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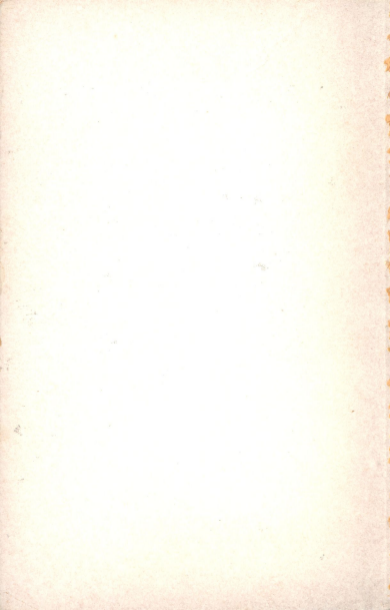
PRESENT AND FUTURE CLASH

IN A WORLD OF THE PAST!

3 FACES OF TIME



SAM MERWIN, Jr.
Complete & Unabridged



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INVADERS ON TIME'S HIDDEN BATTLEFIELD

On the universal time-track, this alternate Earth was two thousand years behind. While in our world and its parallel twins science was surging ahead, there it was still Ancient Rome. Yet though chariots rolled the streets, behind a secret wall crouched an ultra-modern army of flying tanks, atomic artillery, and tough American G.I.'s!

For in this backward Earth there was a menace that had to be met and blocked . . . a stalking foe from a devastated world of the far future, a hungry, vicious, depraved planet seeking new lands to replace its own radioactive ruins! And the key to this fantastic battle between the past, the present, and the future was a lone American girl, Elspeth Marriner, Time Watcher.

THREE FACES OF TIME is another science-fiction triumph from the pen of Sam Merwin, Jr., author of HOUSE OF MANY WORLDS.

Turn this book over for
second complete novel

CAST OF CHARACTERS

ELSPETH MARRINER

She spied for today in yesterday's turbulent eral

MACK FRASER

Elsbeth's boy friend found himself riding a see-saw
in and out of the farthest futurel

GNAIUS LACONIUS

This ancient Roman had a few super-scientific tricks
up his sleeve.

ANA KAI-MARTINEZ

This giantess was the toughest person in a world of
piratical Amazons.

COMMANDER DE MESTRES

He headed the strangest task-force in all of history.

BERENICE AGRIPPINA

She found herself cast in a different role than destiny
had allotted her.

**THREE
FACES
OF TIME**

SAM MERWIN, Jr.

ACE BOOKS, INC.

23 West 47th Street, New York 36, N. Y.

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PROLOGUE

THE OLD MAN rested his white, blue-veined hands on the top of his magnificent satinwood desk and leaned slightly forward, as if to impress upon Elspeth Marriner the importance of what he had to tell her. His wise, deep-set eyes fixed themselves upon hers with a calm, yet compelling urgency.

He said, "My dear, thanks to circumstances beyond my control, I am going to send you out alone for the first time."

There was no need for further explanation. Elspeth understood fully the implications of Mr. Horelle's remark. For she was, although still on the sunny side of thirty, a veteran Watcher, one of that supremely select little group accustomed to risk their lives transferring as trouble shooters to whichever of the many parallel versions of Earth needed their services.

Usually, it was Watcher policy to operate in teams of two or more—working in close collaboration with the carefully screened and chosen agents in residence on the worlds to which they were assigned. On her previous missions for Mr. Horelle, Elspeth had worked with a man named Mack Fraser, an ex-prizefighter turned magazine cameraman. Although her relationship with Mack had been a chronically stormy one, she was used to Mack and sensed, with a pang of inner regret, how helpless she was going to feel without him.

But she knew better than to admit this unease to Mr. Horelle. In his wisdom, she knew he must already have foreseen her feelings and discounted them. Her blue eyes steady on those of the Chief Watcher, she said, "Where am I needed?"

Elspeth, fair, sensitive, a poet, felt deep gratification at the slight trace of a smile that moved the old man's lips. She had said what he wanted her to say. He passed a

parchment-hued hand over his tall forehead before beginning the briefing.

Then he said, "My dear, I am assigning you to a newly discovered and quite remarkable version of Earth. Your mission will be neither military nor political this time—I am sending you merely to observe." His thin fingers caressed the celestial globe on one side of the great desk.

