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Flower of Doradil

JOHN RACKHAM

Amazons are out of
bounds for Earthlings



Safari was a planet notorious for its big game. Sportsmen could hunt its monstrous progeny on thousands of islands, but not on its single, dark continent, where its native inhabitants were assumed to sleep in primitive ignorance.

Somewhere on that unexplored continent a flower grew whose ichor might cure any human ailment. Someone was exporting the mysterious liquid to Earth, where a few drops of it were priceless, and someone had killed to keep the secret. Four men, all good agents of Interplanetary Security, had been sent to stop the illicit traffic and to discover the source of the flower. None had survived; only one left any clue.

Now one woman, Claire Harper, had been sent. Who were the enemy, where was their lair and how had they remained hidden for so long? With the help of Safari's greatest guide and hunter, she might have a chance to find out, but she would be lucky to see the planet's forbidden continent, much less penetrate to its heart!

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Flower of Doradil

JOHN RACKHAM

AN ACE BOOK

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ONE

AS SHE ENTERED the bar of the Hunt Club, Claire Harper expected to be able to spot her quarry without effort. She had been briefed on his appearance, but her first glance drew a blank. There were, she estimated, fifty men scattered about the room, and almost as many women, but not the Roger Lovell that agreed with her information. As she was on the point of appealing to one of the brass-rail loungers, her eye was caught by the arm-waving annoyance of a man instantly identifiable as over-fed, over-rich, and peevish.

"Damn it, man," he complained loudly, "I'll pay you. If it's stellars you want, I've got them. Double rates, eh?"

Claire wasn't really paying attention until the slow-smiling man at his table stood up. Sitting, he had seemed ordinary. Now that he was fully erect, he was huge, at least six feet six inches tall and solidly built. She heard him murmur, "Don't bother me, Donaldson. I already said *no*."

"But I want you, damn it!" Donaldson had to crane backwards to meet the other's steady stare. "You're for hire; my money's good, isn't it?"

The big man moved with unexpected speed, plucking his tormentor from the floor and carrying him to the nearby terrace. Over the chatter in the room, Claire could hear a frantic yell and then a splash. She saw the giant return to his chair and sit down. She hesitated, then shrugged and left the bar, threading her way through the scattered tables to halt by a vacant chair.

"Roger Lovell, I believe?" He looked up to give her a

steady stare from enigmatic, smoke-gray eyes and started to move. "No, don't get up, please. May I sit? I'm Claire Harper."

"You want something from me, Miss Harper?"

"Not what he got!" She aimed her chin at the terrace, and got a slow grin from Lovell. It had warmth, but it told her little about what went on inside. His face was not exactly craggy, but there was power in it, and calm. She estimated his age at between twenty-five and thirty. For the first time in her life, she knew an inner twinge of misgiving. Nature had been lavishly kind to her, blessing her with a nearly perfect shape and tele-star looks, together with an intelligence that had led her to make the very most of her endowments. She knew exactly how to employ her gifts to persuade men to do what she wanted of them, but she had a suspicion that it wasn't going to work, this time. She heard him ask indifferently, "You a friend of Donaldson's?"

"Never saw him before. I've only been on the planet an hour; just came off the ship." She tried to smile. She knew that her hair flamed vividly about her head, emphasizing the emerald green of her eyes and that her smile could hint at things unsaid. She performed more from reflex than from deliberation. "I've come here to Safari for a special purpose, Mr. Lovell. I need a very special kind of guide; I need you." Her charms did not seem to have affected him at all.

"I'm sorry," he said, still mild, his voice a curiously gentle rumble in his chest. "I can't do that. I'm already booked!"

"And you don't even want to know what I want you for? I see!" She switched her approach instantly. "Would you mind telling me just who has you?"

"Why?" She sensed defensiveness and curiosity in him.

"So that I can speak to him, or her, and try to persuade them to cancel the arrangement. That is, if you've no objection."

"That's one way of doing it. You must want something

real bad." He seemed to go away inside to think, and she took the time to study him again.

It wasn't just size or the small evidences of perfect control in the poise of his shoulders and the stillness of his hands on the catalog he had been studying. He had a good head, with fair hair cut casually and swept back. His shirt-blouse was clean, but not new. There was a radiation of strength from him like subtle heat from a stove. "Won't tell you his name," he said all at once, "because he wouldn't thank me for having strangers pestering him. But I'll take you to him, if that's agreeable to you. Maybe I can save you the trip, though. We're all set to skim out to Denisal Island first thing tomorrow. After *caracal*, a kind of snow leopard, tricky to track down. We aim to be gone maybe eight or nine days, and we've been looking forward to it some time."

"I see! That doesn't sound like the usual hunting trip, more like two friends having fun. Yet you told Mr. Donaldson you were booked. You told me, too. Which is it?"

"Bit of both. I'm a guide. It's my business. I'm booked, but the man I'm taking along happens to be a good friend, too."

"Which is why you think I'd be wasting my time?"

"Right. You don't look the hunting type to me, Miss Harper, but if you want a real good guide, I can pass you along to—"

"Oh, no, I want you. I'll take you up on that invitation. I'd like to meet this friend of yours." She saw Lovell grin again and had the disturbing impression that he could see all the little wheels going around in her head.

All he said was, "You fixed up your baggage and a room? You do that and I'll go get a skimmer ready. Down at the bottom of the steps, out that door."

"He's not on the premises, then?"

"No. Has his own little villa up the coast from here, about an hour's run."

Less than ten minutes later Claire was seated beside him in a shallow shell, skimming swiftly over the water, with

the Hunter's Club buildings dropping rapidly astern and a welcome breeze in her face.

"You could tell me his name, now," she suggested.

"Why not? Sam Coleman, Ex-major Coleman of the Interplanetary Colonization Service, Beachhead Section."

"And, as you two are such firm friends, I assume you, too, were once in the same service. You're not very fair, Mr. Lovell. Two to one?"

"You're a bit too slick, Miss Harper. You're no sport hunter. Sam is all right with a straight challenge, but he might be a bit confused by somebody deliberately setting out to trap him. I just want to be along to hear you say your piece, that's all. No tricks."

"Do you like being a guide, Mr. Lovell?" Claire rode down her annoyance and set herself to understand the slow-drawling man.

"It's my job; I can't say I like it. Didn't like it in the service, either. I guess I'm just not service material. Couldn't get used to waiting for somebody else to tell me what to do when, and how, so I quit. Sam helped me a lot, helped me get started here. He came out about the same time as me, but he's got money, some kind of job where he has to show his face on a committee or two every so often. He lives here, between times. I paid him back long ago, but we're still friends. I'd say he knows as much about the wildlife here as I do, but it's against the rules to go on a hunt without an official guide, so it works out fine. No, I don't like being a guide." He leaned on the stubby tiller to swing the skimmer's head around and avoid a jutting neck of land. "It earns me enough to live on. For myself, I'm a hunter."

"I suppose there's a difference? Tell me, doesn't anyone ever do anything else, here? Is that all there is on Safari, hunting?"

"It's a pretty big *all*. You could have seen a map of the islands on the tabletop back in the club. Thirty-seven of them scattered about the tropical and semitropical belts. You can find just about any type and size of wild animal

you care to think of, and a lot nobody ever thought of before, on one or other of them—something to do with isolated ecologies, and natural selection, the scientists say. I reckon I know as much about most of them as anybody, and I've only scratched the surface. Sure, hunting is what Safari is for. There's a crowd of service people, naturally, running games, booze and hostel businesses, but it all turns on the rich sports. There is a difference—there are sports, guides and *hunters!*"

Crosscurrents made the light craft dance momentarily, and he gave his attention to the tiller. She suppressed a growing irritation and was searching for a fresh topic, when she saw his head come up and around, then heard the distant but rapidly nearing stammer of a powerful engine. It appeared to come from the depths of a dark inlet to their right.

"Noisy as hell," he murmured. "Outboard's all right for speed, but you'd never sneak up on anything that wasn't stone deaf in a thing like that. Some people just like noise, I reckon." She craned her head to peer at the scudding craft and saw it turn in a tight arc, circling them. All at once she felt his big hand at the nape of her neck and heard him snap, "Go down! Flat!"

He was beside her, his arm over her shoulders. She squinted up and saw a ragged line of holes stitch along the fiber shell just above her head. "Keep still," he ordered. "Reckon he'll swing around and come back for another try. I hope so." She could hear the staccato stammer fading away.

"What can we do? We're not armed!"

"He knows that, too. Just hold still, stand by for his wake." The skimmer dipped suddenly and heaved up, tilting. He moved with it, slid over the side as silently as a seal, leaving her with the order, "Stay still!"

She hugged the keel board, hearing the noisy engine return; she expected another burst of fire and wondered why she hadn't heard any noise from the first burst. The engine roar grew loud, and then became a staggered chat-

ter and banging. She heard a furious yell and then the solid crash of something striking the water. Then there was silence. She dared to lift her head to peep, then to stare. About fifteen feet away, the outboard wallowed in the water, bottom up and Roger Lovell sat astride the keel, hanging on with one hand while stretching the other to pluck a struggling man from the water. The man kicked and coughed, resisting frantically but vainly, as Lovell dragged him up and slapped him sharply with the flat of his hand.

"Hold still, now!" he ordered. "What's this all about?"

The frustrated assassin squirmed and tried to kick. Lovell slapped him harder, and the man went limp. Lovell shook his head, laid the inert body face down across the keel and looked around to see Claire.

"Reckon you can run that skimmer over here? I must have hit him a bit too hard. He's out cold." She waved understanding. She had seen him start the skimmer so she was able to deduce its workings. She managed to get the skimmer close enough for him to dump his captive to the bottom and clamber back in. "You ever handled one of these before?" he asked.

"I don't even know how it works. No noise?"

"Simple enough—generator under that casing. Coil runs the length of the keel, makes a magnetic field—a solenoid, right? Not all that good for load or thrust, but all you want for this craft, and it's silent, ideal for stalking water-edge game. Keep her head on that point, there. Sam's place is right around the corner."

"Do you know that man, or why he shot at us?"

"No, both times." Lovell shook his head. "We'll find out when he comes around. Probably a poacher. That's not why he tried to murder us, but, I guess that's what he is. See, we have rules, strict ones, to protect game, among other things. One of them is, 'No loaded guns on Home Island.' That's here. Sports like to drink and brag, just like other folk—plenty of arguments, even fighting, but no loaded guns. That's why I said he knew we weren't armed. He was all set to murder you, Miss Harper."

"Me?" she pretended surprise. "Why me?"

"Well," he drawled, "I reckon there's plenty would like to kick my teeth in, but there's nobody I know of who will be any better off for having me dead. Not that I know of. Maybe he'll tell us, when he wakes up." He squinted ahead. "You can ease off a little now and start swinging to starboard, to the right, that is."

"I didn't think it meant to the left! That's open seal"

"So it is." He moved forward, grabbing the unconscious man and dragging him along. She managed to run the craft alongside an alloy-frame landing stage that led back into luxuriant foliage. Lovell took a line and made the craft fast, heaved his captive up like a sack, swung himself out and came back to hold his hand down, hoisting her up like a child.

"Wait," he advised. "We're sort of fussy about privacy here. I'll hail him." He turned, put cupped hands to his mouth and whistled. A short wait brought an answering hoot, a sharp, double note. Lovell nodded. "We can go ahead." He gathered up the body.

Claire went forward with a sense of irritation nagging at her control. *No man should be this self-sufficient, this impregnable!* Ahead she saw the leaf screen part to reveal a man in drill-neat white shirt and shorts; his dark hair was close to his head and his hand went up to take the pipe from his mouth and stuff it away as he saw her. He was unmistakably military, about thirty, and as tanned as Lovell, but not nearly as big. *A mere six-footer*, she thought wryly. He stared at her candidly, then at Lovell; his eyebrows went up. "Rescue, Roger? Trouble?"

"Not the kind you mean. He's out cold because I hit him. Sam, meet Miss Claire Harper, who wants to talk to you on important business. She's only just landed on Safari. I've told her a bit about you. I reckon she'll tell you what you need to know, herself." Coleman led the way through the foliage into sight of a cabin that lay comfortably back in the tree-grown hillside. The staging led them along to a

terrace with its own small lake beneath, where basket chairs and a table suggested cool shade and refreshment.

"Can I offer you something, Miss Harper? Tea, coffee, something more potent? Better go and get those wet things off, Roger, give them a chance to dry out. I've nothing to fit your great hulk, so you'll have to make do with a bath towel. That is, if you don't mind, Miss Harper." Coleman managed to be affable and yet guarded, and he sounded faintly British. *Another hard case*, Claire thought and smiled.

"I'm grown up, Mr. Coleman," she said, "and I wouldn't want him to catch anything. I need him." Coleman raised a brow, but let it pass until the drinks were ready and Lovell had come back with a towel hitched at his waist, to spread his clothes on the rail close to where the captive lay silent.

Coleman settled himself calmly, and asked, "Who's first to spin the yarn, you, Miss Harper? You said you need Roger. Odd way to put it; you're no hunter."

"That's what he said." Claire spoke a little more sharply than she intended, because she was a trifle off-balance. Lovell was even more imposing sprawled easily in a basket chair with his upper half bare to the sun. But Coleman was a force, too, despite his crisp impression of frankness. "I don't see how you can be so sure that I am not just another game-chaser!"

"My guess," Lovell murmured, "is that you're on the run. No offense intended, it's not my business. Safari is a great place for minding your own affairs, when you think about it."

"I can't tell you my business, not yet—just that it is highly important. Mr. Coleman, I need Mr. Lovell's professional services. I need the best I can get, and I am reliably informed that he is the best, also that he is absolutely discreet and reliable." She saw now, without revealing the sharpness of her eyes, that she had managed to get some way through the big man's armor. It was worth remembering. "I understand he is contracted to you, and, very properly, he refuses to switch. That's part of what I mean, he is reliable. So, I came to ask you to release him, so that

I can hire him. It's that simple." She was still watching, but there was nothing to be deduced from Coleman's face. She added, "Of course, I am prepared to compensate you for any financial loss that might be involved."

Coleman put down his glass and reached for his pipe. "Just like that? A blind contract? You're a very attractive woman, Miss Harper—excuse me being personal—but I don't think that's enough. If discretion is what you're bothered about, I don't think you need worry that Roger or myself will babble. But you will have to tell a bit more, you know."

"You'll need to try, anyhow, to explain why somebody hired this person to try to murder you, and me in the process." Lovell added.

"Very well." Claire made up her mind. "I think you can be trusted that far. A moment." She unbuttoned the front of her shirt just above the waist and took something from a close-fitting belt next to her skin; she brought out her hand closed, eyed them curiously, then turned her fist over and opened her palm. In it lay a disk less than an inch across. It glowed a rich, dark red, as if by some inner fire. "Has either of you ever seen one of these before?"

Coleman took out his pipe, put it down on the table carefully, then extended finger and thumb to pick up the disk. As soon as it left her palm it faded a dull gray. He shook his head and passed it to Lovell. The big man handed it back to her silently, saw it resume its glow, the fine structure responding as it was designed to, to her personal metabolism and no other. She put it away again and waited. Coleman sighed. "Special Service! Now what in the world is going on here that would bring a ruby agent sniffing? You don't have to answer that, Miss Harper, but you can't blame me for being curious."

Lovell sat still and silent, but his gray eyes were intent.

TWO

"I DON'T MIND telling you," Claire said, "and, in fact, it might help, since Mr. Lovell told me that you know as much about this planet as he does. The information I have is scanty enough, in all conscience. I need all the help I can get." She settled back, arranging her thoughts. The unconscious man sprawled close by suddenly erupted into frantic movement. Up off the slatted floor like a cat, he made a flying rush from the rail, struck it, rolled over, and flung himself, arms and legs flailing, into the placid water below. He went without his shirt. Lovell, in the fastest, most tigerish spring she had ever seen, had grabbed him in the act of going over, and was now flinging the ripped shirt away, poising to dive after. Claire yelled at him.

"No! Hold it!" She plunged forward urgently to crouch and grab at the small, glittering cylinder that lay where the "unconscious" captive had just been. She picked it up and threw it, all in one swift movement, straight over the rail after the man who had left it there. Her forward rush carried her to the rail, to collide with Lovell. She gripped his arm and watched the glittering thing go down, and splash into the water. In the next second the water erupted, the slam of the explosion shaking the whole building, setting bells ringing in their heads and showering them with spray.

"You're very fast," she said, unsteadily. "Almost too fast, that time!"

"Yeah. Reckon there's not much point in going after him now. I'm very much obliged to you, Miss Harper."

"I'll go along with that," Coleman declared, coming to touch her arm. "I would never have seen that thing in time. What was it, some kind of bomb?"

"My fault," Lovell grumbled. "I should have cleaned him. Might have known he would be loaded. I just assumed that

he'd lost his twenty-bore when I turned him over. Might have known!"

"Just what sort of weapon was that, anyway?" she said, as they went back to sit. "I didn't hear any explosions!"

"Magnetic rifle, hunting weapon. They come in all kinds of bores, all the way up from a needle gun to a fifty-bore—steel-jacket slug, solid if you want, or hollow and filled with explosive or dope—propelled by a series of solenoids in sequence down the barrel. Reminds me, I had a catalog I was going to bring out. Forgot it. Sorry, Sam."

"It's not important now, Roger. It seems to me, Miss Harper, that somebody knows you're here, and they don't like it very much."

"I had got that far myself," she said, smiling to take off any hint of offense. "I wouldn't blame you if you packed me into your boat and sent me away right now. All I can say is that I wasn't expecting anything like this so soon. I would have prepared you. I'd better do it now, hadn't I?"

"Just a moment." Coleman settled his pipe again. "I don't care for bomb layers. I'd like to know just who arranged that little lot. The way it looks, my best chance of getting that kind of information is to stick close to you, Miss Harper. So, I'm sorry, I'm afraid I can't release Roger. But I will share him with you."

"Now just a minute!" she protested. "That won't work. Nothing personal, but it's like this: I have authority to post a bond here in Mr. Lovell's benefit against safe return, fifty thousand stellars; but I can't do the same for you, obviously. I just haven't got it, for one thing."

"Forget it. In the first place I don't need the money. Secondly, who do you think is Roger's next of kin? That's right, me! I'm afraid you're going to have to take both of us. You said you needed all the help you can get."

As she hesitated, Lovell murmured placidly, "Sam's competent, Miss Harper. He only takes me along hunting with him because it's the rule he has to have a guide. I'd just as soon have him along on anything. Any time anybody needs me fifty thousand stellars worth, I'm nervous!"

She laughed. "I hope I never see you calm, if that's what you call nerves! All right, you've twisted my arm, Mr. Coleman, and I'll admit I'm glad to have you. In fact, it will help. I imagine it will look better if it can be assumed that you have invited me to accompany you on a hunting trip that everybody knows you've planned for tomorrow. Could I have a little more of that coffee? This will take a while."

Cuddling the coffee cup in her hands, she put her thoughts in order then turned to stare over the sea in the direction of the afternoon sun. "Over there is a place that wasn't on your hunting map, Mr. Lovell. Not an island, but a whole continent. It's called Adil. What do you know of it?"

"Much as anybody, more than some, not much—forbidden territory. I guess you already know that."

"I do. Do you know why it's forbidden?"

"Common knowledge," Coleman said. "The Alien Contact Authority has a ban on it. The inhabitants are as human as us, but in the tribal stage. All contact is forbidden, except for small parties of bona fide scientists. The place is a reservation."

"How nice!" She was ironic. "The A.C.A. says keep off and everybody obeys, just like that? They have one headquarters, eight or nine teams, about a hundred staff, to police a continent half the size of Africa, and everybody stays obediently away?"

Coleman chuckled. "That's why we have official guides and strict rules, no expeditions without a guide. No guide would go anywhere near Adil. Roger?"

"Sports come here for thrills. They want to hunt something, get a trophy—a skin, a head, that kind of thing. But they also want to go home again all in one piece. That's my job, as a guide. They can get all the tree dragons, or saber wolves, swamp hogs or six-legged catamounts—anything—without going near Adil. And no guide in his right mind would take them there, either. That place is dangerous!"

"Spoken like one who knows!"

"You hear things," he murmured. "Hunters are great ones for spinning tall stories."

"Without ever going there?"

"We get the odd leak from the A.C.A." Coleman protested. "They come by regularly to chat and check up on the guides, keep in touch."

"Come off it!" Claire advised candidly. "Queer stories come out of Adil; people bring them out. I'd like to hear some of them, any you know, to see if they stack up with some I've heard, some very intriguing ones."

Coleman started charging his pipe, concentrating on it. "I can't say we'd lose any sleep over breaking a little rule or two," he murmured, "but if you're set on exploring Adil, maybe you'd better tell us why. It might save a bit of time and trouble. Maybe we do know a little more than most, at that."

"It's a big place." Lovell reminded her. "You said half the size of Africa. At least ten different tribes are known, so far, all along the coast on the south. Lord knows how many more there are, or what goes on in the interior. All we have is a satellite map. Stories come easy—lost civilizations, temples smothered in gold and diamonds, stuff like that. It strikes me that the Special Section of Interplanetary Security would have something more than that in mind, to get you here. Fifty thousand stellars worth?"

"All right, you suspicious pair!" She did her trick with her shirt button again, producing a small, yellow-gold flower, about the shape and size of a common buttercup, but with a double bell. She passed it to Coleman. "That is a plastic replica of a certain flower." The two men gave it attention, then passed it back.

"Rare species?"

"Not the way you mean, Mr. Coleman." She put it carefully away. "That flower, the real thing and more like it, is grown somewhere on Adil. It is cultivated, that much we know. That much has already cost the lives of four field agents."

"It's that important? You want to know which tribe?"

FLOWER OF DORADIL

"Not a tribe. Not, at any rate, a primitive tribe such as you have described. Whoever cultivates that flower not only knows a great deal about botany and similar arts, but knows what it can do. The juice of that flower is worth a fortune on Earth."

"What's it do?"

"It's a cure-all. You know your body produces an agent called interferon, which turns out to be a whole range of substances which are specific for any one species and any one virus and any one individual. In other words, they can't be mass-produced. This stuff boosts the body's natural production of interferon. That means it can cure anything infectious."

"You didn't say, but it's obvious that the medical boys can't copy this stuff in their cooking pots."

"They aren't getting the chance, Mr. Coleman. I told you it wasn't simple. Somebody is getting this stuff out of Adil and to Earth, under cover. Officially, it doesn't exist. It is being sold, under wraps, to any doctor who can afford it and keep his mouth shut—or get no more. What would you do with it, if you were a doctor? Use it to cure people and stand the chance of getting a little more or turn the whole thing, the story and a few drops of it over to an investigator? There would be no proof except your word and a spoonful of stuff, not enough to analyze. It has taken the branch over four years of chasing down wispy rumors and has cost, as I said, at least four lives just to get what I've told you."

"But, surely," Coleman mused aloud, "this is something for the Alien Contact people, isn't it? Can't they handle it?"

"Wouldn't work out, Sam." Lovell spoke mildly, with a faint grin. "You know the A.C.A. and the I.C.I. don't get along. The A.C.A. wants to protect the place. They would say this is just some yarn, some excuse to open the place up. They would want proof, and that would get publicity. And the smugglers would just find a hole and pull it in after them. So, no more juice! Everybody loses."

