that he had tagged and put through an experimental model had been sent back from points as far away as ten thousand miles. Some had never been returned despite the stiff reward offer printed on the tag.

Now that he himself was in, there was no hurry. Normal time and space laws had no meaning in this realm of half-light. It was nowhere and it was everywhere. It was the quickest place in which to go mad, because the body that intruded on it experienced time; *it* didn't.

He had found that a six-hour session made genuinely serious inroads on his sanity. His incursion earlier in the evening, through the shield in his hide-out, had been for what would have been two hours normal time, and the trip had revealed to him that the empress wanted to marry him. Temporarily, that had guaranteed his safety; what was more important it also guaranteed he would have access to the shield in the palace tombs. Accordingly, he had withdrawn swiftly, conserving the remaining four hours of the six that was the human limit.

His present incursion mustn't occupy more than four hours, preferably three, preferably two. After which, he'd have to stay away from the mind-destroying thing for months. The idea for the invention had been broached to him during one of his terms as chairman of the Weapon Makers council, an enormously autocratic position that had enabled him to assign an entire laboratory of physicists to assist the brilliant young man whose brain child it was.

Simply, the problem had been: The Weapon Shop vibratory transmitter bridged the spatial gap between two points in interplanetary space by mechanically accepting that space had no material existence. Why not then, the inventor had expounded, why not reverse the process, and create an illusion of space where there had been nothing?

The research was a success. The inventor reported the details to Hedrock, who thought it over and informed the man and his colleagues that the council had decided on secrecy. To the council itself, he made a negative report on the invention. And had it. The subject, once explored, was considered one more closed door, was entered as such in the files of INFORMATION CENTER for the future reference of men who might have a repetition of the idea. Accordingly, it would never again be the subject of Weapon Shop research. Some day, but not now, he would release the knowledge.

It was not, Hedrock reflected, as he stood there patiently letting his body adjust, not the first time that an invention had come into his possession and been withheld from the public. His own discovery, vibratory magnification, he had kept as a personal secret for twenty centuries before finally using it to establish the Weapon Shops as a counterbalance to the Isher emperors.

He still had several others; and his main rule for withholding or not had always been: Would release for general use be of benefit to the progressive spirit of man? Or would the power that it represented merely assist some temporal group

in tightening a tyranny already too rigid? Quite enough dangerous inventions were carelessly produced during the inventive spurts that came every few centuries, produced by scientists who never thought in a practical fashion of what the effect might be of their discoveries.

Damn it, why should a billion people die because some inventor had a brain that couldn't see an inch into human nature?

Then, of course, there were the people who saw an invention in terms of their own private or group or economic welfare. If they were withholding, as the empress was withholding the interstellar drive, they must be forced by all means to yield their secret. Sometimes, the decision had been a hard one, but who else had the power, the experience to decide? For better or for worse, he was the arbiter.

He let the thought drain slowly out of him. His body was ready. The time had come for action. Hedrock began to walk forward in the mist. He could see the people in the palace, standing rigidly like carven figurates seen at late dusk. His time relation to them had not changed a single instant.

He paid them no attention, even when they were in his way, but stepped through their bodies as if they were clouds of gas. Walls yielded before his mass, but that had to be carefully done. It would have been just as easy, too easy, to sink through the floor, and so on into the earth. The laboratory experiments of the inventor and his assistants had produced one such casualty; and repetition was not desired. To avoid the calamity, the research staff finally designed that the initial creation of new space should be on a partial scale only. A ring was provided which, when activated, would increase or decrease the original apportionment at will, for use when heavy materials had to be penetrated.

The ring, one of two—the other had a different purpose—was what Hedrock used when he came to walls. First, an easy jump, followed as his feet left the floor by a touch on the

activator of the ring, then swift release of the activator, and then a gentle landing on a floor that gave like thick mud under his feet. It was simple for muscles so perfectly coordinated as his own. He reached the cache of machines which he had long ago tuned to this space, and secreted in the palace.

There was a small spaceship, with lifting devices, magnetizers large and small, particularly there were dozens of machines that could snatch and hold things. There were various weapons, and, of course, every tool, every instrument from spaceship to mechanical fingers had its own equivalent of the two adjustors necessary to their complete operation. Every instrument in the ship, the ship itself, and the two adjustor rings on Hedrock's finger, were attuned to a master control on the switchboard of the spaceship.

The second ring and the matching adjustors on the machine comprised the second valuable function of the invention. By controlling the second ring, it was possible to go backward and forward in time for a short distance. Theoretically, years could be covered; actually the shattering effect of the entire experience to the human brain limited a trip to a few hours backward or forward.

Hedrock had discovered that, in nine hours forward in time, and nine backward, eighteen altogether, the body lived the six normal hours that it could endure without going too insane. Three for one. The method of time travel had no relation to the seesaw system of time travel unwittingly devised by the empress' physicists seven years before, wherein the body collected time energy, which could never again quite be balanced off, with the result that the time traveler was always destroyed.

There was no time in *this* space; there was only a method of adjusting the space to a given time in the normal world.

Hedrock eased the little spaceship and everything in it around to where the Weapon Shop cruiser lay-to beside the break in the palace wall. Through the hard shell of the cruiser, he nosed his machine; then switched off the engines, and

turned on the master time adjustor to full power, thrice the rate of normal time. He waited tensely, watching the Sensitives, which were nothing but automatic relays converted to use in this space. It shouldn't take long.

The Sensitive lights flashed; the master switch clicked instantly down to one third its full power, adjusting the whole ship to normal-time rate. Simultaneously, Hedrock felt movement. The great Weapon Shop cruiser was rising; he and his small machine were with it, perfectly matched as to time rate, and just far enough out of the special space to keep from falling through the walls of the cruiser.

If he was right, there were now two Hedrocks in the cruiser, himself here in the gray-dark realm, and himself returned to the palace *from* this very spy trip, made prisoner by the Weapon Makers and brought aboard the cruiser. Unwise though to take them for granted. One of the difficulties of moving around in time was that of locating people, and keeping track of them in crowds, or just keeping track. He had once wasted an entire six-hour period searching for a person who had gone to a theater.