"We have been extremely slow in discovering the world of your destination," he went on, "perhaps because it and the worlds in close parallel to it have been concealed from our instruments by an odd cosmic cloud that partially shut off the sun's rays in your new world's particular plane."

"Heavens!" Elspeth exclaimed. "It must be a backward sort of world."

"It is," said Mr. Horelle, again with the trace of a smile. "Yet, I feel certain that its backwardness is of a nature that will prove especially fascinating to you. *Antique*—that is the name of your assigned planet for reasons you will shortly understand—has been in a sort of cosmic deep-freeze for two millenia. It has, in short, lost almost two thousand years of its history."

Fascinated, Elspeth said, "Why, it sounds almost like traveling backward in time!"

"You will be transferring to a world that is actually equivalent to the latter part of the first century of the Christian era," said Mr. Horelle, obviously enjoying the fullness of Elspeth's response. "The disaster that retarded its development utterly destroyed life on the two-score planets closest to its continuum."

"Yet, in broader perspective, this appalling catastrophe has its fortunate facets," the old man continued. "Naturally, we must profit by its discovery—an ancient world that is actually contemporaneous with our modern worlds. If I were still capable of making transfer, I assure you I should not miss the opportunity I am offering you."

Elspeth could only nod as she considered what might lie ahead of her. Here, she thought, was a world for poets—poets and lovers rather than engineers or tradesmen. Here was the world of Horace, of Ovid, of Virgil and

Catullus. . . . She felt a surge of immense inner satisfaction sweep through her.

Mr. Horelle brought her out of it with, "Unfortunately, we are not fully aware of all the possible implications in the mere existence of such a parallel planet. They may not prove to be entirely pleasant or profitable to the worlds as a whole. So, my dear, I want you to be on the alert for any anachronisms, to let your intuition as well as your judgment guide you should you sense anything wrong or out of place."

"I understand." Elspeth nodded. "I take it I am to go to Rome." And, when Mr. Horelle nodded, "Where do I make transfer—on this side of the ocean?"

Again Mr. Horelle smiled. "Hardly," he said, "unless you literally wish to paddle your own canoe. I have already arranged for you to fly to Sicily. Your transfer point lies there, halfway between Messina and Mount Etna."

Elspeth nodded. The whole business of effecting transfer between worlds was a delicate and sometimes dangerous one. As Mack Fraser once remarked, in his meat-and-potatoes way: "It's like being a naval aviator—no matter how many carrier landings you make, you never really get used to it."

Mr. Horelle's house, situated on a small island just within the barrier of Cape Hatteras, was one of the key transfer points in the Western Hemisphere—for the important doings of mankind, as well as the forces of nature, were instrumental in making transfer points possible.

As Mr. Horelle had told Elspeth and Mack Fraser when the two of them, ostensibly on a picture-and-article assignment for *Picture Week*, were first conducted to Spindrift Key, ". . . if a tangent in time develops out of historical decisions, then it must grow out of minor personal decisions as well. It takes forces far greater than any one person can generate to split the space-time continuum in which our universe exists.

"A nova, the destruction of a planet, even such momentous man-made events as effect the life history of this minor speck of space-dust we call Earth—these things all leave

their marks in varying degrees. For a while after their occurrence—the time span varies according to the shock suffered by the fabric of the continuum—a tangential zone remains through which, to those who know the secret of the key, it is possible to effect a transfer between worlds.”

To this, Mack Fraser had wondered: “But what has ever happened here—in this godforsaken place?”

And Mr. Horelle had explained, to both of them, “Spin-drift Key is thrice tangential. Almost four centuries ago, an Englishman named Sir Walter Raleigh put ashore inside the Capes while en route back to England after founding a Colony at Roanoke. He then decided that this island and the mainland behind it offered a safer and more generally favorable site for his colony. It was his plan to transfer it here before returning to England.”

“And . . . ?” a fascinated Elspeth had asked.

Mr. Horelle’s reply was, “In one of our tangential worlds Raleigh was able to make his transfer. His colony survived and the entire history of the continent was altered. In the world you come from, conditions arose which caused him to postpone doing so. The Roanoke colony, left to its fate, perished.

“Then, in January of 1813, the American privateer *Patriot*, Captain Overstocks commanding, was lured onto a reef by the so-called ‘bankers’ or pirates, who then made a highly prosperous business out of decoying ships to their ruin. The *Patriot* was running the then British blockade off the Capes with a safe-conduct arranged between the British admiral and Governor Joseph Alston of South Carolina. She was bound for New York . . .