"Exactly!" Claire agreed. "You're not just a pretty face,

Mr. Lovell." She had the satisfaction of seeing a touch of red under his tan, but his smoky eyes were steady.

"Big guys are always supposed to be dumb," he murmured. "That's quite a help sometimes, like camouflage."

"That's all right, as far as it goes." Coleman interrupted as if there were no tension. "But it's not much to go on. You don't expect us to just dive in and start looking for flowers, surely? There's a couple of million square miles over there, almost all of it unknown."

"You mentioned a map of Adil," she said.

"Of course. This way." He rose and gestured her ahead into the cabin, then followed. "Along here. I call it the armory." The interior was cool and neat but not luxurious, apart from the several skin rugs and ferocious heads here and there on the walls. The armory was a long, quiet room, with a polished table and racks of blued steel, alloy and plastic weapons of various kinds. Her host slid open a drawer and produced a roll of transparent film, spread it on the table and held it flat. "This is as good a map of Adil as you'll get anywhere," he declared, "and better than most. We are off the map about here."

"I've seen something like this before, but not on this scale," she said. "Check me if I go wrong. This central area is a high plateau about three or four hundred miles across. Mountain chains radiate out from it like the spokes of a wheel, dividing the rest of the continent into regions. Lower down it's all jungle, out to the coast. So, somewhere on, or about the skirts of this central region is where the flower comes from."

"You're still taking in a lot of territory," Lovell stated. "And it's the worst kind. Even the hunting tribes won't go near anything that high; that's where all the wild tales come from."

"Including stories about a warlike tribe of enormous women who swoop down from the mountains from time to time to carry men off?" she asked.

Coleman chuckled. "I've heard that one a time or two with variations, but always secondhand. Like the old Hindu

rope trick, it's always somebody else who saw it, or them, in this case."

"Then I'm luckier than you. My information was first-hand."

"You mean you've talked with somebody who claims to have seen these Amazons with his own eyes?"

Lovell grunted a gentle snort of doubt. "He told you they were gorgeous—long, golden hair blowing in the breeze, smothered in jewels, helmets, shimmering swords, on dashing, white horses and all that stuff?"

"The man who told me," she said quietly, "was dying. He may have been delirious, but I doubt it, even if he had every right to be, after what had been done to him by those women. He said they were big, all of them about six feet tall, and strong. He said they were copper-colored and not blonde, but black-haired, with leather straps on their wrists and ankles and a leather belt to support a white fur apron. They carried short spears with metal tips and they rode fearsome creatures about five feet tall at the shoulder, with six legs and a bristling ruff at the neck, something like a cross between a tiger and a horse. He said, too, that not all of them wore the white fur thing, something between an apron and a bikini, but only those who had qualified by killing one of the beasts single-handed. The rest wore a kind of leather skirt studded with copper. The white fur comes from the *caracal*, which you've already mentioned, Mr. Lovell. That's about it."

"That's very specific." Coleman sounded impressed. "Roger?"

"Right. I take back what I said just now, Miss Harper. Your man could have been delirious, but he got a lot of things dead right. I don't reckon I could describe a *dram-bagar* better myself. That's the six-legged heller you say they ride on. I can't see anybody ever riding one, but that's what they look like; and a *caracal* is the only creature I know that has white fur."

"On the other hand, Roger, there's a lot that is just plain wrong. None of the natives are so tall, none that I've seen;

and they're brown to coffee, not copper. Nor do any of them have metal."

"Not that we know about," Lovell agreed mildly. "But you know, Sam, that the men won't go near high ground at any price, that they let the women go if there's anything to do that takes them up out of the tree belt. Call it a taboo if you like, but remember, too, that the women run things here and men do what they're told, do all the work, but they won't go anywhere near high ground. Won't even talk about it." He brought his smoky eyes around to pin Claire and she felt as if he could look inside her. "Whereabouts was your man when he saw these man-hunting women?"

"I can only place him roughly. Muley—he was Asiatic, picked because he could mix in with the natives—managed to get himself thoroughly lost before he was captured by the women. But he could remember the sun coming up over a cloud-covered plateau, which places him somewhere here."

"Bit farther in than anybody's ever been and come back to talk, that I know about. You say he was dying? How'd he get out?"

"The tribes helped him; they passed him along and got him to the coast as fast as they could. He kept on repeating that if only they could get him there, he could be cured. He was wrong, unfortunately. Do either of you know what a *wik-wik* is?" She got her answer from the sudden grimness on their faces before Coleman nodded.

"We know. It's a kind of snake, anything up to four feet long, bright yellow-green and vicious, with bristles *and* teeth. The bite is certain but slow death, creeping decay and paralysis. It's the only venomous creature we know of, and it's just as well, because there isn't a damn thing anybody can do about him."

"Yes," she sighed. "It can take up to eight or nine days, sometimes more, to die. The wild women turned him loose once he'd been bitten. The natives treated him as a dead man to be humored. We couldn't do anything for him either, although the Special Section has its resources. The point is

FLOWER OF DORADIL

that the natives don't have the flower, but those women do. They can get it, and they *do* get it—from someone else! That's what he learned, and it fits, because they are not that smart. They are warriors, pure and simple, or guardians!"

THREE

"YOU HAVE me hooked, Miss Harper," Coleman admitted, "except for just one thing. At least four men down, you said, so now they send you?"

"I have heard about the general situation on Adil, that it's a matriarchal culture. That gives me a possible edge. Anyway, that's how it is, and what I want from you is help to get *here*." She indicated the foothills of the plateau on the map. "From there I'll play it by ear. I guess you can do it, if anybody can. You two seem to know far more about the interior than any honest person has a right to, and I won't mention that again if you won't. Is it a deal?"

The sun was sliding down the sky in orange glory as Lovell handed her back down into the skimmer and cast off to take her back to the Club. She waved to Coleman, who called, "Half hour after sunup. I'll be waiting for you right here. So long!"

The shallow craft picked up speed and the breeze was welcome. Claire thought wryly that it was going to be a lot hotter where she was going, but there was nothing to be gained by anticipating discomfort. She settled alongside her guide. "None of my business," she murmured, "but you never did explain just how and why you two come to know such a lot about Adil."

"Simple enough." He swung the tiller gently. "You want to know all you can about some animal or other, you ask the people who have lived with them all their lives. That's how to get a reputation, fast!"

"You make it sound so simple." The long afternoon's chat had been both pleasant and informative, and, once the initial hurdles had been leaped, very much on a man-to-man level. Both men were practical, competent, inclined to understatement, able to come to the point and not at all what

Claire had imagined hunters to be. She felt she knew the difference between sports and real hunters. Her new-found friends had a thorough dislike for those who came simply to kill something spectacular. That revelation had come when the conversation came to the time Lovell had been engaged to steer a *Time-Life* reporting team. She learned that he could glow, as he did when telling how the camera team labored, heedless of danger, just to get pictures. She had seen some of them, in a special issue that had been published.

"Those fellows," he told her, "didn't have a weapon among them. They left that to me, and then only when it was absolutely necessary. They really *studied* those animals. That was a hell of a trip!"

Remembering his fervor, she asked, "Roger, does this life satisfy you? You know what I mean?"

"Hadn't thought much about it, Claire. I suppose, maybe, it'll get dull, after a while. By that time I hope to have enough put away to try a new line. But that won't be for a long while."

It was in her mind to try to recruit him for her own service, but she decided not to push it. There were times when being a special agent wasn't attractive. Only very rarely did it involve unspoiled regions like this. She felt pleasantly drowsy and succumbed to a candid yawn as the distant lights of the Hunt Club came into view on the water's edge.

"Early night for me," she decided. "It's been a big day."

"That's the air. It gets most people for a while. You'd better arrange to be called. Do you want me to fix it for you?"

She heard the growing clamor of dance music and jollity from the bright lights and felt distaste. "I wouldn't want to put you to any trouble."

"All part of my job," he said, running in the skimmer expertly. "No trouble at all. Got your room key? Right. You go on up, follow this stairway to the first terrace and bear right; that's one of the rear suites. I'll check and see if

they've taken your gear up and arrange a call for sunup. Nothing unusual in that."

She demurred, "Well, now, I don't intend to be *that* early to bed. Look, couldn't you pick up a bottle of something, and glasses, and bring them up, so we can have a nightcap and a chat? Just a last-minute check over the arrangements for tomorrow?"

"All right," he said. She detected dry amusement in his tone. "You go on. I'll be maybe ten minutes."

She went up the stairway unsure whether to laugh or spit. It was not easy for her to abandon the idea that men would melt when she wanted them to. *I don't want to scalp him*, she argued with herself, *I just want to see him glow a little over me, the way he does over his damned wildlife!*

The full blast of the merrymaking made her wince and give thanks that her suite was at the back, in the quiet. She found her number at the far end of a dim balcony over the dark water, where stars danced in reflection. She passed inside, flicking on the light and found her baggage neatly piled against a wall. She took one that held her handy things, set it beside the bed, unlocked it, and then decided to check the bathroom facilities first. The sight of a shower stall and fleecy, white towels made her feel hot and dirty. She drew the door not quite shut, got swiftly out of her shirt and slacks and into the warm spray.

"I, too, can do things with a towel for a wrap," she murmured, and felt pleasantly malicious. She was still luxuriating in the cleanness when she heard his tread outside and his call.

"Claire?"

"In here!" She grabbed a towel, swathed herself and went to the door, all ready to ask him to pass her bag, but his attitude drove playful thoughts out of her mind. He was still, his head canted and his eyes half shut, as if listening for something. "What is it?" she demanded.

"I don't know. Something. Something's wrong." His voice was down to a murmur in his chest. "Something right here in this room. I can smell it."

"What kind of smell?" She eased forward clear of the door, casting her attention around but seeing nothing remarkable.

"Something deadly." He moved now, revolving silently. "You've never seen this room before, so you wouldn't know if anything was out of line." He stopped, then approached the bed. "You'd sleep here. No, it's not that." He eased back again, questing patiently. "You'd come in. First thing you'd do would be check your baggage. Did you?"

"I looked it over, that's all. I moved my personal bag. That's it, by the bed. My pajamas, brush and comb and things—"

"Did you open it?"

"No, just unlocked it. I decided to shower first."

"Yeah, natural. Come in, shower and change. That's where it is, I'll bet. You hold still." He deliberately unfastened his belt, delicately inserting the buckle in the hole of the small case's zipper-tag. He backed away to stand close by the low table on which he had stood a bottle and glasses, drew the belt taut, and with one long steady pull drew the zipper clear. The two halves of the leather bag fell apart, and a writhing yellow-green creature reared up in swift, sinuous coils. He spun, seized the bottle, and swung it so that it shattered against the floor behind the weaving, beady-eyed head, smashing the wrist-thick body to a bloody pulp. Claire felt a hail of liquor and shards of glass against her bare legs. It happened so suddenly that she didn't have time to feel scared until she felt the wetness on her legs. Glancing down, she started to sway.

"Lift your feet!" His strong hands gripped her and lifted her clear. He took her back to the bathroom door and put her down on the cool, plastic floor. "Shower. Make it good. That was a *wik-wik*; you might have got a scratch from the flying glass. Sorry about that, there was nothing else handy, so you rinse off good. Hear me? I'll take care of this mess."

The shower helped. She stayed there until her heart had slowed down to normal, and her mind stopped reeling. Then

she shut it off, came out, and was dabbing herself dry when she heard him again.

"You all right, Claire?"

She went to the door. "I'm all right. Can I come out, now?"

"It's all cleared. I got another bottle. I reckon you can use a drink after that."

She went barefoot across the throw rug he had moved to cover a wet patch, and settled on the bed, leaving the only chair for him. She watched him pour a generous dose of pale blue liquor into a glass for her.

"Wine of the country, as they say in France." He grinned at her more warmly than he had done all that afternoon. "Strictly illegal. You have to be in the know to get it, but it's good for the shakes."

She took it from him and sipped. It had a hint of mint and something else, and a comforting fire as it spread. "I'm not this weak as a rule," she declared, "but that was so fast!"

"Go ahead and be scared," he advised. "I was. That's the closest I ever want to be to a *wik-wik* in a temper." He put his glass down and came to kneel in front of her, picking up her left foot. It looked fragile in his brown hand. "Just checking for scratches." She shivered involuntarily and his grasp closed warmly on her ankle, firm and reassuring. "You know," he murmured, "this makes me feel a fool."

"Why?" She clutched at her towel as he put her foot down and took up the other one.

"I live here. I know this place as well as anybody, or thought I did. Yet there are people here who want you dead bad enough to catch a *wik-wik*—and that's no snap. You won't get a native to go near them. Whoever it was stuck it in a specimen bag in your luggage, which is cold-blooded in spades! It's gang work, organization. They must have known you were coming from Earth. And yet I knew not a thing about it, not a smell!"

"You smell keenly enough, Roger. You saved my life. And why would you know about crooked dealings? That's not your line."

"Yeah!" His fingers stroked her ankle absently. "But, damn it, us guides are a kind of guild, here. We know all the tricks, yet there's a bunch of smugglers and killers operating right under our noses! Makes me feel foolish." He clenched his hand suddenly, and she caught her breath.

"That's my foot! And there's not a scratch on me," she added, hurriedly, "I'm thankful to say. You did that." She began to shake again. The next thing she knew he was holding her, soothing her like a child.

"You're all right. A night's sleep will set you up fine." He hugged her gently. "Be sure and lock your door. And there'll be no call; I'll come and wake you myself. And I'll leave this with you." He felt in a pocket and produced a little thing and showed her how to use it. "That's a mini-mag; it's silent and throws an explosive slug. It's loaded. There are times when rules have to get bent a little. You hit anybody with that, believe me, he'll stop whatever he's doing, and stay stopped. All right?" He disengaged himself and stood up to grin down at her. "See you first thing in the morning. Good night!"

For a long time after he had gone she lay on her bed, relaxed, while she performed therapeutic drills in her mind. Seldom before had she needed them so badly. Then she was able to go to sleep.

By sunup the next morning she had helped Lovell to load a big craft with all her gear and his insignificant-looking pack, and they were once more heading up the coast to pick up Coleman.

When they arrived, he was waiting with a watertight bundle of lethal hardware, plus his own pack. He felt obliged to cast a critical eye on her extensive luggage. "You reckon we're going to need all that stuff you have there, Claire?" he asked as he scrambled down.

"Trade goods!" Lovell chuckled. "That's what she told me, when I asked the same question. I wouldn't argue, Sam. I reckon she knows what she's doing, by the way the oppo-

sition is worried." He related the *wik-wik* affair, and Coleman was duly impressed.

"That's quite a trick, catching a live one." He took the coffee Claire handed him and settled in the stern on Lovell's other side. "I'm damned if I would care to try it."

"I've been thinking about that." Claire handed out biscuits and sat back thoughtfully. "At a guess, it must be seven hundred miles from the plateau region to here, and most of it jungle. Yet the opposition seem to be able to come and go at will. How? Aircraft?"

"That's out." Coleman shook his head. "There's a total ban on anything like that—too conspicuous, culture shock. Even the weekly ships in and out of Home Island have to come in over the sea from the southwest, where they can't be seen from Adil."

"You're thinking legal, Sam. I reckon Claire has something to chew on there. The smugglers must have some regular and easy route all the way to Home Island. What with hunting craft coming and going and millionaire sports in and out every week, it's a natural for smuggling, but only if you can get the stuff from the interior. And they aren't flogging it through seven hundred miles of jungle, that's for sure."

"Too slow, for one thing," Claire agreed. "Somebody got on to me very fast. What's the radio setup here?"

"Network watch," Coleman explained. "That's all around the clock, centered on Home Island. All craft must carry at least one transceiver. On it we can get regular weather reports and listen on the whole frequency range if we want. But the rule is not to transmit at any time, unless it's a Mayday. That doesn't often happen."

"That's their communication, then. But mobility is something else. I said aircraft, but I don't see how they could bring one in against a ban. You can't exactly carry that kind of thing in a suitcase!"

"It's tricky," Lovell agreed. "All the same, what else fits? They must have some way of going and coming without touching the natives. If this has been going on for better

than four years, the story would have gotten around the tribes by now."

"I'll go along with that," Coleman agreed. "Yes. Let's have another look at that map." He got out the plastic roll and spread it across their knees as they sat in the stern. "As we already pointed out, the A.C.A. has stations here and here and all along the coast line, not too far away from their headquarters on Home Island. They only have small settlements, nothing big. They try to go native, make friends, that kind of thing. It looks as if we can scrub all that stretch—too many eyes and ears."

"Which still leaves us plenty of room to look." Claire scowled at the map. "I'm not sure. I want to get in there, and if we can somehow steal a passage by the smuggler's route—"

"Not unless we have to," Lovell objected. "I don't like the way they play games. There's no point in begging trouble."

"I'll second that." She punched his shoulder gently. "But, just the same, if they do have a quick route, we'd be thick to pass it up." She stared at the map again, and all at once it seemed obvious. "A river! Why wouldn't they use a river?" She looked to them eagerly. "I mean, the whole planet is thick with watercraft of all kinds. No suspicions there!"

"I should have thought of that!" Coleman sounded angry with himself. "It's so obvious, and right, too. Now, then . . ." He frowned furiously at the map, concentrating on the northeast quadrant, "Hmm . . . not too much detail—"

"Razorbacks!" Lovell said suddenly and emphatically. Coleman lifted his head urgently to scan the sea.

"Whereabouts, Roger?"

"Not here, Sam. Where they work from. It's just struck me! That's our clue. Look!" He put his finger down firmly on a spot in the sea right over Claire's knee. "This is where the big-fish boys gather. I've only been there a couple of times; fishing isn't in my line. But here, just off the map, is Dragon Island." He nudged her gently in the stomach to indicate it. "There's not much there but giant lizards and some fancy birds. Only, that's where the fish-boys hang out

and ready up, with big boats like this one. They like to start out just at sundown and get here around dark. They stay around, angling all night and up to noon the next day. They get swords, sea-cats, jumpers—but razorbacks are the prizes—seems there's some kind of underwater forest there. My point is that this place is twenty miles away from Dragon Island and only about sixty-five from the Adil coastline. Could you ask for a better cover? You've been out all night fishing; who's to know any different? Who would guess that maybe you've been all the way over to Adil and back?"

"That's a clever boy!" Claire cried, jarring him with her shoulder. "That's got to be right; it all fits. There's even a river handy."

"It certainly sounds workable," Coleman agreed. "I can't help wondering why we've never been up a river before."

"No point, Sam. We've been contacting the natives, and you know they never go near the big rivers if they can help it!"

"Is that true?" she asked. "How strange. Any idea why?"

"They don't like to talk about things they don't do, so it's just my guess they don't like any water they can't swim across. And they don't have any boats, either, come to think of it."

"Which makes a river, then, the perfect highway for anyone who wants to go up-country without being noticed. Roger, my love, what's the drill? You are obviously the brains around here."

He stirred lazily and gave her a sideways glance. Then he began to describe a plan.

FOUR

DUSK WAS no more than an hour away as they sighted a dark purple smudge on the skyline ahead. They had run at a good speed and they were just a little early, having planned to sneak in under cover of sunset.

"This is all right," Lovell declared, deserting the tiller that he had nursed for the past four hours and relaxing thankfully. "At least we know it's there. See anything, Sam?" Coleman was using a small scope from one of the weapons, but its magnification was small.

"Nothing definite. We'll just have to slide in as the light goes and chance it. It's going to be dodgy. If this river mouth is like the others, there'll be a flock of debris islands and mud banks."

"But if they are running some kind of craft to and fro, won't they post lights of some kind? Or would that attract the natives?"

"You won't catch any natives out very long after dark." Coleman said, "Too many *obo's* about—evil spirits, to you."

"There are so many things I don't know," she sighed. "This is all old hat to you two, but if I'm to do my share, I need to learn. I get the bit about sneaking past the lookout—they must have one—and camouflaging the boat with weeds and driftwood. Let's assume it all works, and we get by and on up the river. Then what? I mean, what would *you* do, on your own?"

Coleman got his pipe going, and settled down where he could watch the distant smudge. "Well, we'd run up the river some way until we were well clear of the A.C.A. post—this isn't, of course, but you know what I mean. Then we'd go into the bush, to sniff out the nearest village, make a few preparations, scout around and then, after dawn, make contact with the locals."

"Just like that, with a completely strange tribe?"

"They are always pleased just to see daylight again," Lovell murmured, "so they're in a good mood anyway. They are usually looking for breakfast, and glad of a bit of help to catch it. As for being strangers, that's not such a problem." He stirred and sat up to stretch. "See, a tribe is like a loose confederation of small groups. Each group has its own little patch, and the entire tribe has its own territory. They recognize each other by their tribal marks. If you wear the correct mark, you're a friend, even if they don't know you by sight, *and* if you don't try to hog too much of the food. They're an easygoing crowd, as a rule. The only time it can get hairy is when you're on the border between two territories."

"I bet it's not that simple," she declared. "But I want in. If you think I'm going to sit back in this boat, in the dark, and wait for you two to come back—perhaps—then you are looping!"

"Yes," Coleman sucked on his pipe thoughtfully. "But there's a snag, you being female and all that. You see, women are in a dominant position here, even among the bush natives. Women give the orders and make all the decisions; the men do all the work—the hunting, fetching, carrying, all that."

"Is there a physical discrepancy, or is it just a custom?"

"Bit of both. The women are, on the average, bigger and heavier than the men, though not much. But it's mostly custom. The men don't mind, so they say. They're quite happy to let the women do all the worrying and fighting. They have it pretty easy—"

"Fighting? You mean the women are warriors?"

"Not that way, no. They fight over men. A young woman setting up her own clan will have to fight or run second to some senior woman. Winner takes all, and the loser gets relegated to second in command."

"Do they use weapons at all?"

"Never seen that. They have a kind of chopper, a hand ax, but they don't fight with it."

"I seel" Claire suppressed a grin. "So it is going to be a provocative situation if I'm seen with two men by some power-hungry female? Don't they ever act friendly to each other?"

"At times they do." Lovell moved back to the tiller again and began easing the craft in towards the fading target. "An old woman with a whole flock of men to take charge of won't be looking for more. She'd be happy to lose some. But they still go through motions of fighting. Maybe we can keep out of the way of the women. We've done that before."

"Is it essential that we go aground anyway?"

"Be chancy not to," Coleman decided. "This is strange territory to us. There may be a few different customs we need to know, and we can do with information, possibly about the smugglers or local legends. And we can do with fresh provisions. We have plenty of hardtack, but there's no point in using it until we have to. Sure you wouldn't rather lie low in the boat, have a nap, wait until we come back?"

"Quite sure. I've slept most of the afternoon, at your expense. I'm quite fresh. And I will *not* be a passenger, Sam!"

"This is a river mouth, all right," Lovell announced mildly. "I can feel the current getting us. The water's muddy, too, and cool. We'll start sliding in. Dusk comes fast in these latitudes. Remember now, don't talk any more than you have to, and don't whisper, mumble—it doesn't carry so far."

Ahead, the violet shades of night were stealing away outlines, and then there was a faint, humid mist to make everything less visible. Apart from the barely audible hum of the generator, they were in breathless silence, with nothing at all to indicate forward movement.

"Light ahead," Lovell murmured.