Best to make sure. He peered into the 'stats; and, yes, there he was, surrounded by guards. The Hedrock out there was already back from this time trip, and knew what had happened. Which was more than *he* did. It shouldn't take long, though.

The cruiser flashed to the fortress that was its destination. Prisoner and guards emerged and went down into the building, where the thick metal room had been constructed. Hedrock forced his ship through the heavy walls and got busy. First, he put out a sound collector; and, while listening to the argument in the room, unloaded some of his machines. When the guards rushed in with the "sack," which was simply a gagging device, he waited till it was about to be fastened, then lowered a mechanical hand, and snatched it into his own space. He sat then, with his fingers on the time control, waiting for developments.

In the room itself, the silence was a thing of tensed nerves and startled looks. Hedrock, the prisoner, stood still, a faint, sardonic smile on his lips, making no effort to break the grip of the guards who held him. He felt remorseless. There was a job to be done, and he intended to do it thoroughly. He said icily:

"I won't waste any time on verbal argument. The determination of this organization to kill me, despite the fact that the Pp machine proved my altruism and good will shows a defensive conservatism that always tries to destroy when confronted by something it does not completely understand. That conservatism shall be taught by overwhelming force that there exists an organization capable of overthrowing even the mighty Weapon Makers."

Peter Cadron said coldly, "The Weapon Shops recognize no secret organization. Guards, destroy him!"

"You silly fool," Hedrock cried. "I thought better of you, Cadron, than that you would give such a mindless command—"

He went on talking, paying no attention to what was happening. Without looking around at the guards, he *knew*.

In that outer space, his earlier self simply cut the time-adjustor switch, whereupon everything in the room stabilized. Without haste, his earlier self relieved the guards of their weapons, and then proceeded to disarm every member of the council, including the removal of the rings from their fingers, and the 'stat radios from their wrists and chairs. Next, he slipped handcuffs onto their wrists, chaining them all together in a long row around the table. The guards he handcuffed arms to legs, and set outside in the hallway. Then he closed and locked the door. The whole job took no time. Literally.

He returned to the control board, adjusted his time rate from zero to normal and listened to the uproar of men discovering their situation.

The dismay was vast. Chains clanked. Men cried out in wonder and alarm, and then sank back looking pale and terrified. Hedrock knew it was not personal fear; it was all too plain that every man present had suddenly had a terrible vision of the end of the Weapon Shops. He waited for their startled attention to jerk back to him, then went on swiftly:

“Gentlemen, calm your fears. Your great organization is not in danger. This situation would never have arisen if you had not pursued me with such singleness of purpose. For your information, it was your own founder, Walter S. de Lany, who recognized the danger to the State of an invincible body such as the Weapon Makers. It was he who set a group of friendly watchers over the Shops. That is all I will say, except to emphasize our friendliness, our good will, our resolve not to interfere so long as the Weapon Makers live according to their Constitution. It is that Constitution which has now been violated in its one inflexible article.”

He paused there, his gaze sweeping the faces before him, but mentally he was coolly appraising his words. It was a good story withal, the lack of detail being its safest feature. All he desired from it was that it conceal the fact that an immortal man was the only watcher. He saw that several of the men had recovered sufficiently to attempt speech, but he cut them off.

“Here is what must be done. First, keep silent about what you have learned today. The Watchers do not wish it known they exist. Secondly, resign *in toto*. You can all stand for re-election, not for the next term, but thereafter. The mass resignation will serve as a reminder to the rank and file of the Shops that there is a Constitution, and that it is one to respect. Finally, no further attempt must be made to molest me. About noon tomorrow, suggest to the empress that you will exchange me for the interstellar drive. I think myself that the drive will be forthcoming before that hour without any bargaining, but make the offer. And now—any questions?”



His voice must have been holding them in thrall. As he finished, there was an angry clamor, then silence, and then a lesser clamor, and silence again. Hedrock did not fail to notice that three or four men, among them Peter Cadron, did not join in either manifestation of that confusion. It was to Cadron that Hedrock addressed himself:

"I am sure that Mr. Cadron can act as spokesman. I have long regarded him as one of the most able members on the council."

Cadron climbed to his feet, a strongly built man in his middle forties. "Yes," he said, "I believe I can be spokesman. I think I speak for the majority when I say that we accept your terms."

No one dissented. Hedrock bowed and said loudly:

"All right, No. 1, pull me out!"

He must have vanished instantly.

They tried no stunts, the two Hedrocks who were briefly together in that misty partial space. The brain suffered too greatly from the slightest attempt to fool with time. Curious how that worked, but experiments had proved the fact long before. The earlier Hedrock sat at the controls of the little ship, driving it hard back into time and toward the palace. The other stood beside him, looking down gloomily.

He could find no clear reason for his mood. There were still things to do, of course, but they were unimportant now, secondary. The main job was not actually done. The interstellar drive was still not in the open, but the psychological tendency was so marked that the issue was no longer in doubt. It was possible that Innelda would hold the "drive" back for bargaining purposes. The exact method didn't matter. Victory was sure. As for what he had just been forced to do, that was another matter. What an unpleasant affair it had been. It seemed incredible that he who had admired every member of the present Weapon Shop council should have been compelled even in self-defense to act against them. But there could be no

real regret. Earth's immortal man must assume his life was worth saving. For better or for worse he was what he was, and all the world must put up with him so long as he could protect himself.

Hedrock grimaced and saw that they were at the destination. The shield loomed up in the dim reaches of the shadow palace, a thing of softly radiant flame. They tried no trickery, attempted no paradoxes. It was his earlier self who stepped through the shield and became one more misty shape in the palace room.

Hedrock burned the shield with a flare of gunpowder, and then sent the little ship hurtling across the dark city toward one of his dozens of secret apartments. Swiftly, he set the Sensitives to hold the ship at normal time rate for possible future use, then he focused the power of a lifter on himself, and felt it lower him into the apartment. He stood alive in normal time, and headed straight for bed. Sleep came easily to his strained body.