“Actually, Alston was only able to obtain his safe-conduct because he and his father-in-law, Aaron Burr, were both trafficking with the British. There was a conspiracy afoot which planned for a double uprising in both the South and New England that could have altered the entire course of subsequent history. In your world, the shipwreck prevented it. But in certain others . . .” He had let it hang.

Then, leaning toward them across his magnificent desk: “More recently, when a pair of brothers named Wilbur

and Orville Wright were experimenting with heavier-than-air craft at nearby Kittyhawk, they made a number of their crucial plans and decisions in this very room. I believe you can compute the tangential potentialities of their discovery.

"So," he concluded, "Spindrift Key is perhaps the strongest tangential point on this continent. That it is a seasonal storm center is an added factor in its tangency. It is actually a multiple gateway to parallel worlds, its older tangencies maintained and reinforced by the importance of more recent occurrences . . ."

Elsbeth thought back to the moment, in this very room, which had so altered her life. Since becoming a Watcher, Elsbeth found little time to write poetry or magazine articles for *Picture Week*. Instead of writing drama, she lived it—at times with danger and ugliness, at times with a full awareness of incredible beauty and the sense of serving other peoples in other worlds.

Yet none of the other worlds to which Mr. Horelle had assigned her, seemed to Elsbeth to offer such a full meed of interest and excitement as this so-called *Antique* to which she was being sent. Looking at Mr. Horelle, she said, "Whom do I get in touch with upon my arrival?"

"I think you will find the agent in residence both familiar and interesting," said the old man. "His name is Pliny—Pliny the Elder—and I understand that, while he does not fully understand the theory of interworld transfer, he is both intelligent and disposed to be cooperative. I believe you will also find him a gentleman."

Mention of the word "gentleman" caused Elsbeth at once to think of the man who had served as her partner on her previous assignments for Mr. Horelle and the Watchers—for Mack Fraser was apparently everything but a "gentleman." She said, bluntly, "Mr. Horelle, why isn't Mack going with me on this assignment?"

"Chiefly," he replied, "because Mack is needed elsewhere. Yours is essentially a cultural assignment. You speak the classic languages and know their history and their art."

"I wonder," said Elsbeth, "which of the schools of Latin pronunciation will prove to be correct."

"Almost certainly, neither of them." Mr. Horelle smiled his faint smile again. "Actually, I should very much like to know myself whether *ae* is pronounced *eee* or *eye*. Perhaps, on your return, we can discuss the matter."

Elspeth sensed that she was being dismissed. While Mr. Horelle never discussed his age, he was almost incredibly old; it was necessary for him to conserve every precious ounce of energy he possessed. She rose and said, "I shall look forward to it. And thank you, sir, for such an assignment."

His thin lips curved again and he lifted one alabastrine hand in farewell salute. He said, "Remember, my dear. Be on the alert for anachronisms. We really know very little about this world. And above all, take care of yourself."

"I'll be careful," she said. She knew that, like herself, Mr. Horelle was remembering Juana Brooks, the brilliant little beauty who had inducted—and conducted—Mack and herself through the complexities of their first poli-world assignment—and had paid for it with her life.

To a very real extent, Elspeth had dedicated her life in an effort to fill Juana's shoes with the Watchers. Nor was her value lessened by the very real humility she brought to her job. She recalled the dark, vivid Juana, and the disaster that had destroyed her. It had come from a degenerate man out of a degenerate world, a man who had not hesitated to use that deadliest of all hand-weapons, the disintegrator. He, too, had died. But his death had not restored Juana Brooks to life.

Elspeth said farewell to the hound-faced butler who had served Mr. Horelle and Spindrift Key for more than four decades. She left the fine old white mansion, standing atop its gentle rise of well-landscaped lawn. Always, when she departed from this place she had come to love best in all the world, Elspeth wondered whether she would live to revisit it.

Walking to the trim little jetty, where a power boat waited to carry her to the somewhat dilapidated village that hugged the western shore of the inlet, Elspeth admitted to herself that she was going to miss Mack Fraser—even while she despised herself for making the admission.