Claire saw it, a little to the left and far distant. Then there was another, a pair of tiny yellow eyes one above the other. "Some kind of marker, seems we guessed right."

Coleman touched her arm. "Take position midships, Claire. I'm going forward. Relay anything I say back to Roger."

"Right." She took her position. There was a strong smell of decaying vegetation. The lights seemed closer, then suddenly vanished as if switched off.

Coleman mumbled, "Slow right down. Starboard a point or two."

Minutes later there came a scraping on the port bow, rocking the boat. Coleman leaned over, hauling in a mass of tangled twigs and weeds, and Claire followed suit.

"Heave it right across and over the other side," Lovell told her, "but keep it low, so I can see over it."

"Veer away to port!"

A black mass loomed on the starboard side. They slid past it, and saw the lights again, much closer now. Coleman came back to help the girl with the smelly, dripping weeds and branches.

"That's fine, now." He patted her shoulder. "Go ahead, Roger." They slid on, and all at once there were two more lights like the first pair, but some distance to one side. The boat lost speed and wallowed soggly. Coleman scrambled back under the dripping screen, tapping her to come along, and they both joined Lovell in the stern.

"What d'you make of that, Sam? Walk into my parlor, maybe?"

"Just a trifle too convenient, anyway, some kind of channel marker, but hardly for us." He had hardly spoken when a dazzling glare stabbed through the haze from directly above and between the two markers, and a bright beam struck seemingly right at them. They all went flat. There was no noise of any kind.

"What can you hear?"

Claire started to shake her head, then she heard. So did Coleman. There was a distant sigh that grew rapidly into a rushing, whistling sound like a gale through treetops, louder and nearer. Now there was motor-booming gently under it.

"That's familiar," Lovell muttered, "but I can't place it."

Coleman had his head up now. All at once he grabbed her arm. "Ye Gods!" he gasped. "Roger! That's a shuttle! They've got a blasted spaceship back there somewhere!"

Claire raised her head and stared up through the leafy screen to see that the beam was a searchlight, over them and on the water some yards away, lighting a great oval. Ahead, low in the sky, she saw red and green lights and the ghost-blue aura of ion-jets, outlining a bullet-shaped craft. She recognized the ship-to-ground transport and wondered whether it was a Service craft. Her mind boggled at the thought, and she left it, watching the thing hover and start to settle, thrashing the water into froth.

"Nice timing!" Lovell growled. "Here comes the other half." She swung her head around at the new noise, the stammering roar of a boat engine. It was a large *trimaran*, shooting out from between the markers and headed for the shuttle. "And that's our cue to get lost, Sam. Keep a look out forward. They'll be too busy to take any heed of us."

The skimmer surged into speed, slid under the bright beam and into the relative darkness beyond. The reflected glow helped so much that they were in the river's turbulence before it had faded. By that time they were also clear of the mist, and there was enough light to make navigation relatively easy.

"Reckon we can shed the greenery now, Roger?" Coleman suggested.

"No rush, Sam. Come on back here; I can see all right. This needs some sorting out. You too, Claire." She detected a hard note in his voice, and wondered why as she returned to the stern and settled beside him, with Coleman on the other side. The river ahead was a slow, sweeping highway with dense, shadowy sides.

"A shuttle, a spacecraft, and a spaceship, somewhere. Who's gone loopy, here? How come a bunch of smugglers can lay hold of a ship?" Lovell demanded.

"I can explain that, if you'll believe me," Claire offered. "Of course, if you're suspicious, there's no point."

"No need, either, my dear," Coleman said. "Roger's a bit out of touch, that's all. I get away from here pretty often. I think I know what you have in mind. Over the past ten years or so, the way the colonies are spreading out, there

have been a few changes in the organization of the Colonization arm. We used to do all the transport, but there's too much of it now, so private contractors have moved in. They buy up old ships, Roger, and use them for charter runs. It's no trick to get hold of a ship, if you have enough money."

"Thank you, Sam," she sighed. "That's about what I had guessed, too. Of course, they do have the money."

"But they won't have it down on the ground, my dear. That's just not practical. A ship *can* land, and take off again, but the power investment is enormous."

"Can I come out of the corner now?" Lovell asked wryly. "All right, they have a ship. There's a whole cluster of colonies just the other side of Denebola, plenty rich, too, by what I hear. It's not too far away. So why don't they have their ship call in, say, once a month to give the shuttle a service and check and swap information and plans?"

"And trade goods," Claire added. "They must be paying for the stuff somehow, making some kind of deal with the locals."

"That sounds more like it," Coleman agreed. "The ship hops between here and Denebola. The shuttle travels from the plateau to the river mouth and back. Fishing sports pick up the goods and take them out via Home Island ships to Earth. It's a blasted network! It must be costing somebody a bomb!"

"Yes, but just think how much the stuff they are getting is worth," Claire reminded him.

She stiffened as Lovell hissed a warning and swung the tiller to drive the boat in towards the shadows. Again she heard the mighty rushing noise and the booming motors. The craft came sweeping down the long, silent lane of the river, brushing the treetops into tossing fury with the rush of its passing and washing the three with down draft. Then it was gone into the dark.

"Slick as grease!" she heard Lovell growl. "Less than an hour to drop the stuff, pick up the goodies and away."

"Goodies? Oh yes, whatever they are delivering in trade,"

she said. "Fresh fruit, roots, meat—so Muley said, and it all goes to mysterious 'other' people, those who have the juice and the flower."

He slid the craft into mid-stream again. "About another half hour should do us, before we run in and ground. Sam, I reckon we need only take a mini-mag apiece, good enough to knock off something for the pot, but small enough to hide." Coleman grunted assent and started rummaging in a pack. It was too dark for Claire to see what he was doing, but it was even darker along the river's edge. She studied the stygian shadow with respect.

For no reason that she could see, Lovell quietly said, "Looks like a good place just ahead. I'm going in."

When the skimmer came aground, Lovell spoke again. "Should be a good spot for swamp hog, Sam. I'll go snoop around a bit. You make fast and get the guns ready. I'll be about fifteen minutes."

The girl felt gentle rockings, heard rustlings, and deduced that the big man was taking off his clothes. She could see him as a gray-pink bulk, rising up and moving over the side into the water, to pause just long enough to repeat, softly, "Be about fifteen minutes. Stay put."

Then he was gone soundlessly, and more easy rocking told her that Coleman was similarly divesting himself of clothing. "Will you stain yourselves in some way?" she asked. "I mean, you're rather visible in the dark like that."

"Often wondered," he answered, "how us Europeans ever came to evolve pale hide. But we'll take care of it as soon as we find some *scaff*. That's a local berry plant—"

Claire suddenly realized that she was involved in this. "Just a bit!" she interrupted. "I'm coming, too."

"All right," he said resignedly. "If you must!"

She had just finished folding her clothes by feel and stuffing them into her bag when Lovell loomed up by the boat, made a tongue click and took hold of the craft to steady himself. "We got lucky," he breathed. "This creek runs quite a bit farther and leads to a stream. There's fresh water, a trail of sorts and a village at the end of it, but not too big.

I found a stand of *scaff* and some dress weeds. Everything we need."

"What," she demanded, "is *scaff*, and dress weeds?"

"Still bent on coming? All right, come on. I'll tell you as we go." She stood, balanced, and swung herself over the side into water that was cool and up to her chest. Her feet settled in mud, and there were wormy things that she hoped were only weeds. She reached, touched a solid shoulder and felt Lovell's hand come to take her fingers. "Just follow. Mind how you walk, the mud's deep in spots. All right, Sam?"

She started wading, leaning against the water, trying not to drag on his fingers. "Don't we get bitten?" she asked.

"Sure. This air is full of bugs. But the *scaff* will take care of it, so long as you don't scratch. Only a minute or two. *Scaff* is a kind of nut full of oil. It smells a bit, but it keeps the bugs off. The natives use it all the time. It stains, too, and will make us the right color. Branch!"

She ducked just in time, wallowed and staggered into a deep hole, but went on doggedly. The water shallowed to her waist, then her knees, and there were pebbles underfoot. The guiding fingers led her onto damp soil, and between the tickling fronds of bushes. The pale shadow by her side made crackling sounds and gave her a gentle nudge.

"Here. Stow them between your feet so you'll find them again. More." He handed her what felt like strawberries. "Roll one in your palms, then squash it and rub the juice on yourself till it's all gone. Throw it away and repeat with another. Put plenty on, all over."

She obeyed, and recoiled from the odor that came as a result. It resembled the odor of rancid butter and fish oil. But, as she smeared it on, it stole away the irritating itches she had been trying not to feel for the past few minutes. Resigning herself, she squeezed more, and got busy rubbing it in as far as she could reach. Stooping down to reach between her feet for further supplies, she realized she could see a little more now, and when she straightened up again she was amused to be able to pick out patches of pale pink

on either side of her. *When it's all on*, she thought, *I won't be able to see them at all.*

"Don't forget your hair," Lovell advised. "I never saw a ginger native."

"Do you mind!" she retorted. "Ginger? It's auburn! That's what a tactful person would say. Ginger!" She squashed another *scaff* and sighed as she applied it to her crowning glory. "All I hope is that this stuff comes off easily!"

Lovell chuckled very quietly, to her dismay. "It's waterproof, but it wears off in about four days!"

FIVE

SHE CHOKED down her disgust, composed her voice and declared, "I just don't see how you find your way about in the dark the way you do."

"Habit, mostly. Your skin tells you a lot, too, once you get the way of it. All wrapped up in clothes, you're shut off from a hell of a lot of information. Air currents, for instance, tell me there's an opening, a trail of sorts, just over there. Smell helps, too. The nose is highly discriminating, if you give it a chance. You'll get it all right."

She couldn't see either of them at all, now, and jumped a little as Lovell said, from over her shoulder, "Hold still, you missed some at the back. I'll fix it." His palm was firm yet gentle. "I was kidding about it wearing off," he admitted softly. "We have some goo in the boat that will remove it in jig time. There, you're all blacked out." She felt his friendly pat, and then froze utterly as the quiet night air shattered to a deep, chesty growl not too far away.

Lovell's hand touched her shoulder, his murmur was close. "Old Stripey. Something woke him up. Keep dead still!"

Something big and slow, deliberate and catlike, was moving on padded feet. It was huge! It had little restless ears and enormous shoulders and front legs. It seemed to be marked in red and yellow stripes; it moved on again, stopping to sniff and rumble irritably. Claire stared fixedly at it as it veered, came directly to her to sniff. She felt the hot puff of its breathing, until it rumbled again and swung away, brushing her leg with its tail, to pad away into the dark to where they had just come from. Claire sipped in a delicate breath and felt the sweat standing out all over her body. Lovell's fingers pressed her shoulder just once.

"Woke up thirsty and bad-tempered," he murmured. "Stri-

pey's no bother unless he's hungry, or you prod him on purpose."

"That was a lion!" she declared, unsteadily but with conviction.

"Kind of, sure. Same kind of head, heavier about the chest and shoulder, nothing much at the rear. *Bambar*, the natives call him. I showed you a picture of him, remember? He's the slow one. If you keep still, he can't see you; keep your head and you can outrun him easy. We'd better move along before he comes back."

She took his fingers again and they were on a trail, uneven and not very wide. "What would you have done if he had attacked me?" she asked, and heard Coleman chuckle softly.

"We don't kill anything unless we have to, Claire. Old Stripey wasn't going to do anything to you. All the same, I had a mini-mag on him. He rears up to strike, if he's going to. He wouldn't have made it."

"Thank you very much," she sighed. "I'm all for respecting the wild creature in its natural habitat, but you can carry that a little too far."

"That's all part of the game, my dear. Animals are a lot more sane than us, when you think about it. They leave us strictly alone, unless we annoy them."

"Climbing a bit," Lovell warned. "Trees ahead. Keep your eyes open." They came to a halt at the crest of a slight rise, and she could see her companions as dark outlines against the rare patches of starry sky. "I'm going to get us some dress weeds. A chopper, Sam." Lovell moved off, and she heard the subdued snick and whack of a blade for some minutes, then he came back with an armful of rustling stuff. "Let's squat here, and I'll show you how to make a skirt like the natives wear." Fingers helped eyes to identify long and flexible leaves about two inches broad and all lengths up to six or seven feet. She felt him select one and strip it on a blade of some kind until he had just the center rib left, which was almost as pliant as cord.

"That's your belt," he explained. "Now you thread your

leaves on it like this. First you get them all the same length. Take the stem end and put it by your elbow, right? Lay it along to the tips of your fingers, mark, and cut off square. You want about twenty-five or thirty like that. Hold the chopper between your knees, blade up. That's it. I'll show you the next bit when you've done that." She set to work awkwardly in the dark, listening to efficient activity on either side of her. Coleman said, after a while,

"You smell *quashi*, Roger? Over there, somewhere?"

"Yeah. Reckon you can find it?"

She heard Coleman snort and move quietly away. She announced her quota of thirty and he took her hand again. "The handle of the chopper is a spike. Use it to punch holes in the stem end, and thread your leaves so they overlap." She followed his guidance patiently and he added casually, "Better make it enough to go all around. The natives don't often bother that much, but you'll need it, because you're going to sling a mini-mag under it. Got your knots good and tight? Fine. You now have yourself a complete, fashionable wardrobe, and it didn't cost you a thing!"

She stood and and experimented with it until it was reasonably comfortable.

"Here," he said, "sling this mini-mag out of sight and make sure the lanyard is secured. And you need a chopper in your belt. Here comes Sam, with breakfast. *Quashi* is something like pineapple, only not so tart."

"How in the world could you smell that over the stink of the *scaff*?" she demanded as she was handed a split fruit and began nibbling on it.

"Simple enough. As Roger said, give your nose a chance. I estimate we have about three hours until daybreak. You'd better be learning some words, just in case you have to talk to some female or other."

"Oh, come!" she objected. "You can't assume the local language is the same here as it is hundreds of miles away, surely?"

"It won't be," Lovell said, "but there is a kind of lingo that everybody knows, a pidgin used among the various tribes."

The time passed pleasantly enough as she nibbled on *quashi* and tried to mimic the sounds the two men plied her with. None of them were difficult to produce, and she applied herself conscientiously to the task.

Later Claire was up a tree, stretched out along a stout branch, within whispering distance of her two companions, and peering down in the gray half-light over a little nest of oddly shaped huts, trying to identify the points the men were making for her.

"Two boss-women," Lovell estimated. "That biggest hut, with the pointed roof, is the chief one, and that other, the same shape but not as big, the second. The other, flat-topped huts are for the men. Count the spears. See them stacked outside each hut?"

"Twenty-eight or thirty men," Coleman suggested, "and, by the look of those spears, they are fishermen. Hal Somebody's awake!"

Claire spotted a small, twisting plume of smoke from the second woman's hut, and a second later saw the grass-screen opening stir to allow a young woman to duck into the light. As she straightened up and stood looking around, slowly arranging the leaf skirt she had brought with her, Claire studied her carefully.

"Second boss, sure enough," Lovell murmured, "keeper of the fire. She'll roust the men out in a moment. Get a good look at her clan mark, Sam."

She was barely a woman, Claire thought, no more than eighteen, or the local equivalent, but impressively sturdy, well-balanced on her feet and with no spare flesh over her muscles. She was tall, too, with useful shoulders and had a head-high arrogance as she scanned the scene keenly. Her black hair had been chopped squarely across her eyebrows, but fell straight and glossy to her shoulders elsewhere. And she was by no means plain. There was undoubted intelligence on her brown features. In the middle of her forehead was the white clan symbol they needed to know and copy, a mark made up of two horizontal wavy lines

with a vertical cutting them. Settling her skirt to her satisfaction, she stooped to gather some twigs from under a flat stone and to duck back into the hut. The smoke plume grew thicker. They heard high-pitched shouts and out came a man, then others, stretching and yawning, fastening their leaf skirts and muttering to each other, only to scatter hurriedly as the girl reappeared and snapped sharply at them.

"I don't need any translating for that!" Claire grinned. "She's sending them about their business, obviously. To get breakfast, would you say?"

"Something like that," Coleman agreed, "water, fresh fruit and some more fuel for the fire. They won't mount a hunting party until they're all roused out and settled. There she goes!" The girl inflated her chest to yell once more at the men, her small breasts leaping under the pull of firm muscles; then she whirled, took a spear from a pile and rattled it alongside one of the lesser huts, shouting shrill commands. "Rise and shine! It's her job to get everybody working and lay on something for the old woman, first of all. It's our cue to fade away discreetly. Away you go down. No, hold it until that lot have gone by."

"Water skins," Lovell noted. "That will take them a while. Right, that's us clear." They descended as silently as possible and made their way back to their little eminence. She had noted that the men were a little shorter than the girl and had close-cropped hair. Every one of them carried a chopper just like her own. She examined the tool now.

"How did you get these?" she asked. "In trade?"

"No fear!" Lovell chuckled, busy chopping at a low shrub. "This is one time when the copy is better than the original. The native ones are a kind of ironstone, with wooden handles. These are beryl-steel and plastic imitations we had specially made. Now you hold still while I decorate you. Sam, check me on the design." He had a handful of stubby roots from which she saw a whitish, syrupy sap oozing. He applied it carefully to her forehead; it was cool and felt like gum. Coleman came to watch. In a moment it was his turn, and

then he took a root stump to do Lovell. The big man frowned as soon as his paint was dry.

"Best we can do," he murmured, shaking his head at Claire. "You're the right color, and the clan mark is fine, but you don't hold yourself right. You need to stiffen up your spine, push your shoulders back and stick out your chest more. Act bossy!"

"There's an invitation!" she laughed. "You're too tactful to say it, but I'm not blind, you know. I'm the wrong shape. I stick out too much in front already without making more of myself. And I have to do something about my hair, it's all wrong!"

"That's easy to fix." Coleman went away, came back with a long leaf, extracting the rib from it. "Tie it back with that. It'll be all right."

"We'll get by," Lovell declared. "If it comes to a crunch, just keep telling them we are passing through. That excuses a lot. Right now, let's run through that mini-mag just one more time, because it's time we started scouting around for game. There's swamp hog close by, almost for sure."

The sun was spearing through the leaves as they moved off and was already hot enough to make Claire thankful she wasn't wearing anything more than she was. On all sides the jungle began to stir into humming life, a chorus of discreet sounds that added up to a drone. She guessed that they were heading for water. Ahead of her, Lovell halted so abruptly that she was breathing on him before she could stop. He pointed with his hand.

"Trail," he murmured. "The water boys are coming back. We cross as soon as they've gone by." The natives came tramping and chattering, each one loaded with a pair of bloated skins. "It gets muddy now," he warned as they went on again and struck a down slope. "Watch how you tread."

"How do you justify killing a swamp hog and not a lion?"

"Swampy is one of the few animals that will attack on sight, without provocation. That's how we get him. We let him see us at the right moment, and have him chase us on-

to solid ground. You'll see. Pick up your feet carefully. He can't see all that good, but he sure can hear."

They were into the mud now, thick greenish-gray stuff rich with reeds, weeds and warped old trees, and Claire had to work to keep her footing and follow him as he threaded his way steadily on. At last he halted by a leaning tree bole where the bark was rotten, and pointed ahead. She put her head by his.

"There!" he breathed. "By that clump of greenish flowers—that smooth black lump just to one side. There, his ears are moving."

"I have him," she murmured. Coleman stole alongside to stare and nod.

"Pointing the wrong way, Roger. High ground's to our left. We'll have to turn him around."

"Yeah. Give me maybe ten minutes to get set. I'll give you a hoot." He went away swiftly, in and out among the plants, moving toward dry ground.

"Our job," Coleman explained softly, "is to stir him up, make a bit of noise and hit him a time or two with the mini-mag slugs. He'll swing this way and start coming slow. Then Roger will whoop it up and swing him all the way around, annoy him a bit, and he'll charge. That will get him out on the dry ground. No good killing him in the mud, he'd just sink. We'd never get him out. All right?"

"You know the drill, but does *he* know it? And what do you mean, hit him a time or two? You surely don't expect fine aiming with a handgun at this distance?"

"No, certainly not. Once we stir him up, we just hit him to make him angry. That's what we want."

"You mean we can't kill him with these weapons?"

"Not a hope! Not unless you hit him exactly right, close up, in one special place. But that's all right, Roger will take care of that. He should be about ready by now, so I'll move off just a bit to the right. All you have to do is keep still and when he throws his head up, hit it. Right?"

Coleman eased away, leaving her to mixed feelings. This was no time to discover that the little weapon in her hand

was nothing more than a prod. It was over three feet deep where she stood, trying to keep still and feeling sweat fall into her eyes.

From far away she heard a whooping, hooting whistle, then nothing. She flicked a glance, but couldn't see Sam at all. Resolutely, she put her eyes back on the quarry. Off to her right she heard a tongue click and then a splatter, as if someone had smacked the mud sharply. The smooth, black hulk stirred and rose up, squelching. *Two weeks ago*, she thought, *I was sitting in an air-conditioned office and complaining. And now this!*

She completely forgot her comparisons as the black mass kept rising up. What she had assumed was its back, she now saw was only the head. The rest of it loomed up like the entire countryside erupting. She was so struck that, for a second or two, she forgot to fire. Then, willing her hand to be steady, she aimed and pressed the stud and felt the little weapon surge in her hand. She fired again and heard the whack of impact. The enormous creature bellowed, turning a cavernous maw in her direction. It began to plow towards her. She fired again.

Then she heard Coleman yell, a shrill screeching that slowed the huge beast, brought its enormous head around more. It started to charge off in the new direction. Claire shook herself free of paralysis and started paddling forward, ready to fire again. She heard the *pluck* of more impacts and no more cries from Sam. The beast was gathering speed now! She tried to hurry. Far away, she heard a shout, a vigorous yell of derision and more smacking of mud. The bulldozing hog flicked its head and bellowed in fury, throwing back a stinking wave of mud.

Sam was at her elbow, shouting urgently and pointing. "Come on! Come on! That's the biggest damned swamp hog I ever saw. Come on! Roger's going to need all the help we can give him. Run! Don't waste a shot, but hit the beggar as much as you can!"

Claire lifted her feet and began to run, slipping and staggering in the mud, trying to get near enough to the runaway

behemoth to get a shot at it. Sam was going like a madman, falling down and scrambling up again, urging her on. She fell flat and slid, struggled up spitting mud and plowed on crazily. She saw Sam halt and fire his gun and start running again. She got a clear view herself and held down the stud until it was empty, then ran more. They were on solid ground, and there was Roger, kneeling in the path of the thundering, ground-shaking fury.

SIX

CLAIRE FLOGGED her straining legs into frantic effort, striving to overtake the creature, although there was nothing she could do. Sam shouted like a madman, possibly hoping to distract it, using his last rounds. Now she could see the damage that the explosive slugs were doing. But the squealing fury thundered on, intent on trampling Roger into the ground. Then, somehow, its stumpy legs weren't working properly. It was stumbling and falling, skidding and crashing through the undergrowth. It was silent, but still shivering convulsively as Claire panted up to it, stumbled along its mighty body, and saw Roger standing, shaking his head. He was no more than a few feet away from the enormous nostrils where they lay half-buried in soft earth. She staggered up to him and fell on his neck in unbelief, unable to say anything. He circled her with one arm, chuckling.