He wakened shortly after noon the following day, and sat eating as he listened to the 'stat news. But there was nothing about the interstellar drive. Frowning, Hedrock connected the 'stat to one of his relay systems, and by that roundabout fashion called the Weapon Makers. He smiled grimly as Peter Cadron's face appeared on the plate.

Cadron's face lighted up. He said, "Hedrock, it's you!"

"Yes."

The man said tensely, "Hedrock, I want to tell you that I'm glad to see you. The council has decided to hold no grudges."

"Thank you. That means definitely no plotting."

"Our word of honor."

Hedrock sighed. In a way he had been worried. He need be no longer. He said finally, "Have you made the offer to exchange me?"

"We didn't have to." The man's dark eyes glowed like pools of light. "Listen, Hedrock, we've been sitting here on tenterhooks waiting for you to call."

"Yes?"

"We have received from the empress a most remarkable offer. Recognition for the Shops, a share in the government. It's a surrender of the first order—and all we've got to do is deliver you up alive, as you yourself have stipulated."

Hedrock said, "You are refusing, of course."

"Eh?" Cadron's image stared.

Hedrock went on in a steely voice, "Cadron, you don't really tell me that your council is excited by such a thing. Don't you realize that there can never be a common meeting ground between two such diametrically opposed forces?"

"But," protested Cadron, "that's one of the things you suggested yourself as a reason for your going to the palace."

Hedrock said steadily, "That was a blind. We *had* to have during this crisis of civilization somebody in both the Shops and the palace. Wait!"

He went on in a ringing voice before the other could interrupt:

"Cadron, the Weapon Shops constitute a permanent opposition. The trouble with the opposition of the old days was that they were always scheming for power; all too frequently their criticism was dishonest, their intentions evil; they *lusted* for control. Never must the Weapon Shops allow such emotions to be aroused in their followers. Let the empress rebuild her own chaos. I do not say she is responsible for the corrupt state of the empire, but the time has come for her to attempt a vigorous housecleaning.

"Throughout, the Weapon Makers will remain aloof, interested but maintaining their great standards for the relief *throughout the galaxy* of those who must defend themselves from oppression. The gunmakers will continue to sell their guns and stay out of politics."

Cadron said slowly, "You want us then to—"

"To exchange me for the interstellar drive; nothing more nor less. And now, Cadron—" Hedrock smiled. "Cadron, I

have enjoyed knowing you personally. Pass on my felicitations to the retiring council. I intend to present myself at the palace one hour from now; and none of you will hear from me again. Good-by to all of you, and good luck."

He shut off the 'stat with a jerky movement and sat there conscious of that old, old pain of his. He forced the great loneliness out of his soul at last and put his carplane down on the palace exactly on the hour.

He watched the empress from under half-closed eyes, as they talked. She sat stiffly beside him, a tall, graceful, long-faced young woman, whose green eyes hid her thoughts. They sat under a palm in the garden that was the reception room of the thirty-fourth floor. Soft breezes blew against them; the shaded lights shed a gentle glow over the entire scene. Twice, he kissed her, conscious that her diffidence had an inner meaning that he must bring into the open. She took the kisses with all the passivity of a slave woman.

Hedrock drew back. "Innelda, what's the matter?" She was silent; and he pressed on, "The first thing I find, when I come back, is that Prince del Curtin, who has been almost literally your right hand, has been banished from the palace. Why?"

The words seemed to rouse her out of some depth. She said with a shadow of fire in her tone, "My cousin has had the temerity to criticize and oppose a project of mine. I will not be badgered even by those I love."

Hedrock said, "Badgered you, did he? That doesn't sound like the prince."

Silence. Hedrock stared at her slantwise, then went on in a persistent tone:

"You gave up the interstellar drive for me, and yet now that you have me, I can't feel that it means anything."

During the long silence that followed, he had his first thought of what all this rigidity might be. Was it possible that she knew the truth about him? Before he could speak, her low voice came:

"Perhaps all I really need to say, Robert, is that there will be an Isher heir, an *Isher* heir."

The child part of the revelation hardly touched him. She knew. That was what counted. Hedrock sighed finally. "I forgot. You have Gonish, haven't you?"

"Yes, I have Gonish; and he didn't need very much more information than he had. A few words; and the intuition was complete."

He said at last, "What are you going to do?"

Her answer came, remote-toned, "A woman cannot love an immortal man. The relation would destroy her soul and her mind." She went on, almost as if speaking to herself, "I realize now I never did love you. You fascinated me, and perhaps repelled me a little, too. I'm proud, though, that I selected you without knowing. It shows the enormous instinctive vitality of our line. Robert!"

"Yes?"

"Those other empresses—what was your life like with them?"

Hedrock shook his head. "I won't tell you. I want you to make up your mind without even thinking of them."

She laughed brittlely. "You think I'm jealous. It's not . . . not that at all." She added in a disjointed fashion, "Henceforth I'm a family woman, who intends to have the respect as well as the affection of her child. An Isher empress can do no other. But I won't press you."

Her eyes darkened. She said with sudden heaviness, "I'll have to think it over. Leave me now, will you?"

She held out her hand. It felt limp under the pressure of his lips, and Hedrock went frowning to his apartment.

It was several moments before he thought of Gonish. The guards brought the No-man without demur, and left them alone.

They sat for a while, staring at each other. "I realize," said Gonish at last, "that I'm going to receive no explanations."

"Later," said Hedrock; then, "What are *you* going to do?"

"Nothing."

"You mean—"

"Nothing. You see, I understand just what the knowledge would do to the average and even the higher-type human being. I shall never say a word, not to the council, not to anyone."

Hedrock was relieved. He knew this man, his enormous integrity. No fear was behind that promise, simply a stark honesty of outlook that would never be more than equaled. He saw that Gonish's eyes were studying him. The No-man said:

"With my training, I would have quite naturally known better than to make a test of the effect of immortality on others. But you made it, didn't you? Where was it? When?"