She could envision ever seam, every pore, every feature of his homely-handsome face. Thanks to his somewhat shadowy early experiences in the prize ring, Mack's nose was slightly flattened across the bridge, its end a trifle off center. His cheekbones were not entirely symmetrical, as if one of them—the left one—had been shattered by a fist. His eyes habitually wore a sleepy look which, she suspected, came from the thin pouches of scar tissue on their upper lids.

Why women found him attractive, Elspeth had never been able to figure out to her own satisfaction. But they did and Elspeth resented the fact far more than she should. *Conceited tomcat*, she thought, recalling that Mack had quite casually stood her up on their last supposed meeting in Manhattan.

She was going to miss his toughness, his steadiness, his meat-and-potatoes resourcefulness. She was going to miss him a lot more than she cared to admit to herself.

Yet it was going to be a test, a chance to prove herself—her first solo assignment. What had Mr. Horelle told her: to keep her blue eyes well peeled for any anachronisms in this strange new—or rather old—world she was to visit? She resolved to keep her ears open as well.

As she entered the power boat, she tried to remember some of the things she had read about Rome in the first century of the Christian era. Although, following the wild eruptions that succeeded the Claudian Caesars, the Flavians, led by Vespasian, had brought order out of the chaos that followed Nero, pagan Rome was still a difficult and dangerous place. She was going to have to depend very greatly upon the agent in residence, Pliny the Elder. She wondered if he were as complete a stuffed shirt as she had always supposed.

She lit a cigarette and dropped the match into the warm water of the inlet, thinking, *Rome, get ready. But ready or not, here we come.*

I

ELSPETH MARRINER reclined on a low couch of ivory and ebony and tried to forget that, if she stayed in this strangely backward world, she would have to wait at least fifteen hundred years for a cup of tea. The jug of Marsala which Gnaius Laconius had forwarded by his body slave, Cratus, was raw against the chords of her throat—especially when compared regretfully to the fine Falerno locked in the wine room of the villa's basement.

Yet she was bound to drink it in common courtesy to Gnaius Laconius, who leaned gracefully against one of the exquisite neo-Corinthian pillars of the portico as he recited an ode he had composed in her honor. His tan toga, edged lavishly with maroon embroidery, matched in hues the pale tan and dark red of his face and hair.

With a gesture that suggested passion while not disarranging any of the chain of ringlets which framed his upper face, he declaimed in fluid Latin, "*. . . whose very breath, soft as the summer's night, sparks passion in my body with the speed of light . . .*"

There it was, she thought—another of the odd anachronisms that cropped up occasionally in the work and words of Gnaius Laconius. While half-listening to the rolling hexameters he was uttering, she considered somberly the puzzle he had become to her.

Mentally she reviewed his lapses. There was the evening at Berenice Agrippina's palace when, in the course of a conversation on medicine, he had mentioned a surgeon's scalpel—a device this world had yet to see or possess the steel to make. There was the afternoon in the forum when, languidly pretending an interest in things military with young Decimus Juvenalis, recently appointed to his army tribuneship, Gnaius had used the phrase, "swift and deadly as a war rocket." Decimus Juvenalis had looked puzzled, then let it pass.

And now, "speed of light." She eyed the poet narrowly, seeking other alien traces. But Gnaius, with his flat curls, his effeminate gestures, his carefully affected lisp, his redolence of Asiatic perfume, his demi-drunkenness, seemed the typical aristocratic poetry-buff of Vespasian's reign as Emperor of Rome.

Yet his appearance was a mask. Intuitively she must have known it from the first. There was an exotic quality to his verse itself, despite its careful crouching within the poetic limits of the era, which suggested a rigid restraint, hinted at knowledge of other forms and phrases and concepts beyond those of this world.

Truly, Elspeth's mission to an Earth, retarded by cosmic disaster and delay some nineteen hundred years behind its myriad sister planets, was turning an odd corner into an even stranger street. For Gnaius had not once given her an indication that he was an agent of the Watchers, those tireless guardians of the delicate balance between parallel time-tracks. And she had given him ample opportunity to do so. Watching him, listening to him, she felt all at once afraid.

Her assignment was cultural rather than diplomatic, economic or military. Discovery of this backward world, known among the agents as *Antique*, offered a priceless opportunity for study of the ancient world at first hand—of its customs, language, poetry and daily existence without the filtering of subsequent opinion.