"That's about how I felt when I got a good look at him," he said. "That certainly is the grandpappy of all the swamp hogs I ever saw! Hi, Sam. We stirred up a big one that time!"

"Am I glad to see you, old man! I didn't think there was anything that would stop that one. He's fifty tons, if he's an ounce, and mean!"

"How did you stop it?" Claire panted, hugging him hard and looking over her shoulder at the mountain of meat. "I shot him all I had. So did Sam. He just kept going!"

"You have to hit him just right, from the front, when he opens his mouth. You hit him right in the back of the throat. His skull is thin there. He's all hide and meat everywhere else. Look, we better start staking our claim. The natives will be along pretty soon. They will have heard the racket, and they like swamp hog, when they can get some." He released her and pushed her away gently. "Better

scrape off some of that mud, too. What did you do, roll in it?" She made a swipe at him and he ducked away, chuckling, then drew his chopper and approached the carcass purposefully, attacking the soft part under the neck. Coleman went with him, waving her to stand back.

"Not you, Claire. Remember, you're the boss now."

She didn't feel at all in a domineering mood, but she was glad of the chance to seek out a wisp of grass to clean off the thick of the mud. She was in the middle of that when she spotted movement nearby, and called softly, "We have company!" Lovell looked around, then came to her carrying a hefty slab of blood-dripping flesh.

"Grab it, pretend to be so hungry you can't wait to have it cooked, and ignore them, or glare at them, if you feel like it. They won't bother you. They'll eat raw meat when they have to, so they will know what it means. We're short of a fire. They'll spot that much, fast. It's a bargaining point to them."

He went back to his butcher work, leaving her to use her wits. She raised the slab of raw meat to her mouth and pretended to bite on it and kept a cold eye on the native men who came in two's and three's, to stand at a respectful distance and goggle. They obviously couldn't decide which was the more engrossing, the strangers or the mammoth feast before their eyes. They looked on the point of drooling, but they kept an uneasy distance. Claire worked on her raw meal, and looked beyond the men to where the young woman came loping up, alert and ordering them to stand aside, then slowing to a cautious halt, casting an avaricious eye at the swamp hog. She swung her stare on Claire, who tried to look indifferent and belligerent at the same time. The native woman took one step, then another, like a tigress stalking prey. Claire chose her moment.

"Stop!" she said abruptly, and the girl halted at once, then made a chopping gesture and gabbled imperiously. Claire waited, calm until the demand was finished, then said flatly, "No!" She shook the lump of meat in her hand and added, "Minel" She turned and made a wide, embrac-

ing gesture, and repeated, "Mine!" Dark eyes flashed angrily. The girl repeated her chopping gesture.

"Share!" she demanded, shrilly indignant. Claire kept her cold and haughty stare, beginning to enjoy herself. It really was outrageous to try to claim the whole of that mountain of food, but it was worth playing the trick as far as it would go. "Share!" the girl repeated.

"Wait!" Claire told her, and pretended to munch on her meat, which gave her cover to mumble over her shoulder, "Sing out when you have enough. Those people are hungry, and I'm beginning to feel sick!"

The young woman was edgy now, switching her fierce stare from the carcass to Claire and back like a cat swishing its tail before pouncing. Then Lovell backed away from the carcass and said, loudly but in Anglic, "We have all we can carry, Claire. No point in pushing it. Let her see you inspecting what we've done. Pass a bit of comment, criticism, tough stuff, whatever—and then you can let them have it."

She turned her back on the native woman and paced back to where the two men had hacked away a substantial store of raw flesh. "You stupid great clown!" she cried, grinning crazily. "How the blazes are we going to carry all that load?" The two men cowered humbly, and she was hard put not to giggle.

"I'll go and cut a cane," Lovell muttered, "and string it. No bother. We'll carry it easily enough. You're doing fine. Tell her we have no fire and need help. Then point out we're passing through. Remember the words?"

"All right! Go get your cane!" she snapped, waving her arm. "I'll tell her what you said." She whirled around and strode back to where the native woman was fidgeting, confronted her and waved the raw meat. "Hungry!" she declared. "Fire, want, help."

The woman scowled, then nodded. "Help, fire. Share?"

"Not like." Claire swept her arm back. *Take the whole lot, honey, for me*, she thought. *It might be delicious cooked, but its awful, raw!*

The native woman spun around and yapped orders to her men, sending them scurrying forward to attack the carcass. Lovell came by on his way to get a cane, and Claire saw her dark, intent eyes suddenly show a different interest. Her forebodings materialized as the big man came back and the native woman put up an imperious hand.

"Stop!" she commanded, then aimed a challenging glare at Claire. "Like!" she said, with emphasis. "Good! Take!" Claire dropped the meat she was holding and suddenly felt very cool.

"No!" she declared firmly. "Mine!"

There was immediate and intense silence, into which Lovell murmured, "She's picking a fight, Claire, and there isn't a thing I can do. The other men would stop me if I tried anything."

"That's perfectly all right, Roger. This one I can handle all by myself. How do I show her I'm ready?"

"Ditch that chopper. Make a gesture of it. That's all you need."

"Right! You just stand aside. I've a feeling I'm going to enjoy this, somehow." She took the ax from her belt and pointedly tossed it to one side. The native woman showed her teeth and copied the gesture, then settled into a crouch, balancing on her toes and easing forward to reach with clawed hands. Claire was by no means careless. The other woman had an advantage in height, reach, quite probably in weight. Claire settled into a cross-armed, flexible stance of defense, and waited, watching the other's eyes and balance.

The native sprang like a cat, landing on one foot and kicking with the other. But there was a forearm to divert the kick, and a wrist crossing over and a hand gripping and hoisting strongly. The native woman went over in a complete back somersault, landing face-down on the ground.

And how do you like that? Claire thought, hearing the astonished men gasp a respectful "Wow!" The native scrambled up, shaking with fury, and launched herself screeching and clawing, but Claire stood aside and flailed

her arm across and down in a chop to the ribs that landed solidly, followed by another to the neck that punched her opponent into a dive and skid along the ground. To her surprise and grudging admiration, the native woman got up again with an effort, and came back for more, but with painful caution this time, feinting with her arms, seeking some kind of opening to grab at. Claire waited, then advanced her own hands as if to grab, and there was a triumphant pounce. Two clamping hands seized on her wrist powerfully, and the woman bore down, straining hard. Claire beat her breathless with a series of well-placed blows. The other slumped to the ground. Claire breathed deeply, dusted her hands, and turned to see Coleman and Lovell just as goggle-eyed as the native men.

"What happens now?" she asked innocently.

Coleman choked. "You've just won yourself about seven or eight men of your own, unless you disclaim them."

"I'd better do that, then. I have quite enough trouble with you two, never mind a whole harem. What do I say?"

"You don't," Lovell mumbled. "Not until she comes around. I hope you haven't killed her."

"I doubt it. She'll get better in a while. Oh, hello, who's this?" The sudden chatter of the men brought her head around, to see an older woman coming, guarded by more men. "Not another combat?"

"Could be. No, hold it!" Coleman cocked his head suddenly, nudged his companion. "Hear that, Roger. Worth a chance, d'you think?"

"I'll say it is. We should have thought of it a long time ago. Claire, can you make a few fancy gestures, like passes or something? Magic? Aim them at the old woman, make them impressive. Then point to everything except us and this meat and say that you 'don't like' and 'don't want' and that we are just passing through. Got it?"

"I hear, O master, and obey. Maybe you'll tell me why, sometime!" She turned to stare at the imperious-looking older woman, judging her to be in her thirties, a fine, full-blown female with a shape any civilized woman might envy.

There was hesitant suspicion in her dark eyes. Claire played on it, lifting her arms and waving them in the most impressive gestures she could think of, listening to the uneasy chatter of the men and wondering what it was all about. Then she did the next part, casting disparagement on the carcass, the men and the unconscious body at her feet, and said she was merely a passing visitor. "Nice place you have here," she admitted, in between the native syllables, "but I have somewhere else to go, see?"

It was working. The men were backing away, and even the headwoman looked uneasy and impressed. "Tell me what to say!" she asked, and heard Lovell grunt softly.

"Nothing more now, for you. We can do the rest. All you have to do is look queer and mumble a bit to yourself, then start off. Can you remember your way back to the boat?"

"You're putting me on!" she retorted. "I don't have any built in gyro like you. And what are you setting me up for, damn you?"

"Don't chat. Point your nose at the sun and get moving." She heard him call out something in sounds she didn't understand, and the men gave her all the room she needed. She set away with an appearance of confidence she didn't feel, and was intrigued by all the activity behind her, which she couldn't watch. It was quite a walk, and she didn't recognize any of it until she was actually in the trail where they had roused the *bambar*. Her two men had steered her with occasional words in between the gabble they were exchanging with the natives. She had time to wonder at them. Nothing seemed to shake them for very long, and they had the devil's own gift for switching circumstances to their advantage. *What in the world have they faked up this time?* She was just recognizing the small glade, when Coleman called to her gently to halt and turn around.

"Give them a bit more of the arm-waving, my dear," he advised, "and then tell them to go away, *good-bye* and all that."

"Sam Coleman!" she declared, sawing the air and calling down fire from the skies. "There had better be a good ex-

planation for all this!" The native men eyed her apprehensively until she remembered to say *good-bye* and *go!* They went promptly.

"Come on!" Lovell chuckled. "We better get down in the boat, just in case one of them does pluck up the courage to be nosy. You did fine, Claire!" He aimed a brisk pat at her leaf-covered rear as he went by laden with meat. "I'll tell you the full story once we get safely out into the river."

Although it was full daylight, she would have had to grope her way back, but Lovell led them to the hidden skimmer as if he'd made the journey scores of times, and within a very short while they were out of the creek and once more on the broad bosom of the river. "And that's a relief," Lovell admitted. "You tell her, Sam, while I get the grill going and cook some of this. I'll half-cook all the rest, so it will keep, but right now I fancy a steak. How about you, Claire? It tastes fine when it's cooked, better than raw."

"It had better!" she declared. "Now, Sam, what was all that weird stuff for?"

She watched him grope in his pack and dig out his faithful pipe, charging it affectionately. He looked incongruous in a leaf skirt, stained dark tan and with a pipe, against the setting of the craft. It came to her that she really ought to be busy resuming civilized dress, but she didn't feel like it at all. The skimmer's speed was making a pleasant breeze and she felt quite comfortable, apart from the lingering smell of *scaff*.

"Well, now," Coleman began, chuckling to himself, "we let them think that you were a witch, a kind of magic woman. I can't think why it didn't occur to us sooner! But when we heard them mumbling about magic, it was a natural reaction."

"The reason we didn't think of it," Lovell suggested, dropping a thick slab of meat on the glowing plate, "is that it's strictly a woman's affair, and the men don't talk about it any more than they can help. We've always been careful to make contact with only men. It's the damned mushrooms."

"A kind of psychedelic fungus," Coleman explained, "that the women keep to themselves as a delicacy. It gives them funny spells, sometimes, and out of that comes a whole string of myths about magic women who see visions. Some of them go all the way out of this world and become loopy, and the natives like to give them plenty of room, sort of fearful respect, if you know what I mean."

"I'm getting the general idea," Claire said grimly. "You let them go right on thinking that I'm out of my mind! Flattered, I'm sure! Whatever put the notion into their heads in the first place?"

"Well, a whole string of things, I imagine. You managed to kill the biggest swamp hog anybody ever saw, without a spear or weapon of any kind that they would recognize. You were hungry enough to be eating raw meat, and yet you clobbered their woman in a way they can never have seen before. I mean, their usual method is to kick and scratch and wrestle until one admits she's had enough. But you—I say, that was a hell of an exhibition, my dear! They'll be telling tall tales about that for years to come!"

"There was something else, Sam," Lovell prompted, grinning over an aroma of grilling steak. "Why don't you tell her all of it?"

"To tell you the truth, old man, I'm half afraid to. She might just start in and clobber me the way she did that boss lady!"

"Come on!" Claire insisted sternly. "What else? Come on, was it the way I look? Was it?"

"That's about it," Coleman shrugged and looked wary. "That juice, on your hair—well, it's turned out a queer kind of greenish tinge. With green eyes to match, you can't really blame them for thinking . . ." He watched her intently.

She took a deep breath, scowled, and then had to laugh. "Right now I can't wait to try some of what's making that smell. Surely it's ready now?"

It was. Lovell sliced it into generous portions and they tried it, Claire to find that it was as delicious as it smelled.

"For this," she sighed, as she swallowed happily, "I could

forgive a lot, especially with these onion things." She enjoyed another mouthful and then demanded, "What was all that chatter you were having with the men?"

"Ah!" Coleman gulped hurriedly. "That was almost worth the whole bit of risk. We got news. Seemingly, the spear-fish tribe—that's us—do quite a bit of traveling up and down the reaches of the river. Not on it, mind, but close by. And not the women, but the men do get shuffled about a bit, or they run off, when they get bored. That's why our young boss woman back there was so keen to collect a follower or two."

"Don't you believe it," she contradicted. "She was fascinated by Roger, the big hunk of man. I'm going to have trouble with him, I can see." His embarrassment didn't show under the stain, but she knew it was there. "Anyway, you said news. Good?"

"Bit of both. So far as I can guess, this river runs about two hundred miles, maybe more, inland, and then we hit a place where the water falls down from the sky. That, I fancy, can only mean waterfalls."

"That's a blow. We'll lose our boat."

"Looks like it. But the good bit is that the men claim there's a tribe around that region that has a pack animal of some kind and does a lot of moving about, trading and such."

"Domestic drambagar, in fact?"

"That I will believe when I see it," Lovell murmured. "I've heard native stories before. Anybody want another helping? No? All right, I'm going to singe the rest of it and pack it. There's nothing much to do for the next two hundred miles except sit back and enjoy it."

"And sleep." Claire yawned grossly. "I know, I know, it's the air, and the food, and the excitement. Good night all!"

SEVEN

SHE AWOKE to a sense of well-being that was so good she was afraid to disturb it at first. Then the vivid evening glow of the sky told her it was late and that she must have slept the whole day. She stirred. Someone had very thoughtfully rigged a shade for her. As she stirred, her arm brushed something still and warm. Lovell was there fast asleep, his head resting in the crook of his arm. Moving her head more, she saw Coleman with the tiller hooked under his arm while he charged his pipe. That was all right, but there was something missing, the muted purr of the generator.

"Hello, there," she said quietly, wriggling herself so as not to disturb Lovell. "Why are we stopped?"

"White water. Look astern." Coleman aimed his chin and she looked past him. "Rapids," he said. "Bit of a problem." She could see the foaming tumult about a mile away and the line over the stern that was their anchor. "I'd like to hear Roger's opinion on them, but he's only been down about four hours. I don't want to wake him yet."

"It's almost sunset." She did rough calculations and frowned.

"Right," he agreed, "about an hour away. We've come over a hundred miles, allowing for bends."

"You mean I've been snoring away for over nine hours?"

"That's all right, you needed it. Ready for a bite?"

"Now look here, Sam!" She was stern. "What do I have to do to convince you I am not fragile? Stop coddling me! I'll bet *you* haven't eaten."

"That's all right," he repeated awkwardly. "Nothing new. We often go a whole day without grub. We have to, sometimes. If you want to take a dip and freshen up a bit, I'll get the grill going." The skimmer was close to the shore, in shallows, so she was able to splash happily in the cool

water and get rid of the rest of the mud, and, with her brush and comb, even managed to make her hair more disciplined. Then, while they waited for the steaks to come to perfection, Coleman spread the map over their knees again and showed her some additions he had made.

He said, "Putting this and that together, we're about here now, and this mountain ridge seems to run along, about fifty miles back from this river, to meet the plateau somewhere about here. That will probably be the falls, and some kind of break in the mountain ridge. And that would be the logical place for traders to pass through to the uplands. It looks as if your story is hanging together so far."

"It certainly does. Sam, I've chased many a wild goose—you expect to on my job—but you never get to like it. I'm glad this one seems to have real feathers, and a nest."

He put the map away and busied himself with the tempting meat. "You know, when Roger brought you along to see me, I didn't think you were the type at all. You looked neat, pretty, straight out of a glossy, fragile—your word. But you're not like that at all. You'd make a damn fine hunter!"

"You're very kind, but you don't know what's going on inside."

Lovell lifted his head and sat up, immediately wide awake. "Smells good, Sam. Claire! Sleep well? Why are we stopped?"

"White water ahead. We can take a look at it in a while. Come and eat." Lovell moved to stand and stare about, studying the rapids ahead for a moment, then plunged over the side and splashed. He got aboard quickly again to take his share of the meal.

"Looks to be a fair stretch," he said thoughtfully, "but it shouldn't be any trouble if we play it right. Speed will be our only problem."

"You mean we'll be able to sail up there?"

"I reckon. See, we only draw three feet of water even when we're fully loaded and awash. We can't sink, and we can't turn over unless we damage one of the buoyancy tanks, and we aren't going to do that. So, as soon as we're ready,

we lash everything down tight and get going. I'll go ashore in a minute and get us a couple of poles. Sam and I will be in the bows to shove us away from any rocks that get too near, you'll take the tiller and give her the gun, keep her heading right."

"Just like that!" she mocked, and he gave her a slow grin.

"Just like that. All you have to do is keep aiming her head at the dark patches, we'll do the rest. But keep the throttle screwed all the way up. This water's getting fresher all the time, and the drive doesn't work so well in fresh water. It loses conductivity."

Claire had handled boats before and she had learned to be familiar with this one, but nothing like the bucking, roaring nightmare of rapids had ever come her way before. The stern slid and heaved, seeming to scud sideways at the least touch. There were scores of boiling crosscurrents sprouting and foaming around fanglike rocks, and dark water was scarce. Most of the time it was all she could do to aim for the lowest point between curdling edges of white spray. Flying spray and jostling waves had the skimmer full and overflowing in the first fifteen minutes. Lovell's claim that it couldn't turn over was severely tested again and again as the craft heeled and reared and swooped crazily from one boiling current to the next.

Her arms ached first, one clutching her backrest, the other holding the tiller, and then the ache spread all over her body as she slid and twisted, gripped the generator casing with her knees, and tried to ride out the rollings and pitchings. Again and again great sheets of driving spray swept into her face, stung her body and caught her breath. The darkness, oddly enough, helped. Lovell had made that point before they started.

He had told her, "Believe it or not, with the sunlight glinting off the waves, we'd all be blinded in no time. This way, we'll be able to see all we want, don't you worry."

Lovell was in the bows with Sam on the other side, slightly astern of him. Both men were straining and struggling to fend off the menacing rocks, staggering as the wild water

leaped over them, but coming right back to labor more. It was a nightmare of black and white and constant movement and smashing water. Squinting ahead into the spume, Claire saw Roger raising his arm.

"We made it! Clear water ahead!" What was he pointing at? Sam came reeling back, to stumble into the stern and grip her shoulder, to clap her bare skin vigorously and grin like a crazy man.

"We're through, Claire! It's all clear ahead now. Straight ahead!" She heard him as if through cotton wool, but the grip of his hand on her shoulder had warmth in it that flowed into her, driving away her dreamlike concentration on rock and water. The skimmer settled out of its crazy plunging into a steady, smooth run, and his hand came to grip hers on the tiller, warming her fingers so that she was able to unclamp them, to ease down on the throttle. She began to shiver. Now Lovell came back, shaking himself like a dog, grinning hugely.

"That was lively," he declared. "About eight or nine miles, I'd say. It should be a lot easier on the trip back." He stretched his hand to nudge her shoulder gently. "You did fine, handled her great!"

"I wouldn't want to do that regularly. Frankly, I *do* feel just a bit fragile, right now!" She smiled.

"You're cold," Coleman explained. "We'll fix that in a minute. We'll heat up some coffee as soon as we bail out the worst of the water."

"Let me help with that," she insisted. "I've done nothing but sit. Here, you take the tiller." She thrust it into his hand and paddled forward, creaking in every joint, but determined. She settled herself in a crouch beside Lovell, took a bowl, and began bailing. It helped drive away the aches. All at once the big man raised his head, their faces so close that their noses were nearly touching. He looked puzzled, almost troubled.

"You're quite a woman," he said quietly and lowered his head again to go on bailing. "Never met anyone like you before."

"Is that good?" she asked, feeling breathless for some reason.

"I don't know." His movements were steady, efficient and smooth, his face still turned. "Never thought much about it before."

"You two have worked together a lot. You know each other, treat each other as equal. I'm a stranger, Roger, but I'd like it if you could somehow just let me be one of the team."

"Can't do that!" he retorted, with a sudden change of tone that told her the moment of rapport was over. "Don't look now, but you're losing your skirt. This stuff tends to wilt fast in fresh water."

"Now you tell me!" She grabbed at her disintegrating waistband.

All the rest of that night and all the following day taking turns at the tiller, watching the jungle slide by, and discussing the slow but steady changes in the trees and the way the river grew narrower. Twice they disturbed great honking flights of water birds, heavy, blue and white, swan-like creatures with spearing beaks, and once they came upon a rolling, spouting herd of things like hippopotami, as yellow-brown as autumn leaves. The two men eyed those wistfully.

"Never seen anything like that before, Roger, have we?"

"No, but we never went up a river before, either. We're getting high. We must have come close on two hundred fifty miles and it's cooler. We must be getting close to those falls by now."

The day wore on and sunset came to steal away the river banks in thick dusk. There was neither sight nor sound of waterfalls.

"We can't have missed them, and we know the natives can't count very well, so we just go on," Coleman said.

"They can't count at all without their fingers," Lovell murmured, "and who knows how far is a day's walk? But we could have missed the falls, Sam. We have only our

guess that they are on the main river at all. They could have meant some tributary or other. It would be all the same to them."

They went on steadily, but anxiously now, in the dark, following the dancing star reflections on the water and listening ever more worriedly for the sound of falling water. Then they came to a problem that made them all-stare, and sag and wonder what to do. Lovell, at the tiller, eased down until they were barely making progress. "And now, what?" he murmured, looking ahead to where their river highway split itself into two equal portions.

"It's a facer, all right," Coleman admitted. "There's no possible way of telling which is which. The only thing we can do is pick one and try it, for about two hours, say. We *have* to be near the falls by then. If not, we can come back and try the other one, that's all."

"And if the falls aren't on the river at all?" Lovell suggested. Claire sighed, beat her clenched fist gently against the boat's side and tried to think of a way out. The map was useless here.

"It's a bit thin, but I prefer to believe that the falls *are* on this river," she declared. "Look, the smugglers are using it as a highway, we know that much. We assume they are based somewhere on the plateau and that they fly as low as possible to avoid being spotted. And a fall, as we've said, argues a cut through the mountains, a gorge. So they would use that. It's on this river, almost for sure."

"All right," Lovell admitted. "We try one fork, for a couple of hours. Who wants to flip a coin?"

"Just a minute!" Coleman sat up urgently. "I've just thought—the smugglers! That shuttle! Roger, if you were in their place and had to fly a shuttle by night over three hundred miles or more of river, regularly, wouldn't you want some kind of navigational aid, if you could get it? You remember the way they had that landing light all ready, down at the river mouth, *before* the thing showed up?"

"String beam! A nice, tight, directional beam to follow!

You could be right, Sam. Only, would they chance broadcasting anything?"