Hedrock swallowed hard. The memory was like fire. "It was on Venus," he said in a flat voice, "during the early days of interplanetary travel. I set up an isolated colony of scientists, told them the truth, and set them to work to help me discover the secret of my immortality.

"Horrible, oh—" His voice thickened in distress. "They couldn't stand watching my perpetual youth as they grew old. Never again."

He shuddered; and the No-man said quickly, "What about your wife?"

Hedrock was silent for a long minute. He said then slowly, "The Isher empresses in the past have always been proud of their relation to the immortal man. For the sake of the children, they put up with me. I can say no more."

His frown deepened. "I've sometimes thought I should marry oftener. The immortal strain might, just might, repeat that way. This is only my thirteenth marriage. Somehow, I

didn't have the heart even though"—he looked up—"I've developed a perfect method of aging my appearance, enough to have a psychological effect on those who actually know the truth."

There was a look on Gonish's face, that narrowed Hedrock's eyes. He said quickly, "What's the matter?"

The No-man said, "She loves you, I think; and that makes it very bad. You see, she can't have any children."

Hedrock rose up out of his chair, took a step forward as if he intended the No-man bodily harm. "Are you in earnest? Why she told me—"

Gonish was bleak. "We of the Weapon Shops have studied the empress from childhood. Her file, of course, is accessible only to the three No-men and to the members of the council. It's the old story. These old families tend to thin out. I hope you'll pardon me, but it's the truth."

The No-man's gaze fixed Hedrock sharply. "I know this wrecks your plans, but don't take it so hard. Prince del Curtin is next in line, and will carry on, rather strongly, I think. There'll be another empress along in a few generations, and you can marry her."

Hedrock ceased his pacing. "Don't be so damned callous," he said. "I'm not thinking of myself. It's these Isher women. The trait hasn't shown clearly in Innelda, but it's there. She won't give up that child; that's what I'm worrying about." He swung directly toward the No-man again. "Are you absolutely sure? Don't play with me, Gonish."

The No-man said steadily, "Hedrock, I'm not playing. The Empress Isher is going to die in childbirth and—" He stopped; his eyes fixed on a point beyond Hedrock.

Hedrock turned slowly, and faced the woman who stood there, the woman who said in a cold voice:

“Captain Hedrock, you will take your friend, Mr. Gonish, and depart from the palace within the hour, not to return until—”

She stopped and stood for a moment like a figure of stone. She finished with a rush, “Never,” she said thickly. “Never come back. I couldn’t stand it. Good-by.”

“Wait!” Hedrock cried piercingly. “Innelda, you mustn’t have that child.”

He was talking to a closed door.



# C H A P T E R

# XVII

**F**OR NEELAN, EXCEPT THAT HIS EYES were clamped tight, and his every muscle clenched, the moment after he fired his gun was normal. The two bullets, the explosions of which had deafened him, had not touched him. The shock of the realization that he was still alive ricocheted along his nerves in a spasm of comprehension.

What a fool he had been to let them get away with it.

He leaned back, his eyes still closed, letting his body calm, his mind go slow and blank, all thought trickling away. Nirvana, the ancient Hindu fakirs had called that perfect, mindless attunement with the universal—nothingness—and the great institutes for mind and sensory study, established millenniums ago, had found it was the essential basis for all mind train-

ing. Slowly, Neelan grew conscious of a steady and enormous pulsing that shook his brain with its thunder. But that physical phase, that pounding of his heart, with its attendant murmurs of blood flow, and all the tens of thousands of muscular tensions each with its own tiny sounds—that phase, too, passed. He was alone with utter calm and utter peace.

His first impression, after that moment of ultimate dissociation from matter, was that he was sitting in a chair. The picture was so clear that he knew after a few seconds that the chair was in the control room of his own lifeboat, that it was in fact the multipurpose chair of the little ship's control board. He was in his own machine; and only a few minutes had passed since he had first seen the alien spaceships. All the rest was, not exactly illusion, but willed thought, pictures pushed at him, and which had in a flash of power seized control of his mind before he could even be aware that the attempt was being made.

Neelan sighed and opened his eyes. There mustn't be any hurry, so he sat there letting the familiarity of the surroundings figuratively suffuse his being. This was his environment. This was where he had been physically throughout his entire interview with the spiders. Here he would remain until they removed him physically or turned their destroyer guns on him. Satisfied at last, he bent forward and peered into the glowing 'stats, and saw one ship! Not hundreds, *only one*.

His calm faded in a puff of amazement, that grew, for he wasn't even inside the alien ship. He was out here in space, and had never been anywhere else. He was here free to act as he pleased. He acted. His fingers flashed toward his accelerator, pushed it into gear. Under him, the lifeboat tugged like a trapped thing. It bounced frantically, rolled, and reared up like an untamed horse maddened by the ghastly feel of the rider on its back. It was so violent that Neelan's heart came up tight into his throat, the sweat broke out on his face, his body seemed on the verge of shaking apart.

Shuddering, he shut off the accelerator, but after a moment he smiled shakily through clenched teeth. Whatever else it was, it had been real. His machine had responded. Power in torrents had answered the touch of his fingers on the controls.

"Man, you cannot succeed!"

He had been expecting a mental interference, instinctively cringing in anticipation of the titanic thing. The shock was different than his expectation. The alien thought lacked force. It seemed far away, weak. He was conscious of a genuine astonishment, an unsteady, wide-eyed comprehension: *This* was the reality. Earlier, they must have established over him an instantaneous and complete rapport. Now they had to reach at him from outside.

Better and better, how much, how tremendously much better. The spider-creatures that had seemed so supreme were deflating every minute. Four hundred ships became one. A seemingly superhuman mind control reduced to reachable size.

The flash of thought, of triumph, ended as the alien mind vibration touched him again, cold, steely, remorselessly logical:

"You cannot escape. You are in our power. We shall destroy you when you have served our purpose. So cease this mental and physical squirming against your fate, and look around you."