A poet of considerable progress before she became enmeshed in the work of the Watchers, endowed with a fine classical education, Elspeth had been an obvious choice for the job. She had entered into it with zest and relish, eager to walk among living parallels of the giants whose thoughts and works had remained fresh for two millenia.

She had felt a pang that discovery of *Antique* had not come earlier—when Virgil, Horace and the delightfully wicked Ovid, coming hard on the heels of Varro, Catullus and Lucretius, had brought the age of Augustan poetry to its magnificent fulfillment. But the arid era of the Claudian emperors was ended, the age of Martial and Juvenal about to burst into satiric flame.

She had met young Decimus Juvenalis, a young man of twenty-four whose gloom of countenance but rarely lighted with the warmth of inner delight, and found him more engrossed in the military advancement of his career than in the poetry which had, on so many hundreds of parallel worlds, already won him lasting fame.

Under Watcher sponsorship she had talked with Martial, currently voyaging on the lower Nile, before his departure, had been given the opportunity of reading manuscripts in the finest libraries of the eternal city, had even found opportunity to mingle in the social life of Rome. It had seemed the most glamorous of milk runs.

She discovered that Gnaius Laconius had stopped reading and was peering forward slightly, regarding her with an intensity of yearning that caused her to lower her gaze, to sip her wine, then to look out over the portico balustrade at the panorama of the magnificent city.

The villa, like Lamia, her body slave, had been generously assigned her by Pliny the Elder, who had been selected a resident agent for the Watchers in this anachronistic world. And if Lamia, from Elspeth's twentieth-century point of view had definite drawbacks, the villa did not—save of course for such conveniences as inside plumbing and electricity.

Perched on the steep southwestern tip of the Cispian Hill, between the Vius Patricus and the Clivus Suburbanus, well inside the walls of the old city, it seemed to rise from the tops of the frieze of evergreens that nested in the slope below. Its portico looked across the succession of flat rooftops to the incredible grandeur of the palaces that rose like fairy castles from the Palatine.

Dark green and white—evergreen and marble. Although Elspeth had been resident in the villa now for more than two months, she found the vista still difficult to credit. Rome, under Vespasian, was rebuilt from the holocaust that had attended Nero's wretched reign. Soon it was to attain the ultimate glories of Hadrian. Truly, she thought savoring without pleasure the aftertaste of the Marsala, the modern versions of the city she had known were pallid carbons of Rome in full vitality and glory.

Gnaius, who had rewrapped the scroll of his manuscript

and capped it with a peevish snapping sound, said petulantly, "I fear you have not been listening, Marina."

Emerging from her reverie with a start, Elspeth—Marina Elspetia for the present—felt her face go hot while she foundered for some polite way out of the predicament. She began, "The beauty of your tribute caused my mind to mount a dream." *How corny*, she thought, and wondered how to go on in the same vein.

There was no need to continue. Shedding his usual diffidence, Gnaius Laconius sent his manuscript scroll rolling across the flagged tile of the floor. His arms pinioned her to the couch. His perfume, intermingled with the sourness of his breath, all but overwhelmed her, as he brought his face close to hers.

He said, "I must possess you or I die."

She resisted an impulse to utter a slang saying of another later day with a *Drop dead then*. Instead she said, "Gnaius, what's come over you? You've never acted like this before." She decided with wry self-detachment that she was getting cornier and cornier.

"It is only because you have never given me an opportunity to express the feelings that send the blood coursing through my veins at every thought of you, fair goddess," he replied reproachfully.

An alarm bell in her head rang a cash register. There was another one, she thought, adding it to her previous tally. What right had anyone in Vespasian's Rome to know about circulation of the blood? Her experiences in parallel worlds had inured her to all sorts of anachronisms—but this, she decided, was beyond acceptance.

She said, "I'm no goddess and I'm perfectly capable of being unfair," after allowing him to brush her cheek with his lips—which she suspected of having been stained red with betel juice or some such primitive cosmetic.

Elspeth was a little puzzled; Gnaius had won himself quite a reputation by his indifference to the dark charmers of the city. It was rumored that his interests lay elsewhere. She sought in vain for a reason for this unexpected behavior.

Standing over her, he was almost a foot taller than the average Roman. He might have been a Goth from the forests

of Germany, but his features were cast in far less rugged mold.