"Why not? Remember where we are, miles away from any settlement. A short-range beam between the plateau and the coast wouldn't leak where anybody would get it—except us, that is."

"It's worth a try, better than nothing, anyway. Get the transceiver out. I'll run us over to the right bank."

"Am I with you?" Claire wondered, snuggling beside him at the tiller as Coleman rummaged in a pack and came up with a small hand set. "You hope to listen in on the smugglers' radio?"

"Something like that. They won't use any frequency we could pick up, for talk. I'll bet they don't talk at all. But it's no trick to run a beam link between the river mouth and wherever they're working from, just to give the shuttle something to follow. We might be able to hear that. Those little sets are pretty critical on direction; they have to be, should a boat break down in mid-ocean. Keep your fingers crossed." They were almost to the right bank. There was a click and a faint sizzle of random noise as Coleman turned the hand set delicately in his fingers. There it was, a very faint but positive chirp, roughly every five seconds.

"That's him, all right!" Coleman muttered. "Seems to be on line with this fork, but we'll try the other one, just to be sure. Away you go, Roger." Ten minutes later, after searching vainly for the chirp on the left fork, Coleman nodded. "No doubt about that at all. It's over there, the right hand path. It sounds like something out of Vedanta, but that's it, sure enough!"

"Oh, Sam!" Claire flung her arms around him impulsively. "You're a genius!" She hugged him hard.

He spluttered awkwardly, "Hey, steady! You'll make me drop the radio!"

She laughed, and caught a crooked grin on Lovell's face, so she went back to him at the tiller and spread her arms. "You're a genius, too, but you are too big to hug. More like a tree!" She settled by his side and observed, tactfully, "Any-

way, your arms are longer than mine!" He chuckled and put one long, powerful arm around her so warmly that she protested. "Easy, I need to breathe a little! That's better."

"We got lucky again," he said. "I believe you *are* a witch!"

They sped on at full throttle up the right-hand fork, and she felt a peculiar peace, a security, snuggled close to him. It wasn't love in any way she had ever imagined it, but it was extremely pleasant. She was happily far away in some unformed dream when the river ahead took a long slow curve and they ran into a brisk, cool, and damp rush of air. They heard a distant rumbling that made them all sit up and pay attention. The roar grew as they traveled, and the smell of spray became more and more plain. Then, swinging around another smooth bend, they saw the falls. Lovell eased back on their speed without comment. It was still more than a mile away.

"When that lad said, 'the water that falls from the sky,' he wasn't just talking. Folks, that is a waterfall!" Lovell's voice was awed, with good reason. Claire gazed at it in fascination, at a great gleaming wall of water that went up and up. No one could be blamed for thinking that it did, in fact, pour from some source up where the stars glimmered along its edge. Great white plumes of vapor hung to either side like curtains, and the river boiled at its foot. Lovell murmured, "That's it. From here, we walk!"

EIGHT

THEY LAY in another little creek they had found nearby, still more than a mile from the falls. In the gloom, with inhospitable thorn bushes on either side, the thunderous roar was softened to a steady murmur and they could talk away their awe.

Coleman said, "That water must be all of two hundred yards straight drop; and by the way it bells out, there's a hell of a gorge at the top, feeding it."

"Which means," Lovell pointed out, "that the skimmer wouldn't be any good to us even if we could get it up there, which we can't. So, like I said, we're afoot from here." There was a twinkle in his voice, even if she couldn't see his eyes. "At least *you* are. We did our bit. I'll just scout around and see if there's some kind of trail to start you on." He slid into the water.

"Mind how you go," Coleman chuckled to her as she set away to follow. "I don't like the looks of the thorns."

She slid knee deep into cool water and groped ashore carefully, managing to find an opening in the natural hedge where she could get up on to solid ground. Coleman was right behind her as she found a narrow glade. Lovell loomed in the dark.

"You!" she complained. "You know I can't go on alone! What do you want me to do, plead with you?" He chuckled softly at her.

"That will be the day! I can't see you pleading with anybody!"

"Oh, I don't know." She edged towards him mischievously. "I'm quite good at persuading people. Dear Roger, clever Roger, you're so big and strong and handsome. . . ." She expected him to back away, but instead he reached out with both hands to grab her by the waist and hoist her

into the air, so that she squeaked and grabbed at his hands.

"Now," he rumbled, "let's hear some real pleading, before I drop you right in among the thorns!"

"Put me down! Put—me—down, please! I'll be good!" She wriggled, half-laughing, and then saw in the gloom how the dark bushes behind him stirred and parted and an enormous silver-brown muzzle thrust through, growling at the noise. Before she could speak, Lovell spun around, throwing her to the left. She flew, fell, rolled over and came up on her feet by sheer reflex and training, ignoring the thorns, to see a huge, hairy creature sitting up on four squat legs and offering two more with yellow claws on powerful forelimbs that sprouted from either side of its muzzle. As it growled again, she saw long, yellow fangs in its steaming mouth.

Roger, backing away and hunching his shoulders as he growled back at it, muttered to Coleman, "Back to the boat, Sam, fast. I'll keep him busy. Get the fifty-bore. We won't stop him with anything less."

The creature shambled forward now, only a pace or two, and he backed away again, exactly the same distance. Claire understood the strategy dimly, but she didn't like the way the creature kept feinting with its paws. It seemed merely irritable, not really aroused, and she hoped it never would be, because it was all of six feet high at the shoulders, with its muzzle tucked between them, cradled by bunched muscles under the fur. It seemed not to mind the thorns, but she was painfully aware of them as she angled along to keep abreast of the unequal contestants. Roger was being driven back slowly, protesting all the while in growls. All at once, the creature lashed out at the full stretch of its forelimbs, just as she had dreaded. Roger was too close. She saw him leap back desperately, the murderous claws missing his face by no more than an inch. He was down, flat on his back in a dense bush.

Claire surged forward instantly, heedless of the raking thorns in her flesh, screaming at the beast. She saw the huge, blunt head hesitate and then swing around to glare at her, a yawning red maw opening in a chesty growl. She

yelled again, waving her arms. From her left came a whip-crack noise, and there was a thump of massive impact. Coleman fired again and again. The hairy monster screamed, shivered, tried to scramble around, screamed again and fell heavily, crashing through the thorns. Then, with a coughing sigh, it was still. Coleman called, "Roger? You all right?"

"I reckon, if I can ever get unstitched from this damned pincushion. I need a chopper. Claire, was that you screaming, just now?"

"Who else? And scream is right; I'm stuck. If I so much as breathe, I'm punctured more. Sam, you'll have to get me out of here somehow. I can't move!"

"Obliged to you again, Claire. He'd have had me cold."

"What sort of creature is it? And what were you trying to do, scare it away or something?"

"The natives call him a *maroobar*, a sweet tooth. I guess he's a bear of a kind, and mostly a vegetarian, for all those teeth, but he'll eat meat if he has to. He doesn't give trouble as a rule, but we must have landed right on his private patch and woke him up. He was scaring *me* off; that usually works. He won't take action if he sees you're getting out of it, only the damned thorns held me back. Hey, Sam, I'm bleeding to death!"

Claire could feel blood oozing from her wounds too, but it hurt too much to move. "You don't suppose there are any more about, then?"

"I doubt it. It takes a good bit of territory to feed a body that big, unless he's mated, and I doubt that, too. He wouldn't have been so touchy if there had been a female around."

Claire heard Coleman and the steady thump and crack of a blade coming closer. Extrication was a slow and delicate task. She insisted he free Roger first, because he was lying down, whereas she, standing, could at least hold still and avoid further gouging. It was well over an hour later before they got back to the boat and could start repair work.

"Far side of the boat, you two," Coleman ordered, "and

stay in the water for a bit to rinse out those wounds. God only knows what kind of infection you might get from that lot."

It was a relief, and refreshing, just to sink in the water and relax, and listen while Coleman kept up a steady, reassuring chatter. "Seen a maroobar a time or two before, but usually among rocky outcrops, bushes, that kind of stuff, where he can find fruit and berries. He probably has his bed in the thorns."

"What did you stop him with?" she wondered. "Fifty-bore?"

"Biggest one we carry. It slings out a fifty millimeter expanding slug, with assist."

"You can't possibly fire a fifty millimeter slug with an explosive powder charge. Good grief! That would blast like a cannon!"

"Triple effect takes care of that," Coleman explained. "The powder charge starts it off and regular ferrite rings give it stepup through a coil, but it has—the shell, I mean—a rocket-fuel booster. That's the second crack you hear. By the time it's about eight or nine feet from the muzzle it's passing the sonic barrier—some wallop. And you need that, for maroobar; he takes a bit of stopping."

"It's time we stopped, too," Lovell muttered. "The way we're bleeding into the water we'll have nibblers around soon. I reckon we're clean enough. Better hop out."

Claire felt better as she settled in the boat, but within seconds her wounds began to sting. "We do have first-aid, don't we?" she asked, and Coleman chuckled as he sorted out items from his pack.

"Look up!" she cried. "You say we've reached the mountains? We have, indeed. Just look at them!"

After one wide-eyed stare, Lovell settled by the tiller and sent the boat purring back out into mid-stream, where the bellowing of the fall hit them once more, but where they could get a clear view away from trees. The morning air shimmered with multiple rainbows around the fall, but back

beyond that roaring water, rising massively into the blue-gray distance, lay huge sleeping giants of mountains, jagged and bare, awesome in their grandeur.

"Imagine trying to climb those!" she breathed.

Lovell said, "We won't have to, we'll go through. That's what we have to climb, over that way." He aimed his arm back beyond the creek. There were more mountains, not so high but just as rugged, rising steeply away a few miles back from the river. "Up there," he said. "That's our road."

They ran the skimmer back into the creek, and in daylight were able to take it much farther in, almost a mile before they had to stop. Then, working together like the team they were becoming, they beached and secured the craft. While Lovell went off to forage and scout, Claire helped Coleman unship the grill and some provisions and set up a temporary base on the dry side of a rocky slope in the sun.

"I'll be sorry to leave the old skimmer behind," he admitted, "but it looks as if we have no choice. Thing to do now is work out the minimum we can afford to carry."

"My trade goods!" she sighed. "I've been counting on those. I'd hate to abandon them now, but it looks as if I'll have to. It will take us all our time to carry enough food and water—and weapons."

"Ah, well," he soothed, "we can worry about that later. Maybe Roger will have an idea or two. I wonder where he's got to?"

"If he's half as hungry as I am, he'll be right back when he smells the cooking. There, what did I just say? Here he comes now."

"Local fashions must be a little different around here," Lovell declared, as he dropped an armful of pale-green grass blades and opened them to show a haul of berries. "This stuff is the nearest I could find to our old dress material. It's a bit skimpy, but it will have to do. The berries are all right, though, I've seen them before."

"This is hardly worth bothering about!" Claire took up

a narrow leaf no more than eight inches long. "We might as well have nothing on at all!"

"That wouldn't do, not for the natives. Not unless they are very much more advanced than those we know! Clothing is as much a matter of status as anything else with primitive peoples." Coleman sorted out generous helpings of food and settled comfortably to start on his own.

"Quiet," Lovell breathed. Claire listened, trying to hear what he had heard. Then he was up and away, scrambling lithely up the rock slope to a high point and peering over. As she joined him and lay flat to look, she heard it too, a long way off, the unmusical clash of something like a badly-designed bell.

"Down there," he murmured, putting his arm over her shoulder and stretching it so that as she turned, her cheek lined up by his forearm. "Down in that cut, between the trees, coming this way. I take it all back; that is a dram-bagar, and there's somebody riding it!"

Coleman, stretched out on her other side, muttered softly, "A boss woman in front, pack animals, another boss woman, more pack animals, and men—by God, porters! It's a blasted caravan!"

There was also another mounted one bringing up the rear as the line of figures emerged from the trees and started toiling up the slope. The clash of bells was distinct now.

"It'll take them half an hour to get this far," Lovell estimated. "We'd better make ready to cut in. We'd better do it right, too. These people have metal of some kind, and that's something new. But they're going the way we want, and they have transport. Come on, there's no time to waste staring!"

NINE

CLAIRE LAY still on the high ledge overlooking the trail, her eyes soaking up detail to occupy her mind, to guard against nerves. About fifteen feet below her she could see Roger, also flat and watching. Sam was away to the left. She had on a grass skirt of a kind. On her forehead she felt the drying out of an entirely new kind of clan mark, done in glow paint from Sam's pack. According to him, the two men used it rarely, but always to the great astonishment of the natives. She hoped it would work this time. She liked the drambagars less the closer they came. Not quite the size of a horse, they had a bristle-ruff about the neck and fur everywhere else in all shades of yellow and brown. The six legs seemed to wander at random, each one finding its own foothold on the rock-strewn, sloping trail, while the head poked forward threateningly to show an elongated, cat-like muzzle well furnished with teeth. The riders apparently controlled the beasts with double reins fastened to stout leather bands over the muzzles and behind the fangs.

Large, dismal-sounding bells dangled from the pack animals, and a similar metal was to be seen in coppery studs in the leather wrist and ankle bands of the riding women. The lead woman was young, alert and arrogant; her clan mark was a circle with a slant line through it. Her black hair was caught back in a thong and a leather girdle was about her waist. She was pale tan, like a high-caste Hindu. Three animals back from her rode another woman, who was older, hard-faced and obviously senior. Far back, trudging wearily and looking unhappy, the men were loaded with bundles. For them there was no ornament except grass skirts like Claire's. These bundles were netted, both on the animals and the men, and nets were a novelty. The last six animals were without burden, which was puz-

zling, unless, as Lovell had guessed, the idea was to spare them until the men were dispensed with.

The caravan was very close. The leading rider halted to look back. Lovell chose that moment to stand up, full in the sun, his feet apart and arms folded, to call out, "Wait!"

The reaction was swift and savage. The lead rider whipped her head around, and her free arm snapped back and forward strongly, launching a short, metal-tipped spear straight at Lovell. In mid-flight it suddenly leaped aside, spun over and over and clattered away among the stones at the trail side, with an echoing crack. Lovell moved not a muscle. Up above him, Claire released a pent breath, remembering what he had said.

"They look nervous, touchy; it seems they're in dangerous parts, here. Better expect fast reactions to surprises, Sam!"

The native girl was frozen for a moment, then she yelled something at the solitary figure. Claire had to admire the nerve of both parties in the little drama. Lovell stood quite still. The rest of the caravan began to pile up. The old woman came up with imperious authority and astonishment. There were mumbles of fear and wonder from the staring men. There was a pistol-shot cracking from the whip of the end rider, who now came pounding up to see what was happening, lashing the men out of her way casually. Lovell moved, spread his arms theatrically and began asking them to stop, wait and listen. "Help us. We are travelers, passing through."

Claire readied herself for her part. It was all wrong that a mere man should speak without being spoken to first, but it helped to provide a dramatic entrance for Claire. It almost went wrong. She was on her knees, waiting his signal, when the senior woman, driving her hand down by her thigh, brought it up in a throw. Something spun in the sunlight; then, just like the spear, it leaped away with a *ting*, to spend itself by the trail side. It was Sam, with his needle gun. He had claimed to be able to hit a gnat on the wing with it. Lovell went on saying his few words as

if nothing had happened, then raised his arms up over his head.

Claire stood, staring into the middle distance, assuming calm but shivering on the inside. *Suppose this particular tribe doesn't believe in magic women?* Then she heard a subdued gasp and mutter of consternation from below, and felt better. She looked down, to see the men running back down the trail, free of burdens and the three mounted women struggling to calm their pack animals from the fear that was obvious in their own faces.

The victory was won, but ingrained habits die hard and there was a lot of tedious dickering to do before things were settled. Claire used her meager language as best she could to keep impressing the fact that the men were hers, not for sale or conquest. Lovell and Coleman kept her abreast of the argument as much as they could, picking out familiar words here and there.

"It's a mess, all right," Lovell muttered. "All this stuff has to be loaded up, and they have no men. They have to go on quite a bit yet. There's some kind of rendezvous with somebody that sounds to me like Yakut."

"We'd better do the loading, Roger. We can't push this magic bit too far. They won't work and have men stand around idle; that's too much!"

"I wish I knew what the old woman is so scared of, Sam, the way she keeps pointing ahead. As far as I can make out, they have to go some way yet, then the two young ones turn back—"

"And they want to take us with them!"

"My cue to establish ownership again." Claire used her vocabulary again, emphatically. She said in an aside, "Doesn't it sound to you like my warrior women who hunt men?"

"So? What do we do, let ourselves be captured?"

Eventually all the beasts were loaded and the caravan started again, but now three of them were carrying everything from the skimmer, and a fourth carried Claire herself, much to her dislike, as her two companions were afoot.

"Can't push it too far," Coleman repeated, reassuring her. "We'll be all right; it can't be that far. It's a pity we don't know what we're going to run into, though. The old woman won't talk, and the young ones don't know."

Claire worried about that, too, for about ten minutes. Then she had other things to bother her. She found that riding a drambagar was ten times more uncomfortable than it looked. Seemingly the traders had never heard of saddles or blankets, and there was nothing between her and the beast's hard spine but her own skin and muscles, which soon protested at the effort. In its deliberate stroll, feeling out a foothold for each padded paw, the animal was utterly unpredictable in its tilt and roll, and she had to manage as best she could. Ten minutes later, she was suffering, but thankful that she was riding, because the trail now became suitable more for a mountain goat than anything else. The caravan strung out in single file, winding, climbing and slithering, evading deadly drops by the strength of a claw at times. They passed the thunderous boom of the falls and along the precipitous side of the gorge, where a stiff breeze tore at them and nothing grew for miles. Over her cramps and agonies, Claire found time to wonder where they were going to find anything like civilization. Then, after some hours of struggling and scrambling, the trail took a turn into a narrow defile away from the rushing river, and she saw, beyond, a scene down into distant green, a vast plain that stretched on into blue distance. There was a sudden check.

On either side, as if materialized out of the rocks, were riders, silent and menacing. Claire took one look and her heart leaped, and then sank again. They were copper-skinned women, mounted on a different kind of drambagar, which was dark-furred and lean. The women were sleek and arrogant with muscle, hard-faced, all jaw and chin, with no forehead to speak of, and few curves. Their black hair was braided close to the head and held with a thong; they wore studded leather straps at the neck, wrists and ankles, curious markings on their arms and across their

breasts, and white fur loincloths. Short, metal-tipped spears, and knives were strapped to their thighs. There were a dozen of them, at least.

The native women muttered fearfully, including the word Yakut, and then the leader of the ominous band snapped out commands and gestured with a spear back along the way they had come. In a matter of moments the native women were gone, hurriedly urging their awkward mounts back along the trail, and the three were left with the pack animals. Claire looked back to see Lovell and Coleman scrambling forward to join her, and saw too how the red-skinned riders urged their beasts forward to interfere. She scrambled down from her own mount, wincing as her feet took her weight against the agonized muscles in her thighs, then turned to the leader.

"Stop!" she said valiantly. "Stop! Mine!"

The red-skinned woman grinned and slid down to the ground with the easy grace of abundant health and vigor. She came forward, her head high and her short spear crooked in her arm, its point aimed casually at Claire's middle. She stopped just out of arm's reach, set her feet apart, and stared, just as a horseman might stare at a new breed. She was big, six feet two inches tall and barrel-chested, her striped breasts conical and firm, lifting to her steady breathing. She exuded arrogance and contempt. Claire began to boil inside, forgetting her aches and thoughts of impressing the creature with illusions of magic. The name Yakut fitted perfectly. Now the red woman moved again, came forward with the spear still pointed, her other hand reaching out to investigate the strange mark on Claire's forehead.

It was an invitation not to be resisted. Claire inhaled, then swept the spear aside, and threw it away, at the same time seizing on the inquiring hand and wrist. The red-skinned woman flew in a tangle of arms and legs, landing heavily. *The bigger they are . . .* Claire thought, and trod forward eagerly, to be there with a savage knee as the red woman staggered up, and went reeling back. But she came up again, her face a mask of fury, blood starting to trickle

from her nose. *Took the sneer off your face, my love. Now let's really shake you apart!* She braced to meet the stalking approach, affording the long arms plenty of respect. *This one has a reach!* She chopped at one arm, took the other over a shoulder and heaved again, but the red skin managed to catch at Claire's shoulder, dragging her down. Claire rolled fast, over on her back and kicked with her free foot into her opponent's face. Scrambling up, Claire limped to take advantage of the momentary daze, smashing and chopping at neck and forearms to stun her enemy. Something hard connected with the back of her head.

Claire woke across a drambagar in a back-breaking position. A tentative try proved that the same thong that held her ankles also extended to her wrists, over her head, and was probably looped under the beast's body.

Later, out of a stupor of wrenching agony she realized dimly that the racking movement had ceased. It was fractionally better than bouncing, but not much. She tried to ease herself, heard a sharp-voiced order; strong hands seized her ankles urgently and then released them. She fell headfirst onto soft dirt and slumped in a new pattern of twisting distress. The sharp voice snapped again, and hands hauled on her bonds, dragging her to her feet, and hauling her along into a staggering, stumbling trot. She saw a squat stone building with a wide double door of dark metal rails, and the busy movement of many red-skinned women and squealing beasts. She got the blurred impression of other stone buildings somewhat apart. She was dragged impatiently into the dimness of the first structure, into the thick smell of many animals, over a slippery, foul floor, and then her arms went up painfully, as her captor slung the leather thongs over a stone crossbar eight feet above the ground and insured that Claire was held helplessly on tiptoe. The Yakut went away without a word or glance.

Claire sagged, and then rose on her toes hurriedly as the slim thongs bit into her wrists and her shoulders creaked painfully. Now that she had time and comparative silence,

she was aware of so many racking aches and hurts that it seemed impossible there could be so many in one body. The recent cuts from the thorns were only a minor part of the whole. This place, she guessed, was a stable. By turning gingerly, she could see drambagar not far off, secured in the same way that she was, with their reins slung over the bar to keep their heads high. She wondered dismally how Roger and Sam had got on, tried to hope that they might somehow have escaped and realized that she was getting light-headed.

"Hey, Sam, you conscious? Can you hear me?"

"Huh? Oh—hell—my arms! Roger? You—tied up?"

"Strung up, more like. Damn Yakuts! We have to get out of here, before they start exercising what imagination they have."

"They seem to have done all right, so far. It would be a pleasure just to fall down. Reckon they were laying for us?"

"It looked like it. I wonder what happened to Claire?"

Mention of her name seemed to slice through the fog and brought her wits alive. "I'm over here!" she choked, her voice coming out rustily. "I can't see you, but I can hear you all right."

"You don't sound too good. Roger, what d'you mean, get out of here? How the hell are we going to do that?"

"I reckon—that hitching-rail—all safe for *them*, maybe—but not too high up for me. If I can jump . . ."

There was a grunt of effort, and a snorting, scrambling sound, then a sigh of relief, followed quickly by a thud of feet. "Whoa there, you horrible thing, you can't chew me, much as you'd like to. Sam? Right, I see you. Hold still now. Damn it, my fingers are numb!"

She held her breath, straining the last effort out of her ankles and calves to take the weight off her wrists; she heard muffled groanings and grunts, and then a choking sigh.

"Thanks, Roger. Better get Claire. It's going to take me a minute or two to get my joints reset. I'll be with you soon as I can make tracks."