Neelan was dimly aware of the ending of that feral admonishment. He leaned breathlessly back in the control chair, and sat realizing that here in spite of all that he had done was death.

"It is true," the creature-thought went on in its precise and inhuman fashion, "that you have released yourself from our mental thrall, and have discovered that there is but one ship. It would have been easier, of course, for us, if you had remained under our control. However, we accept the situation. We desire to study further your sensory or emotional relation to your brother. There will be no pain, so, as you cannot escape, you should yield yourself to the investigation. Death

will come in due course. We will advise you when. That is clear enough, is it not, and it conforms, as we understand it, to your own moral system."

Neelan simply sat there. He felt a maze of fascination, and then a dismay so intense that it hurt his head. It wasn't fear; nowhere in him was there a tremor of fear. These monsters thought they were conforming to human moral standards by giving him warning of death. They wanted his co-operation; and they believed, by explaining their plans to him, the logic would be of such clarity that he would automatically yield; and so everything would be gotten over with as swiftly as possible. What a pretty little picture it was. No fuss, no bother; simply everybody being perfectly wonderful about it all; and then the end.

Well, damn their miserable hides! He felt a violence, a flame of outraged anger. So that was what intellect did to a spider. Instead of trying to bite the hand that was reaching forth to crush it, it examined all methods of escape and, finding none, accepted death without a struggle.

Neelan smiled harshly. "You seem to have done pretty well, you and your kind," he said with crisp ferocity. "Here you are in a ship the size of a small moon. You obviously come from a mentally superior civilization; I'd like to see the planet that spawned you, its industries, its ordinary way of life. It should be interesting. Beyond doubt, your brand of logic has done well for you. Nature can pat herself on the back for a successful experiment in producing intelligence, but, by heaven—" He sat up; his face twisted, his voice spat the words as he finished, "By heaven, men don't live that way. You may not know you've been in a fight when you get through with me, but you will know that I didn't conform, that I took death the hard way, and tried my damndest while there was a breath in my body."

Neelan was breathless when he finished, and startled. It had sounded, he thought ruefully, like purest bravado. He

must seem to them like some alien creature, hissing defiance. The outside thought was coming at him again:

“You will find that we understand your psychology better than you think. I repeat, look around you!”

This time the admonishment penetrated. Neelan frowned, pulled his mind even further out of his passion and he saw what they meant. The big ship, whose captive he was, had rolled upward; its immense bulk filled the forward and rear plates now, only touching the edges of the right and left 'stats.

Where it had been was a gulf of space, and deep in that gulf swam two white, yellow-tinged suns. They were tiny at first, little more than round balls, little more than bright stars. But they grew. They grew. And far to the left another tinier sun appeared. The two larger showed after a moment six inches in diameter. They had seemed a foot apart; they separated farther. One remained small, while the other drew nearer, took on more size. The second sun swung farther and farther to the left; his estimators showed it finally as about three billion miles away.

Further tests showed the angular diameter of both the nearer suns of the system to be larger than that of Sol. The luminosity of the nearest was 1.12 Sol, and of the second .32; weights were 1.14 and .97 respectively as compared with Earth's sun. The third sun was a mere blur of light in the distance. It would have taken days for his inadequate instruments to compute its characteristics. But the fact that it was there made Neelan frown; he searched for, then, and after a moment found a red point in the distance, the fourth sun of that system. He sat grim, as the alien mind directed its cold vibrations at him.

“Yes, man, you are right. These are the suns of the system you call Alpha Centauri. The two nearest are Alpha A and Alpha B. The third sun is Alpha C, and the red point is, of course, the insignificant Proxima Centauri. These latter two do not concern us. What matters is that your brother stated that he was on a freak planet of this system.

"There is only one freak. It is a planet which, by describing a Figure 8, revolves in turn around the Centauri suns, Alpha A and Alpha B. It does this by traveling at the unusual speed of nearly three thousand miles a second. In its eccentric orbit, it passes very close to each star, much as a comet might, but, unlike a comet, it is forever unable to break away. The gravitational field of Alpha A then Alpha B catches it, and whips it on its way.

"It is now approaching ever nearer to Alpha A, the star ahead; and, very plainly, we desire to use your connection with your brother to locate his body, and, in the course of the search, further our own studies of human emotions. It is clear, is it not, that you will agree to this?"

"But he's dead," Neelan managed to ejaculate.

"Exactly. That is the astounding thing. Your brother is dead, and yet your emotional feeling for him has heightened, not lessened. To us, this is a unique opportunity for studying a sensory equipment that has no parallel in the world of intelligence."

"But—" Neelan began. And stopped.

He felt helpless before the impenetrable density that was here. He mourned his brother, and that was incomprehensible to them. It was damnable to think of Gil lying lifeless on a limitless sea of sand, his cells already collapsing from the ever rising pall of heat as a three-thousand-mile-a-second planet drew nearer and nearer one of its two parent suns. It was damnable, and yet, at the same time, thank God he was dead. The suffering was over. The mortal remains were beyond the pain of heat, beyond the ceaseless worry of the stinging sand, beyond thirst and hunger, beyond fear and unreasonable hope. Death had come to Gilbert Neelan as it must to all men. God bless him and keep him.

There was, of course, the fact that, if Gil had hung on a little longer, the spiders, in their research work, might have rescued

him, and then given them death together. Neelan smiled dully. That was obviously no solution.

He shook himself. What was the use, he thought wearily? If these creatures couldn't understand such a basic human emotion as grief, it was useless to expect them to know the meaning of mercy. It would be worth it to yield just for the sake of seeing Gil again, and perhaps giving him a decent burial. Wait a minute. With a jerk, Neelan climbed to his feet, and paced the floor of the liftboat. He paused finally, said aloud ringingly:

"I'll make a deal with you. I'll do what you ask. I'll cooperate, provided you release me afterward. That's logic, isn't it?"

The reply came instantly, coldly, "To the contrary, the logic is simply that you will do what we desire without any bargain; and, besides, what would make us stick to such a bargain?"

"Surely, you would keep your promise!"