When she rose he looked frightened at his own temerity—as if he expected her to scold. She patted his cheek, looked into his soulful brown eyes, and said, "I shan't pretend I'm not flattered, Gnaius, but I fear I must have time to consider your suit."

He looked like a condemned man granted a reprieve. He said eagerly. "Then I shall see you tonight at Berenice's?"

"Perhaps," she told him, though she had every intention of going. The son of the Emperor, and Berenice's lover, would almost certainly be present. Titus Flavius Sabinus Vespasianus had just returned from a journey through the northern provinces that had lasted almost four months and had carried him as far as Britain. After reporting to his father, he was due to make his first appearance in society. And Elspeth was frankly eager to meet and talk with a Roman Emperor-to-be.

Elspeth summoned her maid, Lamia, a sparkling little creature, while Gnaius smothered her with melting glances of love. His body-slave, a sawed-off Hercules from Mauritania, named Narvo, brought his master's toga, an ornate affair, and draped it properly around him.

"Until tonight, fair goddess," said the poet with a bow. He tossed the end of his toga over his shoulder with an elaborate bravura and strode from the portico toward the inner rooms of the villa, the atrium and the street entrance. His sandal bottoms made faint scuffling sounds on the tile floor as he moved.

Lamia eyed her mistress speculatively. Neither her inferior stature—the top of her blue-black head came barely to Elspeth's breasts in level—or her inferior station seemed to have infected the slave-girl from Pamphylia with the slightest notions of respect. She said, "You'd do better with the slave than the master, mistress." She proceeded to qualify this statement with some, to Elspeth, appallingly frank information.

"I'll keep it in mind, Lamia," she murmured when the garrulous little slave at last stopped speaking. She paused, her brows lifted curiously, as she sensed an air of excite-

ment which the Pamphylian seemed to be having difficulty in repressing. "What is it?" she asked bluntly.

"Madam," said Lamia, her eyes rounder than usual, "there's a messenger awaiting your audience in the smaller atrium. I put him there to be out of the way of your company."

"You should have told me first," said Elspeth, faintly reproving. Then, "What is it about him that interests you so, Lamia?"

Lamia wriggled like a burlesque dancer from another world and said breathlessly, "He is tall and fair and looks a barbarian—but he comes from Aventine district beyond the Palatine and his accent is strange.

"Show him out here—at once," said Elspeth.

"Yes, madam," the girl said patiently. She withdrew, returned a moment later to usher in a tall bronzed fair-haired man who looked about as much at home in tunic and toga as a longshoreman in a white tie and tails. As he came out on the portico, the newcomer tripped over a dragging corner of his outer garment and uttered a distinct and thoroughly twentieth century, "Damn!"—at which Lamia giggled and slithered sinuously back into the house.

He stood rigidly in front of Elspeth and spoke in low-voiced English with a distinct Irish brogue, saying, "Miss Marriner, with the compliments of Commander Mestres."

Elspeth felt both fright and relief at the sound of her native tongue. She murmured, "Thanks," and took the envelope he offered her, scanned it quickly. It had been hurriedly written and said.

Dear Miss Marriner—Sergeant Carhart, the bearer, will back up my request for your presence as soon as possible. As you will understand soon enough, I am unable to visit you at present, to make know the present urgent situation of which Mr. Horelle wishes me to apprise you. Since it is important we cooperate I must therefore ask you to come to me, returning with Sergeant Carhart if possible.

Sincerely,

R. G. de Mestres
(Commander)

Elspeth read the note twice, feeling a chill at the prospect of unknown and rapidly approaching action. Out of life-long habit, she sought to read the character of Commander de Mestres from the written word. By his name, she decided, he must be French. Probably some sort of career military man, his prose rigidified by decades of service paper-work. A man with a soul of starch, she thought, as she moved to a brazier and held the note over the flame till it was burned to ash.

"You walked!" she asked Sergeant Carhart in English, still speaking softly lest sound of the alien tongue rouse the curiosity of Lamia or one of the house-slaves.

At his nod Elspeth tapped her lower lip with a forefinger, said, "Wait here while I summon my chair." Then, at his expression of contempt: "It's part of the act, Sergeant. Women like the one I'm supposed to be simply don't walk in Rome. And if you'd kept your eyes open coming here you'd know why."

Again he nodded. Then, blurtingly: "Madam, I never seen anything like it. What sort of a place is this, anyway? If I'd known when I volunteered . . ." His voice trailed off.