She saw Roger now, ducking and stumbling past the snorting beasts, and called to him. He was a frightful sight, filthy with mud and dirt, and with dark bruises everywhere, one eye half shut, but grinning crookedly just the same. He reached up to unfasten her bonds, grabbing her as her knees failed to hold her up under her weight and leaning her against a rough wall.

"All in one piece?" he asked. She nodded painfully. "Right, move about a bit and get loosened up. There's no time to waste; we've got to get away from here. I don't like the way these Yakut make friends. Sam? You moving?"

"Unwillingly, Roger." Coleman came, reeling but dogged. "Where the hell will we go, supposing we *do* get out? Where are we?"

"Don't know. I don't care, either. I just want to be far away from here, fast. We'll take the three drambagar nearest the door. Come on!"

Claire managed to drag herself after him, to lay her arm over the neck of a squealing, plunging beast, to watch him as he leaned on the heavy door and swung it open, and to marvel at the unstoppable quality of him. She almost fell off the beast as he gave her a boost up. She clung to the reins blindly with one hand, and the ruff-mane with the other, saw Sam go up by her side and sway. Then they were plunging into bright light.

There was a path of soft earth. Claire found Roger on one side, Sam on the other, as they lurched along through the trees. Shrill screams of rage from far behind, and the gasping panic of pursuit, desperately urged the padding mount between her legs. At an intersecting path, there were other riders cutting across, getting in the way. She was dimly aware of squealing and plunging, of stern voices shouting commands, of the beast under her lurching to a sudden stop, and of falling off, hitting hard grass and not wanting to get up.

A white face bent over her, a man with clear blue eyes and a frown. She embraced the darkness that overtook her.

TEN

CLAIRE AWOKE with a wonderful, all-over tingle of well-being and comfort. She opened her eyes, cautiously, but the feeling lingered, even when she sat up to look around. She was in a small room walled with a crazy, but pleasant pattern of silver and white, lit by the bright glow from a window of translucent material. She lay on a firm, comfortable bed that felt as if it had resilient bands instead of springs. What really brought her awake was the beautiful tawny fur that covered her and the silky white one under her. There was a striped one on the floor and another hanging on the wall opposite the window. They were magnificent furs, in stark contrast to the monastic lines of the room itself. There was no sound. She sat quite still, listening, but there was nothing to tell her whether this was just one room by itself, or part of a larger structure.

She moved again, pushing back the fur to swing her legs out and put her feet on the cool floor and then she marveled at her own skin. So far as she could see, there wasn't a mark on her anywhere, neither bruise, nor scrape, nor scar. As she stood up and stretched luxuriously, she felt not a twinge or ache. "Either I have completely looped," she told the empty room, "and that is not unlikely, or I'm dead and this is something I never expected. But why am I so ravenously hungry?"

She was staring into vacancy and thought, looking at that wall-hanging skin when it moved, folded aside, and a man stooped and came in. Defensively aware that she was without a stitch of clothes, she dived for the bed, snatched the fur up to her bosom and stared at him. This was the sculptured, handsome face she had seen in her daze. He was a white man, delicately tanned, not young, but by no means senile, tall, and very well made—the word *flawless* kept pushing into her mind. He had the clearest, deepest

blue eyes she had ever seen. His bleach blond hair was carefully swept back from a high forehead and his face showed a calm dignity that was threatened now by a hint of wonder and bewilderment.

She took in the rest of him, in growing wonder. A magnificent fur, caught across one shoulder and his chest by a jeweled strap, hung like a cape behind him. There were more jeweled straps at his wrists, and soft leather sandals on his feet. Around his loins he wore a glossy black pelt that was held at one side by another strap and buckle.

"You are awake now. Good. I hope you are well?"

It was Anglic, carefully enunciated and oddly inflected, but genuine and understandable. Claire heaved a deep breath.

"I feel fine, thank you. How come you speak my language?"

"I will explain, afterwards. For now, it is my duty to ask if there is anything you need. I wish to serve as far as possible." If it hadn't been so insane, she would have thought he was afraid of her.

"I'm hungry, if that's what you mean."

"Yes. I will bring food, at once." He was gone before she could think to ask about clothes, but back in short order with a metal table on slim legs, loaded with polished metal pans and plates. He put it by her side, and bowed formally. "You wish that I test it, to be sure?"

"You mean, it might be poisoned?"

"There are substances which loosen the tongue and release secrets. I wish to know much about you before I can allow you to go, but not that way."

"That's big of you. What about clothes? Can you . . . ?"

"If it is important, I can offer some of mine. I have no suitable garb for women in my house. You wish?" He interpreted her nod and went away again. She tackled the loaded table, not caring about chemical games. She was munching happily when he returned with a dark-gray fur cape and a kilt like his own, in the same glossy black. She turned her back on him to struggle with the kilt, only

to find that he had settled at the end of her bed, had taken off his own cape, and was watching her, with a veiled, baffled look on his face. She sat, accepting that she was adequately clad by his standards, and returned to her meal.

"Tell me how you came to speak my language," she demanded.

"I have learned it from the other Earth people, they who say they are from another world, far away. How do you say?"

"That is quite a question," Claire murmured as several pieces of puzzle clicked into place in her mind. "I had better be very careful, here. I don't know which side you're on, yet, do I?" Before he could respond, she went on, "I can say this much, though, that it seems I am in your debt for rescuing me, looking after me, and all this. Do you have a name, so that I can thank you in a civilized manner?"

"I am Menzel of Yardo. I regret that you were injured and badly treated. The Yakut were foolish; they have been punished. It is my pleasure that you are healed now."

"You mean *you* did it? Well, I'm Claire Harper, of Earth, and I am grateful to you for being such a good doctor!"

"I do not know that word. I accept your thanks, however."

"Hey, what about my friends, the two men who were with me?" She saw his face harden a little like a defensive screen.

"Your men are well and cared for, like you."

"Thank the Lord for that, anyhow. I want to see them, please."

Now he was really stern; he rose to his feet and stood away from her. She came up after him in immediate apprehension, and realized just how big he was, at least six feet two. He stared down at her thoughtfully.

"They say that Earth has different ways. That may be true; I do not know. It is difficult. I will ask them whether they wish to know you."

"What are you talking about? Of course they'll want to know me!"

"I will ask them. Wait here!"

He left her the prey to mixed emotions. As she returned to the meal, she painstakingly tried to sort them out. It seemed that here, at last, were the other people she had been looking for, the people who had the flower, and a lot of other arts, to judge by the way she had been restored to health. They were civilized, obviously, but there her conjectures went into spirals. To guess from Menzel's tone, this, too, was a matriarchal society. He had said your men in that suggestive way, and he had no women's gear in his house. That cryptic remark about Earth being different could make sense, too. But if women *were* the bosses here, why was he deliberately being obstructive and careful?

"It's a mess," she concluded, "but if that walking Elgin marble has any intentions of keeping me separated from Sam and Roger, he has a shock in store for him. I hope he *does* ask them, though!"

She was on her feet, done with the meal and feeling restless, when Menzel came back, still with that baffled look on his face.

"I tell you," he said, "that this is my house and that I am master here. I will defy your orders!" He went past her to get his cape and sling it casually over his shoulder, sounding as if he was driving himself to a gesture. "You will follow me."

She got her cape and hurried after him, out along a cool passage to the head of a flight of stairs that led to a large room with skin rugs everywhere and gleaming, wrought-metal furnishings. Roger and Sam were there, looking wonderfully fit and almost at home in the same barbaric costume as the owner of the house himself. She scampered ahead, trailing the cloak and calling them thankfully, unashamedly glad to have Roger grab her and hug her until her ribs complained, with Sam slapping her on the shoulder and beaming all over his face. Words were superfluous for a few moments.

"Certainly was a hairy moment or two," Coleman chuckled,

taking his turn in the hugging. "But we seem to have landed soft, at last."

"So far," Lovell said, looking more enormous than ever in his heathen outfit. "They woke us about an hour ago. It strikes me these people have forgotten more about medicine than Earth knows, but they have problems all their own. Take a look at the old man, there; he's bothered about something."

Menzel did indeed look troubled, as if this fraternizing was not what he had expected. Claire studied him and confided to her companions, "This is a queer situation altogether. I've been trying to fit it in with woman power, but can you see women ruling the roost, with men like that? Anyway, why is he so dead set against me? I'd like to know what the smugglers have been spreading here, besides Anglic. You know what, I think he had those Yakut all tipped off to catch us. He as good as told me that, only it doesn't square with having them punished for the way they ill-treated us."

"Let's get some answers," Coleman moved up to Menzel. "If it is not asking too much, sir, I think it's about time we had some kind of talk—a few explanations. We're a bit puzzled, if you know what I mean."

"I also am confused, Coleman of Earth. We will talk. I will call another, who disagrees with me on certain things, but who will help to answer any questions you may ask. Will you drink?"

"That's a civilized thought." Coleman approved, and Menzel stepped aside and struck a mellow gong. Almost instantly a tall, lean, red-skinned man appeared, listened attentively, and went away. "Was that a Yakut?" Coleman pointed where the servant had disappeared, and Menzel inclined his head.

"The Yakut serve us in many capacities. He will bring drink, also my companion. We will sit here." He indicated a low, silver-stopped table and metal frame chairs webbed with leather, but as Claire automatically moved to join

them, she met a cold, blue stare. "You will remain apart, please!"

"Not if you want to get anywhere with us," Coleman objected instantly. "Claire is in with us, all the way, in everything."

"She is a woman!"

"She is an *Earth* woman!" Lovell corrected, very gently but with emphasis. It made a difference, that he was at least four inches taller than Menzel, and just as controlled. "We do things differently, on Earth, Menzel. Surely you've heard that?"

"I have heard so many things that I do not know, any longer, what to believe." Menzel was obviously torn between emotions. Before he could resolve them, a new face came to join the group, a face that made Claire tingle in appreciation. He was a younger man than Menzel, with jet-black hair and perfect features, just as tall, just as classically built, slinging his golden-brown fur cape casually over an arm as he hurried into the room. He halted abruptly at the sight of the strange faces. The newcomer raised a palm.

"I am Donar of Yardo," he announced, almost with defiance. "My kinsman, Menzel, is anxious, perhaps with reason, trusting no one. I am prepared to take risks. We will talk, even if the woman is here." He turned on his companion, appealing, "Menzel, what is there to fear? She is an Earth woman. Even if things are not as we have been told, no one else knows that she is here. No word of this will ever reach the women, the council, or the Queen! We can kill her, if it becomes necessary."

"Hold it right there!" Lovell said, getting instant attention. "We'll talk first. Any killing will have to be sorted out some other way. And Claire joins us, she's one of us, all right?"

Donar stiffened for a moment, then smiled. "That is as we have been told. We will sit and talk. You were expected."

"The hell we were!" Lovell exclaimed. "By who, and how?"

"The other Earth men told us." Donar sat and leaned aside as the silent Yakut brought a large pitcher and goblets, in what looked like gold. "They are six. They have been here with us a long time. They came in a strange and noisy machine, made of metals we have never seen before. They were sick, unhealthy in ways that were strange to us. They were taken and would have been transported to the downlands, because it is our custom here to be apart. This is our land, and we live here. In our speech, there is no word for stranger. It has always been like this. But these six were amusing, entertaining, they made themselves agreeable to the women, and the council decided they should be allowed to remain, for amusement. They were placed within the domain and care of Skopar, where their machine arrived. I will show you."

He reached into a pocket in his glossy kilt to produce a tablet and a drawing stick like charcoal. Then he passed the tablet to Lovell, and went on, "We call our land Doradil. It is of that shape, and there are five domains; Yardo, Baran, Skopar, Herrel and Roke. I have marked where we are now, and where the other Earth men are, with their machine. It helps you to understand."

"You've done that a time or two before," Coleman observed, passing the tablet to Claire. She saw Donar's grimness as she took it and glanced at it.

"I have learned to do this from the Earth men. Before they came we did not draw pictures of our land—maps? It was not necessary, until we had to explain it to them." Claire looked at it again. It was a rough circle cut into five like a pie—the plateau, of course.

"What's the circular bit in the middle?" she asked.

"That is the Queen's land and our ruling city." He was grudgingly polite and precise. "Each domain is ruled by the women in council of that domain, and the family head of each domain commands everything. The grand council is made up of the chief women of each domain and Queen

Sara commands all of Doradil. That is how it has always been, until now!"

"Is this wise?" Menzel protested. "We know nothing about these new faces. We do not even know, surely, if they are actually of Earth."

"You're not trying," Lovell declared sardonically. "If you are half as smart as I think you are, you've seen the evidence already. We came up by what you call the downlands, up a river, through the mountains, past the Yakut. We had fun on the way, too. Do you reckon we got ourselves beat up the way we were just to try and fool somebody? You go ahead, Donar. You said 'until now.' What's happened to change anything?"

"We have talked much with the Earth men, as secretly as possible. They do not like the rule of women. They tell us that it was once like this on Earth, long ago, but that, by degrees, men became rulers and the women obeyed, and that life is much better that way."

"That sounds great," Coleman said dryly. "Did they offer any kind of proof for that, or just their word?"

"This is what I have argued," Menzel came in intensely. "I have heard this talk, and it is only talk. I do not trust these men. They speak two ways, one way to the women, another way to us. They claim to dislike woman rule—as we all do, at times—yet they are always making themselves agreeable to the women, pleasing them in many ways, and they tell us they are only pretending. To us they talk of getting together and working out ways of assuming power, of becoming rulers in place of the women—when all know that there are three or four women to every man. It has always been like this. For every man child born into this land there are three or four women. The women themselves make it so, with their secret arts and skills. This talk of overthrowing them is foolish, and dangerous!"

"I don't like it, either," Coleman admitted, making restless motions with his hands. "Blast, I could do with my pipe, but I suppose all our stuff has gone down the drain by now."

"Your personal equipment is all here," Menzel said. "The Yakut brought it untouched, as they were instructed to do. Do you wish it brought to you?"

He moved away to strike the gong again, and Lovell asked Donar, in some grimness, "Those Yakut females that gave us the hard time—what are they?"

"We breed them," Donar said casually. "They guard Doradil. We supply them with such crude weapons as they need."

"You *breed* them?"

"Of course. They guard the borders of Doradil. They trade with the people of the downlands, exchanging crude metal objects and leather for fresh fruits, roots, meat, skins, furs—Doradil is poor in growing land for the most part—and, some of the time, they raid the downlands for men, for their entertainment. Sometimes they happen upon a man they approve. They come to us for permission to breed. Not, of course, to us, as men; the women deal with all that. If the offspring are worthy, they are given the necessary foods to insure they grow strong and healthy. The female ones become guards and warriors such as you saw, the males become servants in our houses, again as you have seen. It has always been like this."

Claire began to seethe inwardly, and could see the two men similarly moved, but at that moment in came red men carrying their familiar, plastic-wrapped stores and bundles. Coleman made a dive, but was no quicker than she when she spotted her personal bag.

"Don't talk about anything important," she implored, "until I get back into civilized clothes, please! I won't be long!" She fled for the stairs, almost forgetting her precious body belt in her hurry. It was unfortunate to part with the sumptuous furs and uncomfortable to wriggle herself once again into slacks and shirt and shoes, but she felt, as she hurried back down to join the men, that she was now better able to talk as from Earth. From what she had heard so far, she felt sure there was trouble of the worst kind brewing.

The effect was all she could desire. The two Doradilans turned away from fascination with Coleman and his smoke screen, to stare at her in frank wonder as she resumed her seat. Lovell gave her a grin. "I sort of preferred you the other way. Now you look civilized. Donar, there's something I wanted to ask you. The other Earth men, you say, have been talking you into trying to overthrow the ruling women here. You made it sound as if that was about to happen any time. Have they also advised you *how* to do it?"

"Yes, they have explained, and they have helped us." Donar hesitated, glancing at Claire. "They have brought us guns!"

"Sol!" Lovell sighed. "That's the way it is. Guns!"

ELEVEN

"WHAT A beautiful mess!" Claire groaned. "Guns against spears and knives! Ye Gods, when you think what they are taking out of here in exchange! Donar,"—the young man stiffened as she addressed him, but she ignored it—"do you realize what you're doing? You are giving these men the juice of a certain flower, and in return they are secretly bringing you dangerous weapons!" The sullen look on his face warned her that she was on the wrong track, but before she could amend it Coleman cleared his throat politely.

"Hold on a bit, Claire, there's more to it, I fancy." He thumbed the strap that held his fur cape. "See these things? They're poorly cut, but I know a little about gem stones, and I'll bet anything you like that these are diamonds and emeralds, and this stuff is gold."

"Yes," Donar nodded unexpectedly. "This is what the Earth men say. Gold, diamonds worth much, on Earth. But juice of a flower?"

Claire opened her belt, produced the imitation bloom and offered it for inspection. Both men marveled at it. "It is *tember*," Menzel declared, "but it is dead, lifeless. How came you by this?" At her insistence, he admitted that there was a juice, available in reasonable quantity, that was common enough. The Earth men could get it, merely by asking. But they put great store by gold, diamonds and emeralds. She shook her head angrily as she put the copy away. Lovell, with a cold frown such as she had never seen on him before, rose to his full height to stare down at the Doradilans.

"Suckers!" he growled. "You have been well and truly taken. Listen. It's true that gold and diamonds are worth a lot on Earth, but we *do* have our own. We have nothing at all like that flower; we have nothing at all that can do what it does. On Earth, when people get sick, quite often

they die. With the juice of that flower, they can be saved. Those other Earth men are taking that juice back to Earth, and for it they are getting great riches, far more than for the gold and diamonds. They are doing it secretly, because they do not want anyone else to get a share of it, and they are giving you guns, talking you into trying to overthrow your rulers. How? By killing them?"

"If necessary," Donar said sullenly. "Why not? We will have to kill only a few. Then *we* will be the rulers; the Earth men have told us so."

"Damn and blast it, man!" Coleman cried. "That's not the way to do it, by force! Haven't you ever heard of co-operation, partnership?"

"There!" Menzel declared swiftly. "Donar, do you hear that? Do I not always use these words to you?" He turned eagerly to the two hunters. "I am old, and perhaps wiser for that. There are times when I fret under the yoke of women, who are not always wise or pleasing to deal with. But I manage to talk to them from time to time. I am well thought of by Queen Sara, who is more sensible than most. There are others, a few, who are patient enough to try to settle differences by talk. Often I have been fortunate enough to give advice and opinion. It is not much, not often, but it can be done. If we are to dislodge women from the control of things, this is the way, by showing that we are capable of it. But not by killing!"

"I do not expect to live such a long time as that!" Donar retorted. "They humor you in the council, Menzel. They laugh at you afterwards!"

"Hold on a minute," Lovell rumbled. "As you just said, Sam, there's a bit more to this. I mean, what's it to the other crowd, the smugglers, who run this show? Why should they care? They have it made, here, already."

"Trust you to get straight down to basics," Claire agreed. "What's in it for them? Why do they want to foul up their golden goose?"

Coleman emitted a blue cloud and nodded. "Smelly. This chap is no fool, a bit naive, maybe, carried away by his own

sense of grievance, but not stupid. If he can't trust the smugglers, I'd say there's something in it."

Donar began to glower. "This also the other Earth men told us. They said that you would come, that there would be a woman coming, and that you would try to stop us in what we plan to do. They said that you would try to make a deal directly with the women, with Queen Sara."

Claire nodded unwillingly. "They're smart, all right. Donar, it's true that Earth would like to deal openly with Doradil for supplies of this juice and other medical things you might have. It's true that we would deal only with your official leaders and ours. We don't interfere with internal politics, if we can help it. But our system is a bit different from yours. I'm not saying that ours is better than yours, just that it is different. But we would be against any attempt to overthrow a government by force, just to get our way."

"You would deal with Queen Sara!" Donar growled. "It is as we were told. That is why we arranged for the Yakut to seize you and bring you here in secret, so that we could put the question to you directly, not knowing who to believe. You see, Menzel, they will betray us if they are set free!"

"Hold on a bit," Lovell repeated, looking as if he had been too busy thinking his own thoughts to hear a word. "I keep coming back to guns. That's something I do know about. What kind of guns? Do you have any? Can you show me? Just to look. I claim to be something of an expert." Claire frowned, trying to guess what was in his mind. Donar scowled too, hesitating.

"I think you are as full of guile as a woman," he muttered, "at which *they* are expert. But why not? I will show you; I have a gun." He arose and went storming out. Menzel looked really bothered now.

"I do not know what to think. I am fond of peaceful means; I do not like quarrels. Sara thinks as I do. She, too, does not enjoy domination. She is truly a wise woman, and there are others. It is only the few who are objectionable, and the rule of women is not arduous, just irritating to

hotheads like Donar. The women keep to themselves the secrets of their skills in many things, but what of that? They leave us alone most of the time, to amuse ourselves in our own ways!"

"You must get together sometimes," Claire argued, "unless you've learned the trick of parthenogenesis. Donar said he was your kinsman. What does that mean, in fact? That you have common ancestry?" Menzel stared at her in wonder.

"A woman of Yardo may not mate with any of the men of Yardo," he said, as if repeating some old formula, "but will select for her pleasure a man of some other domain. If it be Roke, then Yardo will be obliged to make available to the women of Roke any of its men in exchange. The offspring of any mating will belong to the domain of the woman delivering. The women arrange all this, and have done always. The Queen may mate with any man from any domain, at her choice, but may not, by custom, retain a male household of her own. Queen Sara, so far, has not chosen to mate—"

"Better leave that," Lovell said. "It's getting to sound a bit complicated. Here comes Donar now—Holy Moses, will you look at what—" He rose from his seat and put out a powerful hand to take the weapon Donar so proudly carried, his expression one of profound disgust and scorn. "This just about puts in the fine outlines of the picture. This thing is at least fifty years old, government surplus, museum pieces. You can pick them up for peanuts, if you know where to go. They give you ammunition for this thing?"

Donar was stiffly indignant. "I have cartridges, several boxes. It is a good gun. I have fired it many times, in practice."

"Roger!" Claire found her voice and came to feel the thing. "Does it actually work? I've seen things like that in a showcase, but, will it fire?"

"You heard what the man said. I reckon it will. It's a pretty good gun, of its kind. You could kill a man a mile off with this, if you could hit him."

"I am a good shot!" Donar declared. "I have learned."

"I believe I'm getting it," Claire breathed. "It's antiquated junk to us, but real weapons to them, because they don't know the difference."

"Easy now," Lovell warned. "You too, Sam. These boys don't know who to trust. It won't be enough just to tell them they've been taken. We somehow have to show them, and I think I know how. Donar, you say you've practiced with this, and I believe you. Where? I mean, is there somewhere handy where you can show me how good you are? I'm curious, that's all."

"There is a place, at the back of this house," Menzel put in, "where they come to practice and make loud noises, because my house is far away from curious ears. I do not like it, but I help in this way."

"That's fine, just fine, thank you. Donar, would you oblige me by showing me just what you can do with this thing? Then I hope to show you what a real weapon or two can do. Then, maybe, you'll be in a mind to listen and be told something, because, friend, you've been taken. Sam, break out our hardware, huh?"