"A promise made without relation to the reality that you are our prisoner. Nonsense."

"But—"

Neelan stopped himself with deliberate will. The argument was so unavailing that it had no meaning. The two mental approaches were so many poles apart that all the universe seemed to stand between them, and mock their dialectics. He felt impatient, angry. So they thought they had him, did they? All they had to do was suggest that it would be interesting for him to participate in a sensory experiment with his dead brother, and he'd come a-running, surrendering his own body to them without further argument.

Neelan smiled a savage smile. "We're back to where we started, boys," he said grimly. "No dice. If your reading of human psychology is that I'll play the role of a ghoul, you've made another misplay. The game is over, and you've lost that

trick. Better try again, and this time wear your armor. I'm becoming less amenable every second."

"You refuse!" There was a sharp, intellectual surprise in the question, almost wonder. "The prospect of seeing your brother has no appeal for you?"

Neelan wavered. He was suddenly ill with this bargaining over a corpse.

"You incredible monsters!" he rasped finally, "shoot me and get it over with. Maybe this doesn't make sense to your lop-sided brains, but I'm just screwy enough to feel ill that a man is dead, and yet not have to see his body."

There was silence; then, "It is clear, man, that you do not understand our intention. We propose to resuscitate your brother. It is vital that this be done swiftly, as the carcass will shortly decay beyond our control in the heat to which it is being subjected. Make up your mind, quick!"

Neelan lay under a light. Just where he was, or even where they wanted him to think he was, he had no idea. His body rested comfortably in what could have been a form fitting coffin. The comparison made a gruesome titillation along his nerves, but he quieted that jumpiness. He lay steady, determined, cold with suppressed intention. There had, of course, been no choice. Unthinkable that Gil should not be given his second chance at life, even though he might be killed again a minute later.

Neelan watched the light. It hung in blackness above him or—the thought made a curious pattern—was he staring *down* at it? It didn't matter. There was only the light, shining out of the darkness, shining, shining. It was not, he noticed after a long while, a white light; and yet, conversely, it seemed to have no definite color. Nor was it bright, nor was it warm.

His thought paused; he flinched. It was the notion of heat that did it, that brought consciousness of how cold it was. The light was—ice.



The thought was like a signal, a cue. "Emotion," said a spider's mind vibrations far away, "is an energy. It acts instantaneously over any distance. The reason why the connection between your brother and yourself ever diminished in intensity was your expectation and his that it would so diminish. This expectation is almost entirely unconscious. Your respective nervous systems naturally recognized the widening distance when he set out for Centaurus, and instinctively yielded to the fact. A few moments ago, your own neutral body felt your brother die, and broke the connection because it thought it must. Comprehend, man, that death is no barrier until the body decomposes, and can no longer respond to stimuli. Comprehend that your kind possesses the most remarkable physical equipment in the living universe, and now accept the connection."

It was instantaneous. He was lying, Neelan saw, on a grassy bank beside a stream. The water gurgled and babbled over rocks. A gentle breeze blew into his face, and through the trees to his left a glorious sun was rearing above the horizon. All around him on the ground were boxes and packing cases, several machines, and four men, lying quietly, sleeping.

The nearest man was Gil. Neelan controlled his mind again, thinking desperately, "Steady, you fool, it's only an image, a *thing* they've put into your brain. Gil is on sand, on a freak planet, headed into hell. This is a dream world, an Eden, Earth in its sweetest summertime."

Several seconds passed, and the body of Gil slept on with flushed face, breathing stentoriously, as if it couldn't get enough air into it, as if life was returning the hard way, and hanging on with effort.

A faint thought came into Neelan's mind. "Water," it said. "Oh, God, water!"

*He* hadn't thought that. Literally, Neelan threw himself at the stream. Twice, his cupped hands trembled so violently that the precious water spilled onto the green grass. At last,

a measure of sanity came, and he searched one of the boxes and found a container.

He kept letting the water trickle in and around Gil's mouth. Several times, the emaciated body contorted in dreadful coughing. But that too was good—dead muscles jarring back to life. Neelan, eyes glinting, persisted. They were together now, Gil and he; he could feel his brother's slow heartbeat, could see all the mind pictures that pushed hesitantly into the brain that had scattered far. The old, wonderful, sensory relation it was; and Neelan felt his first content as Gil stirred in awareness.

"Why, Dan"—there was a vast amaze in Gil's thought—"you old devil! Where did you come from?"

"From Earth!" Neelan spoke aloud into the breeze that blew in his face.

The answer seemed all that Gil needed. He sighed, smiled, and, turning over, withdrew mentally into a deep sleep. Neelan began to prowl around the boxes, looking for dextrose tablets. He found a bottle of the quick-acting food, and slipped a tablet into Gil's mouth. It should, he thought, dissolve gradually.

Satisfied that he had done all he could for the moment, Neelan drew back and for the first time the other men ceased to be simply hurdles to step over, irritating natural obstacles in the path of his nursing of Gil. There was no shame in him at his neglect. A man saved his own children first. In a crisis, kinship counted. Gil first; then—

He began to dole out water to each of the three men in turn, and then dextrose tablets. He was straightening from the work, when a spider-thought touched him, matter-of-fact in its steely overtones.

"You see," it said, "he did attend the others, too. The emotion involved is more than just an extension of paired spermatozoa reacting sympathetically."

That was all there was, just that comment. But it stopped Neelan in his tracks. He stood shuddering, adjusting his mind to catastrophe. It wasn't that he had forgotten the spiders.

But the memory of them had been pressed into the background of his mind by the urgency of events. And now here was the reality again.

It worked on his mind, as the minutes became hours, and no other alien thought came. Neelan stared up into the bluish sky, up at that glorious, yellow-white sun, and hated the spider folk. But that, he realized, was like savages of old shaking their fists and mouthing their maledictions at the evil demons who lurked in the heavens.