Elspeth laughed, said, "I'll be with you directly. We'll have to move fast because my time is limited. Wait for me in the atrium—the room where you were before." And, as his face stiffened, she said, "I'll keep Lamia busy so you needn't be afraid."

"Yes, ma'm," was the reply. Then, as they moved to enter the house proper: "That maid of yours—what was she after, anyway?"

"Probably just what you're thinking," said Elspeth. She went serenely on, deriving a childish amusement from shocking the sergeant.

A quarter of an hour later Elspeth was being carried in her litter down the steeply sloped Clivus Suburbanus, with its close-packed rows of apartment houses, toward the Forum. Sergeant Carhart, bewildered but determined not to show it, strode resolutely alongside.

As they progressed somewhat erratically through the densely populated street—scarcely more than a broad alley by twentieth-century standards, but paved with well-worn

blocks of reddish sandstone—she saw through the litter curtains a plump dark girl in a bright orange stola brush against the sergeant. She let her stola fall open at the neck as the sergeant paused to let her pass, revealing the mark of her profession hanging from a chain about her well-fleshed neck, and murmured classic Latin phrases.

Sergeant Carhart yelped and pushed past her, his face turning brick red at the abusive jeers that followed him. He risked a sidelong glance at Elspeth, caught her watching eyes and turned from red to purple. He muttered, "What kind of a place is this?"

She beckoned him close, whispered, "You're in a pagan world, Sergeant." Then, in a torrent of Latin, she directed her slaves to proceed more rapidly with the litter. She was showing off and she knew it but enjoyed it. Almost three months had passed since she had been able to converse with anyone in her native tongue.

They passed along the wider Avenue of Castor, with its brilliant mosaic pavement. Ahead, still out of sight, thanks to the number and size of the buildings around them, lay the Tiber with its magnificent stone and marble bridges. On their right rose the round eminence of Capitoline Hill, topped with its ancient temple to Jupiter.

To their right the magnificent structures of the Forum merged into the seemingly endless palaces, temples and public buildings of the Palatine. While they lacked the airy slimness of Manhattan skyscrapers, there was a broad-scaled grandeur to their tiers of columns upon columns that was equally impressive. And, since from this viewpoint their marble and granite surfaces concealed entirely the ground of the hill on which they were built, they gave the effect of being one single tremendous and complex building.

Calling the sergeant to her side, Elspeth said, "Quite a spectacle, isn't it, Sergeant? A lot more than the history books give us."

Grudgingly reluctant to be impressed he replied, "Yeah—but I don't see how they ever found time to build it. Not the way they seem to keep themselves busy around here."

"Sergeant!" said Elspeth in delighted reproof, and had the pleasure of seeing him turn the color of a salmon steak.

They skirted the Circus Maximus, passed a crumbling vine-grown gate of the ancient Murcian Wall, reaching a less densely built portico of the Aventine Hill and the ill-tended wall of one of the palaces of a Claudian favorite, long since sequestered and allowed to languish in disuse. At Sergeant Carhart's request, Elspeth alighted from her litter. Telling her servants to await her return, she followed her usher to a ring-handled iron gate whose dark surface was bright with rust.

"Headquarters," he said simply, then rapped. A peephole was opened and a voice inquired in execrable Latin, "Who goes there?"

"Me, you motheaten son of a Senegambian baboon," was the sergeant's gentle reply.

"Pass 'friend," said the other in English. The eyehole closed with a groan of tired metal and a small door within the gate itself opened in creaking protest. Elspeth stepped through it and gasped. She was inured to the often sudden contrasts that resulted from interworld transfers, but this one had been utterly unexpected.

The immense courtyard in which she stood belonged to the world called *Antique*—but everything within it was grimly reminiscent of less pleasant aspects of worlds which had not been retarded by cosmic accident. She was in the midst of men and machines belonging to a regimental combat team of nineteen hundred years later.

To her left, mechanics were working over a row of some two dozen tri-di caterpillar cannons of the latest design. Armored pipits were lined up four deep to her right, and smaller groups of other armored units scattered about the four-acre area. All vehicles wore the airy massivity that proclaimed their ability to fly through the air or hover, as well as to travel in water or on land. Their gun-snouts, swathed in plastic protectors, looked like ugly stunted poles.