Ten minutes later the whole party stood in a walled courtyard that ran the full length of the house; it was fifteen feet wide and more than a hundred yards long. Coleman approved. He was carrying his favorite, the long-barreled needle gun that had proved so spectacular with the caravan. Lovell had a rapid ten and the massive fifty-bore, and Claire had a mini-mag tucked inside her shirt. Lovell had passed it to her with the quiet injunction, "You hide that, and whip it out for a spectacular, when the time comes. We need to impress this boy good!" He had explained to Donar that these weapons which looked comparatively flimsy and toylike alongside the rifle, were merely for hunting, and that there were even better versions available for more serious purposes.

Coleman led the way to the target end now, nodding in approval. "Pretty good, for amateurs," he said.

The target itself was made of a long, flat strip of dark

leather tightly wound in a spiral until it was nine feet in diameter; it leaned against the wall. Hanging in the middle was a badly dented bronze plate, about nine inches across. They had watched Donar operate the magazine of his rifle, load it with six rounds and replace it. It was obvious that he had done it several times before. He had even taken pains to point out that with six rounds he could kill six women, if necessary. Now the rifle rested incongruously in his right hand, and Coleman looked at it with cautious respect. "All set? Suppose we just start walking away, and you stop when you think you're at the right distance for a shot. Does that suit you?"

"I am ready, but will you tell me what the stones are for?" He pointed to eight small chips of flintlike stone that Coleman had jammed into the dark leather in a semi-circle about a yard away from the center disk. They were no bigger than a man's thumb, but stood out plainly against the weathered hide. "You are going to shoot—at those?"

"You'll see. Let's start walking." They walked, Donar as stiff and determined as a guardsman, until they were almost forty yards from the target. Then the Doradilan halted, declared himself ready, and the rest of them moved carefully to stand at his back. The noise was a shock to Claire. Each crack banged and rebounded from the stone walls like the sound of a small bomb, making her ears ring. She saw the target plate jerk twice, on the third and fifth shots. Lovell nodded as Donar turned to see their reaction.

"Not bad, not bad at all. Two out of six, with that, for a novice, is pretty good shooting. Can we move back a bit more?" He led the way until the distance was now nearly sixty yards.

"Good grief!" Claire complained. "How in the world did they survive to keep on banging away with things like that? I've got bells!"

"Glad you reminded me," Lovell chuckled, and touched Donar's arm. "This gun, that I'm going to use now, doesn't make a noise at all. Just watch!" He grinned, then swung completely around, pulling the rapid ten to his shoulder.

There was a faint, repeated *weep* and the disk of bronze leaped and jerked six times in rapid sequence. Lovell swung all the way around, still grinning; he dropped the weapon down. "That's just plain and ordinary shooting. Sam will now show us a bit of fancy stuff."

Coleman, tucking his pipe away, took a little more time about getting his stance, estimating the wind and settling himself; but when he started, his delivery was swift. The distant ring of white spots disappeared in rapid sequence counter clockwise.

Donar was goggle-eyed and respectful, but not completely convinced. "These guns will kill?" he demanded.

"They sure will, and so quietly that nobody would know where the shots were coming from. But if you want something impressive, all right, let's move back a bit." Lovell put his rapid ten alongside the wall and led them back until they were almost to the full range and the distant disk was just a yellow dot. Menzel stared at it.

"I can barely see the plate," he declared. "How shall we know if you do strike it properly, from here?"

"You'll know. Donar, I'm going to ruin your target. Sorry. You'll be able to get another, I reckon." Lovell hoisted the fifty bore, took careful aim; there was a whip-crack and a wisp of vapor and the yellow spot disappeared altogether. Then the air-shaking *whomp* of impact bounced back to them.

Then there was another noise, a rapid-fire stutter; the stony ground leaped into agitation by Lovell's feet, and a crisp, sardonic voice said, "Don't do anything impulsive, folks. Drop it, mister. Drop it!"

The command came from a man who was comfortably perched on the top of the wall, his legs dangling, a stubby weapon cradled in his arms. He smiled now in approval of their obedience and careful movement. He was a small man, soon to be bald, and comically incongruous in a furred kilt and jeweled sandals, but there was little humor in his eyes, or on his hard, lean face.

"How pleasant this is," he commented. "My name's Car-

penter, for what good that will do you. Mr. Roger Lovell, famous white hunter, Mr. Sam Coleman, and, of course, Miss Claire Harper, who, in her own way, is just as famous. I fancy you recognize the plaything I'm carrying, Mr. Lovell?"

"Rapid-fire fragmentary," Lovell said promptly, "anti-personnel weapon. You don't take any chances, Carpenter. Don't trust anybody, huh?" He sounded calm, but Claire could hear the tension in his voice. "You don't even trust your confederates."

Carpenter laughed meanly. "You mean the lordly ones, Menzel and Donar? Are you putting me on, hunter man? We don't trust anybody in this screwy place—gorgeous, great women who think they run the show, but are as soft as schoolgirls when they get a little of the old oil, and these pretty boys, all muscle and no brains, trying to pull a fast one on us! You were told, Donar, to bring these people to the ship! Instead, you've kept them here for six days, under cover! I wouldn't have known if a couple of the red skins hadn't tipped me off. That wasn't smart, Donar!"

"They were injured and unhealthy!"

"Not nearly as unhealthy as you're going to be soon. You are all going to have nasty, fatal accidents. Isn't that sad?"

Claire took a breath, moved to the front and stared up at Carpenter with her arms folded, trying not to think of the rock-steady weapon pointing at her. "I'm the one you want," she said. "There's no need to butcher everybody else. They can't do you any harm."

"Your turn to be humorous, Miss Harper. They know too much. We have this thing sewn up, now, we can't afford slipups. Right now we're just tolerated, pets for the women. But soon now the men are going to take over; we've fixed that. And then, guess what? We're going to take over the men! We have it all, right in our palms, the whole shoot! You think we're going to let anybody mess that up?" She saw a fractional shift of tension as he prepared to pull the trigger and moved as fast as her reflexes would operate. Her shot took him squarely in the chest and smashed his body flat across the wall. His weapon fell, and then he slid

after it. Before he had struck the ground, Lovell was running, leaping, to peer over and drop again.

"He was on his own. Nervy! Menzel, better get servants to bring in his mount and secure it, and more to put *that* away somewhere safe."

The two Doradilans looked sick and shaken as they gathered indoors again. Claire, studying them, said, "You've never seen anybody killed before, have you? All that talk about guns, and taking over—you see now how impossible it would be? Your lot couldn't do it, you're not the type. Carpenter could; he would have killed us all. You heard him!"

"I reckon he talked just enough to convince anybody," Lovell said. He turned his stare on Menzel and Donar, dominating them without trying. "You two have got to make up your minds fast. You heard the man. His friends know we are here. We are a threat to their plans, which are to get you thoroughly confused and then rule themselves. You can guess what kind of rule, surely? And Carpenter will be missed, soon! Come on, you know the local score better than we do. Think! Whatever you decide, we'll help, only think, fast!"

"There is only one thing to do," Menzel declared. "We must reveal all to the women and get them to expel these men from our land. This is a threat to the whole of Doradil, not just a plot to overthrow woman rule."

"You're on the ball," Coleman approved, but Donar was darkly angry.

"I will never agree to that; the women would ridicule us!"

"Nobody is going to do any laughing at all," Lovell pointed out, "if those smugglers start operating. You've seen what their weapons can do; and, if you think you have it hard now, you don't know what you're saying. You just wait until that bunch of thugs take over!"

"Forget your foolish pride!" Menzel snapped. "This is no time—" He stopped abruptly at the distant sound of a shattering gong, and then the high-pitched voice of a woman in indignation. His anger against the younger man switched

abruptly to horrified concern. "Omantha! Why would she be here now, except that the word has flown even farther than we thought. In my own house there are long ears and even longer tongues." He sagged visibly, then suddenly rallied and spun on Claire. "You must hide. There is a chance, just a faint one, but she must not see you."

Claire hesitated. "I don't want to get separated again, fellows!"

"Go on, beat it!" Lovell told her. "We're just men. We have to play it cagey. If you can get out of it, you might be able to pull something. What can we lose? Beat it!" She looked to Menzel, who nodded vigorously.

"Up there, hide. You may listen, but do not be seen. I will explain as much as possible, later. Go. Trust me!" Claire picked up her feet and ran, to halt at the top of the stair and stand against the wall, where she could see the owner of the voice as she swept arrogantly into the room. In that first stare she saw why it was that even these godlike men were dominated by their womenfolk. This woman was huge. Even without her fantastic coiffure, lavish with lacquer and trinkets, she was an inch taller than Menzel and she was beautiful. Envious reaction.

TWELVE

THE WOMAN'S HAIR, blue-black as a raven's wing, was pinned with gold and dangling gems, her flawless face made tawdry with gilding around her brows and on her eyelids; her mouth was orange against gleaming teeth. Fine filigree gold held more gems across her brow and around her sculptured throat. One perfect shoulder was revealed by a fur cape in powder blue that almost swept the floor. Then, swirling to halt and talking animatedly, she snapped a gold-buckled strap on the cape and cast it negligently aside, strode to confront Menzel and stare down her perfect nose at him. Claire sighed. *Perfect* was the only word. No amount of ornamentation could disguise the fact that she was flawless in body and quite aware of it.

Claire heard Omantha's name again in the humble apologies Menzel was obviously making. Claire was at once envious and offended at the woman's appearance; she was jeweled from head to foot, but not really clothed.

Now the haughty intruder turned and stared at the strangers, and Claire sighed again. Now came the crunch. Omantha swept across to confront the silent pair, to eye them candidly, to meet blankly impassive faces, and Claire had one faint twinge of pleasure to see that not only could Roger look down on this arrogant hussy, he *did* with all his coldest dignity. Omantha didn't like it. She turned, shaking her bells, to snap at Menzel. The old man went forward.

"It is best," he suggested, "to speak their tongue. They will then be able to understand what we are saying, Omantha."

"Then they *are* Earth men, as I was told!" she declared in triumph, turning back to stare at them. "They should have been brought to my house at once!"

"They were injured and unhealthy. They came up from

the downlands and were taken by the Yakut. It was only by chance that I learned of them, as they were trying to escape from the Yakut sporting."

"The Yakut dared to sport with men like these? Which? I will have them skinned as a lesson!"

"It has been attended to already."

"Very well. You will bring them to my house immediately. The Yardo council will decide what is to become of them."

"I regret I cannot myself attend to it," Menzel murmured, and Claire sharpened her ears. "I must ride at once, now that they are well, to inform Queen Sara that they are here. Donar can bring them to you."

"Oh!" Omantha tossed her head. "I see. Of course Sara must be informed, of course!" She didn't look pleased as she once more cast her dark eyes on the two strangers. Coleman cleared his throat gently.

"Don't we get any say in the matter?"

"Hah! So you have a tongue, Earth man. Take care to use it wisely; it can be removed!" Omantha turned her head to look up at Lovell, obviously disliking the unfamiliar exercise. "Do you, too, have a tongue?"

Roger lowered his head very slowly to look into Omantha's painted face, to project his head forward just a little, and then to open his mouth and protrude his tongue as far as it would go. The air in the big room became suddenly electric. Omantha stiffened. Swooping for her cape she strode out, snapping back over her shoulder, "Bring them! At once!"

Claire's legs trembled under her as she came down the stairs again and joined the tense group. "My God," she muttered, "what a bitch! Excuse me, but is there any other word? Are all your women like that, Menzel?"

"Not all, no, but too many. You have made an enemy, I fear. She will make you pay for that, and I shall suffer, also."

"How?" Lovell demanded. "What will she do, have you flogged?"

"No!" The old man looked shocked. "No, not violence!" He made a wry shrug. "But I am dependent on her, just as

all men are. We have no skills, no ability to provide for ourselves; we depend on the women for everything."

"What's all this about informing the Queen, Menzel?"

"It was the best I could think of. Somehow Omantha knew you were here, and I had not the power to stop her from taking you; but she dare not keep you once Sara knows you are present. The power is with the Queen to decide about you, and I have her ear, in some things. She is not like that one, she is wise and sensible. And there is something else." He directed a curious look at his younger companion. "You have never seen Sara, I think, Donar?"

"Nor want to!" Donar sounded defeated. "The women of Yardo are bad enough. We are betrayed, Menzel, betrayed!"

"Then it would be wise not to irritate Omantha further. Take these men to her, at once!" Menzel had more authority than Claire had thought. "I will ride at once to Sara. And you will come with me. You are a woman. She will listen to you, and I must trust you as you will have to trust me. This is no time for long arguments!"

"He has a point," Claire decided. "If I can get next to the Queen and talk some sense to her, we might get something out of this mess yet."

"Take care of our gear, Claire. We may need it."

"That's a point, too, my trade goods. Menzel, can you fix it so that all this goes with us?"

"It shall be done, but we must hurry."

Hurry they did. The two men were able to depart almost at once, but it took a while to get all the baggage loaded onto animals that were, Claire found, more like overgrown dogs than anything else. They were placidly comfortable to ride, after the drambagar. The man was hatching something; that was obvious. He insisted that she wear a cape over her Earth clothes, and a hood over her head. "The fewer people who see us, the better," he declared. Comfortably mounted on saddles of dressed leather, they set away at a gallop.

"We must waste no time," he insisted. "Omantha will not dare hold the men too long, once Sara knows they are here.

We ride that way. It will take an hour—is that the right word?”

“You’re pretty good at our language, Menzel. What made you take the trouble to learn it so well?”

“Doradil was a quiet and peaceful land until the Earth men came,” he told her, not bitterly. “In your words, it was dull. We amused ourselves with small things, with perhaps silly things. You saw Omantha. Many women strive to decorate themselves so, and some men, too. It is silly, but it is harmless. Then the Earth men came, and it was a wonderful new thing for us. I am old enough to think that it was better before, but it is too late to think of that now.”

Claire prompted him to talk with discreet questions, and was impressed with his thinking, despite some barriers of custom and value. It seemed that the women of Doradil, despite Omantha’s seeming silliness, were the productive minds of the society, and had various arts and skills that Menzel knew of only vaguely. The men were kept more like amusing pets than anything else.

She was still trying to get through a maze of customary values to approach some grasp of personal relations between the sexes, when the central city became visible on the distant skyline. Their path had led through grove after grove of small trees and she had learned that the people had a powerful taboo against cutting trees, and were without wood of any kind. Then they came out into open space. Venerable green turf made a natural carpet, set about with scattered plots of flowering bushes, the whole rising gently but steadily to where gray, brown, and white stone buildings clustered about a wooded hill, with a majestic white building at the crest. It was the Queen’s House, Menzel informed her, with quiet pride. She had a momentary vision of the green serenity despoiled by tourists, litter and loud noises, and realized that it lay in her power to avert that, if it was at all possible.

They came to wide avenues between noble houses, each in its own spacious grounds, and eventually to the open

space that completely surrounded The House, as Menzel called it. He took a moment to hail docile red men to take the baggage and haul it away; then he motioned to her to precede him up the white stone steps and into the main entrance. Claire moved forward into a vast hall. There were marble floors and dressed-stone walls, a vaulted roof, and silent red men passing to and fro, all part of the stately background against which a mass of women strutted and chattered.

They were all like Omantha, some even more so. As they went about their business in and out of archways draped with priceless furs, Claire felt dwarfed by comparison. They were all six feet tall or more, all abundantly feminine, all exquisitely sculptured. She saw enough gems, glossy leather, gold paint and gleaming wire to fill several galleries.

Menzel, managing to attract the attention of one passing woman, explained his mission. A moment or two later, they were traveling around the edge of the hall and then into a winding stairway, with their guide marching in front.

They came into a long corridor lit with hissing, white gas lamps, and then to a door, through a fur screen into a large and gracious room. They stopped there, as their guide went on before, to inquire.

"We are fortunate," Menzel murmured. "Sara is not occupied with any council matters this morning. We may not have to wait long."

The room was full of ornaments on tables and ledges, all of them of gold wire. Menzel explained that the Queen was a master goldsmith, and that these were some of her creations. But not the one which caught her eye. That, he explained, was the great seal of Doradil; it was not the original, but the motif. It was simple, a suspended circle with an upright through the center like spinning top or a gyroscope. There were flat copies of it, with the circle flattened into the oval of perspective and the piercing line acting as a pin, to make it a brooch. In a moment there was a shuffling interruption, as laboring red men brought in the precious baggage, the plastic bags that had

cost so much effort and care, and which Claire felt were going to be worth it, after all.

"We go in now," Menzel muttered, as their guide returned to give them permission. "You will put back the hood, please." He sounded nervous, and Claire had nerves, too. To meet a Queen was one thing, but in circumstances like these it was shattering. *I only hope the old hag is as sane as Menzel claims!* she thought, going with him through another curtained archway, into a room as big as the one they had just left, but more sedately furnished. There were chairs, a long, silver-topped table, and a long, low divan covered with white fur. A woman rested there. She rose with a formal smile and then stared and came pantherlike around the table to stare again.

Claire felt suddenly weak and speechless. As if through a cotton-wool screen she heard Menzel say, "Sara, this is the Earth woman, Claire Harper. You will see why I wanted to bring her secretly to you, in this way." That meant something, but she couldn't catch it then. She had to force a smile, because the radiant face that stared at her in candid astonishment might have been her own. The sparkling green eyes were the same, as, too, was the hair; except that the face was slightly bigger and more perfectly formed, it was the same.

At last Claire managed to say, "I'm pleased to meet you, your majesty. But you'll have to forgive me; this is quite a shock!"

The Queen smiled radiantly, with more than a hint of mischief in her eyes. She stood back in candid appraisal. "I have seen myself," she said—even the voice was like Claire's—"in my *dowra*, many times. But now I see myself again, smaller, daintier, and dressed in skins such as I have seen only once before, when the Earth men came—an Earth woman. Are all Earth women like you?"

Claire felt easier with every breath. The Queen's frankness and total lack of grotesque ornament made the Earth woman more comfortable.

"They are not all like me at all. Some are far more beau-

tiful than I shall ever be, but none are as lovely as you." She spoke just as the words came. The Queen was tall, easily six foot three and towering above Claire, but not haughty. She was simply dressed in leather, with a gold replica of the great seal at one wrist.

"You are kind," Sara said, "and sincere—and as surprised as myself. In all Doradil there is none other with hair this unusual color." She put a hand to her glorious hair. "It has distressed me, often, but now, when I see you, it is not so terrible!" She smiled again, then clapped her hands; a red man came, took an order, went away and came back with a tall, metal frame that held a single, polished sheet of silver. "Come. Look at me, and yourself!" Sara invited, and Claire joined her in front of the mirror, and felt immediately depressed. It showed. Claire felt dirty and untidy, though only her hair really needed attention.

Sara turned to Menzel. "How long has this Earth woman been in your care?"

"Eight days, Sara. She was hurt, unwell, when she came. The Yakut had treated her unkindly."

"Enough. No doubt you cared for her well, but there are things a man does not know. Leave us. I will send for you when I am ready. Until then I will see no one. Come, Claire Harper, we shall have a bath."

"I don't want to put you to a lot of trouble—"

"It is no trouble, but a pleasure. While we bathe, you will tell me all about Earth, but as a woman sees it. This I have long wanted to know."

THIRTEEN

THE BATH was fragrant and comforting. Claire enjoyed it immensely. Sara was full of shrewd and penetrating questions, and Claire was thankful that she had decided from the start to be as forthright as possible. Deliberately, she kept chasing the subject back to Doradil.

"Only a very few of our people," Claire explained, "know anything about this world you live in, and even they know only a little. But we have learned one thing at great cost—that it is bad for two very different peoples to come together unless both are careful, especially if one is small and the other large, and the small one has things which the large one wants." Sara understood at once. Breast-deep in the water, she was very serious.

"You have come to Doradil to learn about us because we have something that you want and are prepared to take?"

"No, exactly the opposite. I have come because you have many things of great value to us, which a few are now stealing from you, for their own benefit. We want to stop that, somehow."

"The Earth men, yes." Sara nodded and sighed. "They beg us for gold, pretty stones, perfumes and tember juice. They bring back toys of strange metal which make loud noises, for the amusement of the men. I know. Also, they talk to the men, tell them that on Earth it is different, that men are superior, and that it should be the same here. The men are foolish enough to listen and dream and grow discontented. But you have come to stop that."

"No, wait!" Claire pleaded. "It's not like that at all!"

"A moment!" Sara reared up out of the water and summoned attendants again. "We will have fresh water now, and wash your hair. I will help. Please continue. Tell me where I am wrong."

"That will have to wait. I can't talk and shampoo at the same time. Later, when it's done."

It was considerably later, for the shampoo was an elaborate affair.

"As I was saying about big countries and small ones—on Earth, long ago, we had many different countries. All of them were much, much bigger than Doradil. We had wars, violent disagreements, many times. But, by patient effort and a lot of sorrow, we managed to work out laws. We devised laws for people, not women, not men, for *people*. Now we have a set of laws for the whole of the various countries together, and one of the laws is that it is wrong to interfere with the way a country runs its own business. That means that if we deal with a country, we deal with the rulers of that country, those people who have a lawful right to be in charge. All right, so far?"

Sara nodded. "You have come to make a deal with me."

"Not quite, but close. On Earth it is not women who rule nor men, but both together, each with their own part to play, as equal as we can possibly make it." Sara shrugged indifferently.

"That is your way, ours is different. You said you cannot interfere."

"It is true that we do not want to interfere, but it will happen. Already you have a small number of Earth men here, and already they are causing trouble, putting strange ideas into the minds of your men. If we make a deal between this country and Earth, more men will come, many more. They will be seen to be equal with women, to be in positions of power. Discontent will grow; you will really be in trouble. Can you see that far?" Sara shrugged again.

"Then we will not deal. We have enough troubles now! The Earth men will be sent away, and the Yakut ordered to stop any more—"

"The Yakut can stop flying machines?"

Sara lost her idle, lovely pose and drew herself up sternly.

"Then you must go and tell your people to stop. We do not wish to deal!"

"It is not that easy. Sara, you must know about fools, stupid people, troublemakers. You've surely got them here; we have them too, people who have no respect for law or common sense. These Earth men already here are breaking our laws. On my way here from the downlands there were three attempts to kill me, to stop me from getting here and telling you this. There was one more attempt after I got here. It is easy to say, 'Stop, you can't do that!' but it's not easy to make it work. You see, you have things here in Doradil that Earth men value very much, enough to lie for, cheat for, steal and kill for. If you don't deal, they will come anyway."

Sara was transformed in three gusting breaths. Her eyes flashed as she confronted Claire. "Deal!" she cried. "Deal! All you talk of is deal! If we deal with your Earth, we have trouble with our men! You said it yourself!"

"That's the problem, all right. But all you have to do is deal with your men first. Talk with them, let them in on a few decisions, ask their opinions and make them feel important. Make friends with them. It's not *that* hard, surely?"

"You do not understand what you are saying!"

"Oh, I think I do. We had a similar problem, the other way around, once. It's not so difficult. You can't do without men; you know that. But you can do a lot *with* them, if you take a bit of trouble. As I understand it, you keep them separate, like pets. Why not *use* them, make them work for you?"

The point went home. Sara wrinkled her brow over it, shook her head, drifted over to the divan and stretched herself out on it. "It is something to think of, certainly, a new thought. You have a keen mind. But there is another question. You say we must, eventually, deal with Earth. We have things that you want. But what have you that *we* want? Do you expect us to be delighted with machines which make noise?"