Tensed finally, but calm, he fed his sick charges a liquid made of highly digestible fruit juice concentrates dissolved in water. One of the men, a lean, handsome fellow, revived sufficiently to smile up at him in a puzzled fashion, but he asked no questions, and Neelan volunteered no information. When all the patients were sleeping again, Neelan climbed the tallest tree he could find, and studied his surroundings. But there were only trees and rolling hills and far, far away, almost lost in the mist of distance, a wider glint of water.

What interested him more were patches of yellow color on a tree a quarter of a mile along the creek. He shinnied to the ground, and walked with some excitement, following the stream bed. It must have been farther than he had estimated, for when he came back with a container full of the fruit, the sun was past the zenith.

But the trek had done him good; he felt better, more alive; and he was thinking shrewdly: Gil and Kershaw—if one of these chaps was Kershaw—must have visited this planet. They must have tested the fruits they found, and as soon as they recovered sufficiently, they'd be able to tell him whether this yellow stuff was edible. There might even be a pocket analyzer in one of the packing cases.

If there was, he couldn't find it. But he did uncover a number of instruments, including a recorder for communication disks, used in surveying and marking land sites. They must have left a lot of those on their various points of landing.

The sun lowered itself toward, well, the west. He'd call it that, Neelan decided wryly. Late in the afternoon, the second sun came up in the east, tinier, a pale orb. For a while, then, it grew warmer, but cooled off when the larger sun sank behind the horizon, and "night" set in.

It was like a dull day on Earth, with a ghost of a sun peering through heavy clouds, only the sky wasn't cloudy and there was none of the humidity and closeness of a dull day. Soft winds blew. The third sun came up, but its dim light seemed to add nothing. A few, faint stars showed. The bright gloom began to get on Neelan's nerves. He paced along the creek bank, and he thought finally: How long would this . . . this sensory investigation continue? How long would these inhuman things carry on the torture?

"Damn you," he raged in abrupt fury, "why don't you give me back my lifeboat and go away? You were kind enough not to leave us on the freak planet. Why do you want to kill us anyway?"

The answer, surprisingly, came at once, and seemed to float at him out of the dim, cloudless sky, precise and supernally dispassionate:

"Your first request is impossible because your ship, on entering our magnetic field became a part of it. It has already been dissolved into a complex screen and will form part of our organized reserve of developed energies."

"Y-you've destroyed it!" Neelan stood appalled. Just how everything had happened, just *what* had happened, was still not clear. But here was a fact that shook him to the roots of his being. The lifeboat was gone. Whatever else happened, or had happened, that disaster would leave its mark. He realized that his informant was paying no attention to his starkly spoken interjection.

"Your second request," the spider-thought was saying, "is equally impossible. We are not quite what we seem. Our race is not, as you suggested, one of Nature's successes. In this

ship is actually the remnant of our people. All of us here present are immortal, the winners in the struggle for supremacy and existence on our planet. Each and every one of us is supreme in some one field by virtue of having destroyed all competition. We intend to remain alive, our existence unsuspected by the several other races in the universe. Because of the accident that precipitated you into our midst, you must die. Is that clear?"

Neelan had no answer, for here at long last was a completely understandable logic. He was to be killed because he knew too much.

"It is our intention," said the cold mind at him, "to make a final investigation of man's sensory equipment on the basis of what we have discovered through you, and then leave this portion of space forever. The investigation will take some time. You will please have patience until then. There will be no answers meanwhile to your petty appeals. Conduct yourself accordingly."

That, too, was clear. Neelan went back slowly to the camp. The lean, tired-looking man who had smiled at him earlier, was sitting up.

"Hello," he said cheerfully. "My name is Kershaw. Derd Kershaw. You must be Dan Neelan. Thanks for saving our lives."

"You're thanking me," said Neelan gruffly, "too soon."

But the sound of the human voice brought a gathering excitement and, just like that, an idea. He worked, now that the hope had come, with terror in his mind. The fear was like a great weight that made him cringe down in momentary expectation of destruction.

The job itself was simple enough. With Gil's energy gun, he cut trees into little round disks about an inch thick. The disks he kept feeding into the Survey recording machine, which imprinted on the elements of each a message stating the position of himself and his companions, describing the spider folk,

and the threat they had made. For some of the disks, he set the recorder to various antigravity pressures, ten feet, twenty feet, fifty—up to five hundred—and watched them float up into the sky to the level their atoms had been adjusted for.

They drifted in the vagrant currents of the air. Some just hung around and made him sweat with rage at the slowness with which they scattered. Others whisked out of sight with a satisfying rapidity. Some of them, Neelan knew, would lodge on hillsides, some in trees, some would float for years, perhaps centuries, prey to every breeze that blew, and every hour that passed they would be more difficult to find, would take longer to search out. The spider folk were going to have a hell of a time preventing the knowledge of their presence from being spread abroad if there was time.

“Oh, lord of space,” Neelan moaned aloud in the agony of his fears, “give them two days to scatter, two days.”

Some of the disks, he simply rendered plastic in the recorder, and tossed them into the creek, watched them gurgle off in the rills of bubbling water.

He paused finally to feed his patients, grudging every minute he had to give to the delaying work. He himself did not eat, but crashed another tree, and began to cut its bole into disks. He was working on a second tree when he grew aware that Kershaw had crawled over to the recorder, and was tuning his wrist 'stat to the message.

The man looked hard at Neelan finally. “So that’s what we’re up against,” he said slowly. “What makes you think it’ll do any good?”

Neelan said: “They’re logic hounds. They’ll accept a *fait accompli*. The reason they haven’t bothered us so far is that they’re near Earth studying man’s emotional structure. At least, that was their intention, and I was told they wouldn’t talk to me for a while. My guess is they’re to far away for their brand of telepathy.”

“But what are they after?” Kershaw was persistent.

It was hard to explain what his own experiences with the spiders had taught him, but Neelan made the attempt, briefly. He finished:

“And I’ve changed my mind about human history. I used to think it was infamous. I used to hate the empress, and that struggle of hers to keep her family in power. I don’t hate her or it any more. What she’s doing is human. It is an attribute of humanness to think of family. All the other emotions are related to that one, dominating, family feeling. Long after other life has vanished from the universe, man shall survive because he is first, last and always a family man.”