Claire sighed and then let out a laugh. "You know, I

thought you'd never ask." She started for the door, then remembered that she was nude. "Will there be anyone out there?" she asked. "I have some things—"

"It is nothing. Wait!" Sara sat up, clapped her hand, gave an order, and within minutes Claire saw her bags being dragged into sight. Sara gave them attention now, coming to stare as Claire fell on her knees and tugged at zippers and ties.

"This is strange skin, unlike any I have seen. Certainly not from any animal that we know."

"It's not a skin. It's made from chemicals, by men—forget it. Take a look at this!" Claire plunged her hand into one of the two bags and spilled into Sara's arms a large bolt of sapphire blue, sheer synthetic fabric. She festooned the Queen with the stuff, throwing the free ends dramatically across the white fur on the floor. In that moment Queen Sara was pure gold to Claire's cause; she was captivated and dazzled.

Before the Queen could catch her breath to speak, Claire brought out a wealth of vivid emerald to match her wide eyes, and Sara was stunned, not knowing which to admire most. There was another and then another, each a different color and texture: shimmering gold, deep velvet, cobweb sheers and others.

"Where does it all come from?" Sara cried. "What wondrous animals yield such glorious skins, in such great amounts? Claire, never have I seen such stuff—so smooth, so fine, so beautifully colored."

"It isn't skin, Sara. It is all made from chemicals by Earth men, with machines. It's made to make their women look more lovely, to give them pleasure. I told you, men have their uses, if you treat them right."

"But how is it used? Will it cut? Can it be stitched?"

"You'll have fun thinking up designs and patterns. Sure it will cut, and you can stitch it or weld it or glue it. I'll show you just some of the things that can be made. There are hundreds more, and more colors. I couldn't bring them

all, there wasn't room!" She attacked the second bag, which contained dresses of simple, classic design.

"Now for the best part of it, Sara." Claire went to stand by Sara, to watch her reluctantly pull off a creation in translucent blue. "This stuff is not of very much value, to us. You mentioned, just now, tember juice. For a small quantity of that, you could exchange all this and much more. For what you use in your bath, Earth people will shower you with stuff like this and more, or they will fight and destroy you if there is no other way, just to get that and your other secrets, for their women. It is like that, you see, when men and women work together. Treat a man right and he will do almost anything for you. That's how it is."

"Men obey me now," Sara pointed out thoughtfully.

"Sure, but do they *want* to? Do they offer? Do they plan, and worry and make great efforts to please you?"

"Not always," Sara admitted. "But now we must return to plainer things. Menzel waits to learn what we have said. There is much to discuss, many problems to settle."

"The House is full of wild talk, Sara. I may have been to blame for some of it. There were two Earth men with this woman. All were in my house, in my care. Somehow, Omantha learned of it and came to take them away. To avoid trouble and to protect this woman from others until you had seen her first, I told Omantha that I would ride to you at once, as I did."

"That was well done. But these two men . . ." Sara turned to Claire. "They came with you?"

"That's right, to talk to you, as I've done."

"I think I would want that. Menzel, you say Omantha came for them?"

"Yes, Sara. I told her I would inform you and that they should be brought first to you. It was in my mind to protect them as much as possible."

"Again, well done. Are they here now?"

"Yes." Menzel grew grave. "Omantha has brought them. But she, and others of Yardo, are going to and fro telling

everyone that it is in your mind to keep these new men here in The House, which is against custom."

"Which is also untrue! Even if I wanted anything so unlikely, would I choose a man I have never seen? Omantha's head is as empty as a bell; I will deal with her, later. Bring those two men to me first; I will see them."

As Menzel strode away, Sara laughed, not pleasantly. "As you said, Claire, I know about fools. That Omantha—I think she was fed on *saparto* as a child; it rattles the mind loose. But you did not tell me you had men with you. Only two?"

"They helped me; we all came together. I told you, on Earth we are equal!" Claire repeated it mechanically. She worried about how Roger would react to Sara. "Sara, do you think I could see them alone, just for a minute or two? I mean, they don't know, any more than I did, how much we look alike. I ought to warn them!"

"Do not!" Sara smiled mischievously. "I will leave you to greet them, yes, but I will be near. I wish to see their faces when they see us together. Do not spoil that. It will be amusing!"

The curtain twitched and Roger and Sam entered, looking harassed, yet at home in their Doradilan garb. They were undisguisedly pleased to see her, though a trifle wide-eyed at her native costume.

Coleman was first, his hand out to her. "Claire, it's a relief to see you, and, my stars, you look well. They've obviously been treating you right. I'm glad." Lovell was right behind him, grinning widely.

"This is a crazy world, all right, but you look well on it. Where's this Queen we're supposed to meet, and what's all that stuff there?"

"Whoa now, fellows," she said urgently, "and let me talk. Queen Sara will be right here in a minute. That is my trade goods, remember? I've been trying to sell the idea of Earth trade to her, and I think it's worked, so be careful, huh? She's on our side, I think, so don't foul it up if you can help it. All the women here are not like Omantha."

"That would be an improvement," Lovell growled. "That Omantha, and the rest of them! I'm beginning to get Donar's point of view!"

"Well, slow down!" she snapped, aware that ears were listening. "While you have been upsetting all the women of Yardo, I've been asking for peaceful agreements, not antiquated firearms and force."

"Smart!" he chuckled suddenly. "I think maybe we'd better let you run the show. It seems to be outside our competence. Women! I hope I never see another one!"

"Well, you're going to, so behave. She's all right—" Claire broke off as she saw the two men look up and past her. She knew why. Sara had appeared through a screen and was standing there, only a few feet away. Claire turned. "Queen Sara, this is Sam Coleman and Roger Lovell, my companions." The air was tense; it crackled.

FOURTEEN

HER FLOWING, sinuous glide ended in front of the two men. She flicked a dazzling glance at the shorter man and said softly, "Sam? Coleman?" Then she brought her eyes to Lovell, tilting her chin to meet his stare. Claire was thinking, *Let him please not say the wrong thing! She has never had to look up at a man in her life! Will somebody please say something!* The tension was painful. Very softly, Sara said, "Roger? Lovell?" The big man bowed his head a little. "Your Majesty."

Sara smiled, a slow but vivid radiance. "Majesty—that is a word to mean respect, I think, an Earth word?"

"It was meant that way, yes."

"Good. But the other Earth men tell me that between them, in respect, they shake hands. Is that right?" She held hers up between them, close to her bosom. Lovell took it, not to shake, but to hold her fingers.

"A handshake," he said deep in his throat, "is our mark of respect, between men. But to a lady, it's different." He lifted her hand to his lips as naturally as if he had always done it. Color flared in Sara's face and on her throat. She was confused.

"That is respect for me?"

"First time I ever did that, for any woman, Your Majesty. I hear you want to talk with us. We'll be happy to listen and to help any way we can."

She turned to Claire, apparently unaware that he was still holding her hand. "I like your man!" she declared. "You are most fortunate!"

"I keep telling you," Claire said patiently, "he's not mine at all. We don't work like that, on Earth. Can we sit down and talk, please?"

Sara smiled, still radiant, and nodded. She drew her hand

to her bosom, and Lovell let go hurriedly. She moved away, glided to the divan, settled herself in a deliberate attitude, and indicated, gracefully but firmly, that Claire was to sit beside her, Coleman there, Lovell there, where she could watch him. To Menzel Sara said imperiously, "Leave us. Go and listen to the gossip. If there is too much silly talk, perhaps I will call a council, and have it stopped!" The old man departed. Sara clapped her hands for a Yakut to bring something to drink. "So," she murmured, looking at Lovell, "you believe that the other Earth men are trying to stir up trouble among the men, to upset Doradil, that they are bad ones—six, against so many?"

"Not six," he corrected, "only five, now. One of them tried to kill us at Menzel's place, but Claire managed to get him first."

"Tried to *kill* you?" Sara's head came up, her languor gone in one breath, her eyes aflame. "One of the Earth men from the ship?" She was staring at Claire in indignation.

"Not just me, all of us—Menzel, Donar, Roger and Sam. We were all together." Claire told the story briefly, skimming lightly over the matter of illicit weapons, but bearing down on Carpenter's revelations. Sara seethed.

"Take over!" she repeated incredulously. "Why did you not tell me this sooner? This is a serious thing. I will have those men brought here and put to the question. If it is truly as you say—" She stopped as she saw Lovell expressing amusement and heard him chuckle. Then she demanded, "You are amused at something?"

He was not at all humble. "Excuse me, but suppose you could get them here anyway, how would you know they were telling the truth?"

"We have ways. There is something to put in a drink which makes the tongue loose and the brain unwary. As for getting them here!"—her eyes flashed indignantly—"I will order it, and they will come!"

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you," he said. Claire wriggled; she knew that needling tone very well. "You'd only get a lot of innocent people killed. Those men aren't fools!"

"What manner of man are you?" she demanded, coming to her feet in anger and towering over him. "You speak words of respect and make pleasing gestures in one breath, and in the next you argue with me and contradict my words. Do you think *me* a fool?" He sat still, looking up at her.

"You're no fool," he said mildly, "but you seem to think the wrong way about men, Earth men, anyway."

"Stand!" she blazed. "Stand when you speak to me!"

He grinned cheerfully and rose. Still with an easy grin, he said, "That's a new rule. You just invented it on purpose. You're no fool, but you get angry too fast."

Claire had never seen anyone as furious as Sara was at that moment, and she held her breath in dismay.

Sara remained silent, waiting for Lovell to act next.

After a long, cooling moment he spoke. "Those men from that ship have weapons such as you've never seen, weapons that can kill as many people as you care to send against them, with no trouble—from as much as a mile away, and more. They have weapons that can knock this fine house of yours into rubble around your lovely head, weapons in that ship that could smash half of Doradil into ruins. But more important than that, those men are smart, far more clever than you think. There were only six of them. They came here as strangers, and they managed to make fools of your men *and* your women. They stole and are stealing from you what is priceless to them, and giving you nothing back but trouble. They have friends back on Earth, which is so far away from here you can't even see it in the sky, who are helping them. The Earth's government has tried to stop those men and other men have been killed trying. So they sent a woman, Claire Harper. You could do to listen to her, too. Three times they tried to kill her, seven hundred miles away from here. They tried to kill her again, as she has told you, right here in your own land. They will probably try again. Those men are smart! They have your own Yakut guard working for them, even. They are ruthless. They don't play games. If you start screaming at *them*,

you'll get hurt, maybe killed. And I wouldn't like that to happen. Now, did you understand any of that?"

"I was not screaming and yelling!" she denied hotly.

"Well, you'll be all right so long as you use your head. You're very beautiful when you get angry, but it doesn't help any. Are you going to be sensible, now?" Sara's cheeks were flushed.

"You are right, Earth men are different. You know them. Advise me."

"You know this place better than I do, you know tricks that I don't. But I can tell you this, so long as you have your own men stirred up against you—" He broke off as the screen moved and Menzel came in, visibly distressed, gabbling something and then patiently shifting into Anglic.

"Your pardon, Sara, but The House is in uproar and confusion. All the Domain Council women are here and many more besides. They are demanding to see you, in full Council. The Council of Skopar have brought the Earth men with them. There is much wild talk about broken customs and secret dealings between yourself and the Earth men—*these* Earth men!"

"Ahah!" Sara was up on her feet again in a moment. "So!" She turned to Lovell. "You said they would not come here, those men. You are wrong! What do they want, Menzel? What is the discord?"

"All are clamoring that the Earth men must be examined, must be shown in public. They demand a full Council."

"Demand? We shall see! This will suit me very well. They shall have their Council!" She wheeled around and had taken two long strides when Coleman cleared his throat and rose.

"Hold on there a minute!"

"You, too?" she spun back and confronted him furiously.

Coleman shook his head. "It can't hurt to listen for a minute. This smells, to me. Roger?"

"You're dead right, Sam, and I think I know what. Menzel, what are those men wearing, how are they dressed? Have you seen them?"

The old man looked puzzled. "They are wearing the strange clothing they wore when they first came here. Is it important?"

"You bet it is. That's all the hint anybody needs. Want to bet that bunch are armed, Claire?"

"It sounds like it. You certainly can't hide much of a weapon in this kind of outfit." She turned to Sara, who was looking bewildered and furious. "What this means, Sara, is that those men are carrying weapons, deadly weapons. I'll show you!" She went to the packs in the corner and took out the little mini-mag that had so effectively disposed of Carpenter and held it in her palm for the Queen to see and wonder at. "You've already heard that I killed one of the six, when he was prepared to kill us. Menzel was there; ask him. I did it with *this*. Go on, ask him!"

"It is as she has said, Sara. There was no sound from that, but a big noise from the man, and he was—completely smashed!"

Sara stared at the toylike weapon, then at Lovell. "You think that these men will be carrying things like these, concealed? Why?"

"I don't know for sure. I can only guess. You're the Queen. They want to get you out in clear view where they can see you. That's bad enough."

Coleman's voice had an edge now. "Roger, I think I can guess a bit further. Look, Queen Sara is an absolute monarch. If they can take and hold her as a hostage, they can dictate their own terms. Get it?"

"Would they have that kind of nerve, Sam?"

"Why not? It would be simple. Your Majesty, do you sit apart from the rest, in this Council?"

"In the High Chair, yes."

"Then that's it, Roger. When they are all set, one of them points a weapon at the Queen and says, 'One move and she dies!' or something like that. Nobody is going to believe that, of course, until they kill one or two others by way of demonstration. Then they'll believe it! And the rest of Doradil will jump through hoops if they say so, just

as long as they can hold you prisoner. Do you understand that?"

"My God!" Claire breathed. "They could just get away with it, too. We can't shoot it out with them in a crowded council chamber. It would be a shambles. What are we going to do?"

"If we don't do something fast, we're in a mess anyway. The longer we wait, the more they'll stir up against us."

"Menzel," Coleman was brisk, "isn't there some way we can get Sara away out of this building?"

Sara snorted and tossed her head. "I will not run away! From men? They would not dare to threaten me or harm me!"

"One of these days," Lovell growled, "I am going to have to slap a bit of sense into you, somehow. Just shut up a minute! Menzel, is there any kind of back way out?"

Menzel was stunned.

"Wait!" Claire cried. "I know a way!" She went to stand by Sara. "Take a look," she invited. "Could you tell the difference between us at a distance?"

"No!" Coleman objected. "Claire, are you out of your mind? You can't just walk out there and be shot at!"

"But they won't kill me, Sam. You said they want a hostage. If they take me instead of Sara, they lose! Can't you see?"

Coleman looked distressed, more upset than she had ever seen him. "That was just a guess, Claire. It could be wrong. My dear, I can't let you go out there and set yourself up as a target! There's got to be something—"

"Look!" She was insistent on her idea, "it has everything. They will think I'm Sara; they'll go through with their plan. And I know the score, I won't provoke any resistance. Nobody will have to be killed to convince me. As soon as I'm away, Sara will be able to show herself and expose the plot for all to know, and that will convince them. You see?"

Coleman was still stubbornly opposed to it. Lovell stood quite still, his whole attention on her, his face calm with thought.

She plunged on. "It will settle our argument once and for all. It's the kind of evidence they will be able to accept." She added more confidently than she felt, "And I am not exactly helpless, you know. I will be armed with this." She put the tiny mini-mag into the little purse that hung from her belt. "And I know how to make a nuisance of myself."

Sara turned, looking down, her green eyes troubled. "You would go into danger in my place, Claire, to be possibly killed?"

"It wouldn't be the first time, Sara. Such things are sometimes part of my job. And it wouldn't be the first time the boys have pulled me out, either. Trust them."

Lovell stirred now. "It would be a hell of a chance, Claire. Do you really want to go through with it?"

"Yes." The distress in his face was deep.

"We'll get you out, Claire," he said. "We'll get you, if we have to tear that ship apart plate by plate, and God help them if they so much as lay a finger on you, that's all!"

The rest was a matter of hurried attention to details and a fast lesson in routine behavior. Then, all too soon, she was away and on Menzel's heels, along a narrow curving passage that was the Queen's private route to the chamber. Menzel got her to the foot of a narrow stair and pointed up.

"The High Chair is to your right, at the top. For Doradil!"

She took a deep breath and went up into the growing clamor of many voices, into bright light and a huge chamber that lay before and below her. Silence came at her appearance. She moved to the great gilded chair and stood. The hush broke into a salute. "Sara! Sara!" and there was silence again, as she sat and hoped that no one would notice how she had to lift herself into the seat. Below her the floor fell away in curving tiers to either side, leaving an open space, in the middle. She raised her hand and put it down again as a signal.

FIFTEEN

"IF WE are met to discuss the Earth men," Claire said, wishing she had Sara's voice, "would it not be best to speak in the tongue they understand, or are we afraid to let them hear what we say?"

She had scored. That was evident in the hushed buzz of comment that spread over all the audience. She cast an anxious gaze over the crowd, trying to guess how many were on her side. After a judicial wait, she lifted her hand again for silence. "If the Earth men have some story they wish to tell, some lie, would it not be best that they should speak first? Let us all hear what they have to say." There was another buzz of reaction, and the bejeweled woman who had started the discussion got indignantly back to her feet.

"We would rather hear you speak of these other Earth men who you keep in secret, and from whom you got those stars which we all see on your leather. Speak! Bring them here and let *them* speak!"

The instant roar of approval was disconcerting. To Claire it sounded as if she had very few sympathizers. But she had the Earth men spotted now. They were on the far side of the chamber, directly opposite her, by the main doors. She waited for the roar to die a little, then raised her hand.

"All will be heard, in due course," she declared. "It is my will to hear the liars first. Who speaks for them?" She was making it as easy as she could, and she saw them stir now. One came striding forward across the open floor, to halt about twenty feet from her, looking up.

"I am Walter Creedy," he said, clearly and calmly. "I speak for all of us." He was dressed in neat, white coveralls, and she wondered how long it had been since the last time he had worn them.

"If I may approach you, Queen Sara?" Claire bowed gracious assent, watching him move. He was heavily built, almost paunchy, with dark shadows on his chin and jowls and masking his eyes. He was a determined man. She grew tense.

"Queen Saral" His voice took on a harsh edge. "We feel it is time certain things were said very plainly." He reached into his coveralls quite openly and pulled out a thing that shone in his grip. "Don't do anything sudden or suspicious, because this thing can kill you stone dead; I want you to believe that." The words, flat and deadly, were so unexpected to the assembly that all were shocked silent for a moment. The woman who had started it all leaped to her feet again, spinning to glare at Creedy. It was her last move. The weapon in Creedy's hand cracked once and the woman fell back. Claire looked away, sickened. She had hoped to avoid this. The whole chamber was stunned quiet. She lifted her hand carefully.

"Let no one move, do nothing violent. This man can do as he has said, as you can see. There must be no more killing." She raised herself to her feet. "What do you want of me, Earth man, to kill me, also?"

"You're being smart, Queenie." Creedy approved, as the rest of the men moved to spread out at his back. "Just do as I tell you, and nobody gets hurt. Keep an eye on them, boys. First one that tries anything, stop her. You know how. Come on down, lady, nice and steady. Walk!"

Claire nerved herself to pace straight to him and saw him move discreetly aside as she got close, waved her to go by. "Straight on," he commanded. "Steady. I'm right behind you. Out. You know the way!" She didn't, but that was the least of her worries. She tried to see as much as possible without being obvious about it, noting the way the men opened out to let her pass, then closed in after her like a bodyguard. They had planned this to the last detail. She heard Creedy.

"Gordy, give 'em the gas as soon as we get clear, then catch up. Milt, Herbie, come on, watch the sides, just in

case the Yaks get ideas about anything. Keep right on moving, Queenie, you're doing fine!"

"This is a snap!" a triumphant voice announced. "We shoulda done this years ago. Them fancy dames and their stupid ways! Boy, are they going to crawl now! This will really curl their hair!"

"Shut up and keep your eyes open, Herbie; we're not in the clear yet. On down the stairs, lady. That's nice. Walt, did you catch the rocks she's wearing? You reckon they been holding out on us?"

"Who cares now? We have her, so we have everything! It's a breeze! We needn't have got the rest of the boys up from the river after all!" Creedy's voice was thick with triumph and satisfaction, but Claire sagged on the inside. She had overlooked the possibility of reinforcements. They came now to the entrance hall; it was deserted. She saw that it was dusk outside and that someone had placed a lamp on the steps just outside the doors. She saw two of the men trot past her and down the steps.

"Stop right there!" Creedy snapped as she came to the head of the stone steps. "All clear, Gordy?"

"Clear, Walt, all away to bye-byes. They won't come around for hours, by which time we will be long gone!"

"Right. You get down there and help with those damn dog horses; get everybody mounted up and ready to blow. Find out if there's been any interference, any trouble. I'll bring the lamp with me."

"Check!" Gordy went loping down the steps to join the milling knot of men and animals, shadows against the glare. Claire stood still, her mind racing to try and find some way out of the net that was closing in on her. Suddenly she heard Creedy curse under his breath and then raise a yell.

"Hey, fellers! Hold it a minute. We've been conned! This dame is only a runt!" She was all out of time. With frantic speed she spun around, grabbing at her cape with one hand, to swing and whirl it in a try to smother Creedy, her other hand grabbing at the purse, feeling for the mini-mag. She felt something sizzle in the air past her cheek

and saw the weapon deflect in Creedy's hand as the heavy fur covered him for a moment. Then he had grappled her. In the struggle his knee caught her wrist and sent her weapon flying. She slammed hard through the fur again and again until Creedy was limp on the stone steps.

The black, doglike animals were plunging crazily. She saw Sam and Roger in the melee.

She plunged down the steps, saw a cursing man stagger into the light from the knot of animals, and went up on her toes as she lashed out with a double-handed chop, kicking up with her knee to complete the destruction. To her left she heard a grunt of effort, and then a crack, caught a flicker of movement to her right and whirled to see another man coming. Again the weapon flew from his hand, emitting a shrill *ping*. It was Sam again with his needle gun. She surged toward the would-be assassin. Stepping back from that, she sensed another attack, whirled to meet it, and saw Roger lean over a beast and grab her attacker by the throat, lifting him into the air, to slam him unconscious with one fist and drop him.

"Strikes me," he said calmly, "that—either I can't count—or there's more—whoa there!" She saw him vault over an animal, to plunge into a scramble on the far side. She looked warily about, but the thing seemed to be over. There were prone bodies all over, and, as she lifted her head, Sam stepped down from his vantage point to the side of the steps, the needle gun crooked in his arm and a grin on his face. She went to him and threw her arms around him.

"I might have known you would get in there before they got me too far away, Sam. I thought I'd had it, for a bit."

"Thought so myself," he said, "when I heard the chap behind you sing out. I had a bead on his gun, but damn near pinned you instead. Are you all right?"

"Never better, now. How did you get here, anyway?"

"It was Queen Sara's idea. She brought us right here. It seems they had a few extras laid on. That threw us for a moment. We had to wait for you, or give the game away. I'm glad you're all right."

Claire wriggled, holding tight to him. "I don't think I've ever been so glad to see anybody before, Sam!" His grip tightened, and his face was at once very serious, very close. They both turned as Roger came up with Sara.

They are a pair, she thought.

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