Kershaw was thoughtful, said at last: “But what are our chances of rescue? What did Greer do with the stellar ship?”

Neelan explained, and finished doggedly, “I know it looks bad for us, but the spiders said they were definitely leaving this part of space. Why would they leave unless they know that soon great ships of Earth will be plying the Centauri traffic lanes? The Weapon Makers must have forced the empress to disgorge.”

“I think,” said Kershaw quietly, “that we’d better get busy. You cut the trees and pile the disks. I’ll feed them into the machine.”

He stopped, and curiously swayed. His gaze flashed wildy up beyond Neelan’s head. Neelan whirled and stared into the sky.

A ship! For a moment, he thought it was the spider ship as seen from far away. And then the mottled hue of it in the sun, and the great letters on its bottom snatched his attention. The letters said:

*WS-CENTAURUS-719.*

The ship was not far away, but low down. It skimmed less than half a mile up; and it was gone over the horizon to the east as Neelan frantically fired his energy gun. Exhausted, Neelan sank down on the soft earth, to be prodded at last by Kershaw’s urgent voice:

“Get busy, man. Keep feeding the disks to the skies. Did you notice that was the seven hundred nineteenth Weapon Shop liner? It must be packed with colonists.”

Neelan nodded gloomily. “It may be years before another one passes overhead. They could be colonizing the other planets first, and meanwhile we’ve got to stay right here. We could wander over a planet as big as this the rest of our lives without ever seeing a colonist.”

“Yes,” said Kershaw, “we’ve got to stay here.”

The slow months passed.



# C H A P T E R

# XVIII

**I**T WAS DEL CURTIN WHO GOT HEDROCK into the palace on the final day. "We've got to," the prince had whispered, "get somebody near her. She must listen to reason. My friends are going to advise that new doctor of hers, Telinger, that you're in. Just stick to your rooms until you're called."

Waiting was dreary. Hedrock paced the thickly carpeted floor, thinking of the months since he had been banished from the palace. Actually, it was the last few days that had been worst. The whisper had spread abroad. Hedrock heard it far and wide. It didn't come over the telestats. No official word was given out; just how it became known definitely was impossible to say. He had heard it sitting in the restaurants he

sometimes frequented. He heard it walking along quiet streets. It drifted on thin breezes, and rose in briefly heard words above the clamor of conversations on carplanes.

It had not been evil in intent, or in actuality. It was simply, there was going to be an Isher heir *any day*, and the excited world of Isher was waiting for the announcement. They didn't know it, but the day was now. The crisis came at ten o'clock at night. A message from Dr. Telinger brought Hedrock out of the study and up into the Imperial apartments.

Telinger, Hedrock found, was a middle-aged medico with a thin face, which was wrinkled with dismay as he greeted his visitor. The fellow, Hedrock knew, was guilty of nothing but weakness. He had been dragooned into the Imperial service as a replacement for Dr. Neel, who had been summarily dismissed after being court physician for thirty years. Hedrock could still remember one day at the dinner table when Innelda had inveighed against Dr. Neel, calling him, "an outdated practitioner who's still palming himself off as a doctor on the strength of having delivered me into the world."

There was no doubt that the old man had told her the exact situation; and Innelda hadn't liked it. And there was also no doubt, Hedrock realized as he listened to Dr. Telinger, that the new doctor had never been granted the privilege of a too thorough examination. She had picked well. He looked the kind of man who would be too awed to override the resistance of his Imperial patient.

"I've just discovered the truth," he almost babbled at Hedrock. "She's under antipain, but I've left a communication gap. Prince Hedrock, you must persuade her. It's the baby or she, and her conviction that she will live is utterly unfounded.

"She has threatened me," he finished whitely, "with death if the baby does not survive."

Hedrock said, "Let me talk to her."

She lay in the bed, calm and still. There was not a fraction of color in her cheeks, and the rise and fall of her chest was

so infinitesimal that she seemed already dead. Hedrock was conscious of relief when the doctor placed the communicator mask gently over that quiet yet intense face. Poor tyrant, he thought, poor, wretched, unhappy tyrant, caught up by inner forces too great for her to command or think through.

He picked up his end of the communicator. "Innelda," he said tenderly.

"It's—you—Robert." The answer was slow in coming and yet fierce. "I—told them—not—to—let—you—come."

"Your friends love you. They want to keep you."

"They—hate—me. They—think—I'm—a—fool. But I shall show them. I *will* myself to live, but the child must live."

"Prince del Curtin has married a lovely and wonderful woman. They will have beautiful children worthy of the succession."

"No child but mine—and yours—will rule in Isher's name. Don't you see, it is the direct line that matters. There has never been a break. There will not be now. Don't you see?"

Hedrock stood sad. He saw only too well. In the old days when, under various aliases, he had persuaded dozens of Isher emperors to marry women to whom family mattered, it had not seemed possible that the trait could ever become too strong. Here was proof that it could be tragic.

"Robert—will you stay—and hold my hand?"

He stayed, and watched the life force ebb; waited till death lay heavily on the chilling body, and the baby was a thing whose raucous yowling made him sick with anger against all babies and the wretched immortality they represented.

A light year away, a hundred-mile-long ship got slowly under way. Great thoughts bounded and roared through its length:

". . . The second general examination is almost as futile as the first in its basic results. We know some of the laws—but why did this ruler, who possessed a world, give her life for her child, when her whole being shrank from personal death?

Her reasons, that she personally must carry on her line, logically inadequate. It is only a matter of a slight atomic re-arrangement. Many men and women are alive who could carry forward her tribal progression.

“It remains but to bring her back to life, and make a record of the emotional reactions of those around her to the resuscitation.

“We need not return by way of Centaurus. Our prisoner—Neelan—has by an ingenious method nullified the logic that required destruction. Only accident that he has not yet been rescued. Any hour. We can leave the galaxy within one—period.

“This much we have learned. Here is the race that shall rule the sevagram.”

THE END.







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