The men who lounged about the area or worked on their machines were clad in slate-gray coveralls and long-brimmed fatigue caps and the heavy, high-laced boots of the military of an era far removed from the brief tunics, greaves, breastplates and helmets of Roman soldiery. The language they spoke was English rather than Latin.

Their presence, in the abandoned palace of the Claudian favorite on the Aventine hill, stunned Elspeth, who moved through them toward the palace proper as if in a dream. Never before, in the missions among worlds she had performed for Mr. Horelle and the Watchers he represented, had there been occasion to transfer from one world to another any such sizeable unit of force.

If force were needed, usually it was obtained through placing a weapon, taken from some other world, into the proper hands. Thus the Watchers maintained the cosmic balance between the myriad existences of Earth.

There were other causes for wonder at such action. Usually it was the policy of the Watchers to maintain secrecy at all costs. They usually operated through sparsely settled agents in residence and small teams of two or three travelers. Only a few, a very few persons on each version of Earth, were held sufficiently educated, intelligent, imaginative and well-balanced to be permitted to make transfer between worlds. Yet here was a force of several hundred officers and men transferred in bulk to a world that, save for its having been retarded in development, seemed to be following the normal course of history. Elspeth could not help but wonder why.

They entered a gloomy, half-lit hall of the sequestered palace, in which unshaded electric bulbs gleamed as occasional anachronisms. Elspeth let her thoughts range backward three months to the briefing Mr. Horelle had given her for the assignment on *Antique*.

She did not have to close her eyes to see the Chief Watcher's alabaster skin, his wise and gentle deep-set eyes. In her thoughts the alabaster texture and color of his paper-thin old hands rested upon the top of his magnificent study desk, flanked on one side by a terrestrial globe, on the other by a celestial one.

Only now, faced with this appalling anachronism, did she recall clearly the warning he had given her at the time. He had said, "Elspeth, I'm sending you out alone for the first time."

Her reply had been a prompt, "Good!" Ever since their first trip to other worlds, she and Mack Fraser, a tough

materialistic and mechanically minded ex-photographer, had worked together on jobs involving transfer between worlds.

Their relationship had been a stormy one—and other was impossible between their varied natures. Elspeth was sensitive to beauty of thought as well as vision, frequently moody, apt to drift off into reverie on the wings of her imagination, with a poet's instinctive love of the bizarre, the colorful, the exotic.

Mack was strictly a down-to-earth character—an ex-prizefighter and engineer who thought always in black and white, whose frequent shrewdnesses and insights were the more annoying because they emerged inexplicably from such a drab exterior. At the time Mr. Horelle assigned her to *Antique*, Elspeth and Mack had been indulging in one of their most angry feuds—of which the most bothersome factor to Elspeth was that, in the heat of the conflict, she had utterly forgotten its cause.

This way, madam—are you okay?" Sergeant Carhart took her arm solicitously, as, in her consideration of the quarrel with her former partner, she went blundering past an open doorway.

"Sorry, Sergeant," she stammered, abashed as always by her ineptitude. Turning, she remembered Mr. Horelle's warning before he had sent her on the flight across the Atlantic, that brought her to the transfer point.

"I want you to look for anachronisms, to seek out whatever seems to you wrong. I hope I am making myself at least partially clear."

"You are, sir," she had replied, in perfect rapport. "And Mack isn't going along on this job?"

Mr. Horelle had shaken his head, told her, with the trace of a smile, "No, Elspeth, while his engineering talents might find much interest in this, we know most of the secrets of the Roman builders. What we have lost is much of their culture, their everyday use of the language, the way they thought and felt and behaved."

These were the words that had registered most deeply with Elspeth at the time. The warning reminded her of Gnaius Laconius and his references to things of which he should not have known.

Perhaps Gnaius was part of the suddenly distorted picture, for some distortion must exist to account for the unprecedented show of force. She watched a stocky, half-handsome man wearing fourragère and the crossed batons of a commander rise from behind the desk and extend his hand.

He said, "Miss Marriner, Mr. Horelle asked me to extend his compliments. I'm Commander de Mestres and I hope you've been briefed on the situation. From where I sit it looks impossible."

II

LOOKING AT Commander de Mestres, Elspeth decided ruefully that her character analysis of the soldier through his handwritten note was a number of kilometers off-base. Certainly he was not French. His accents bore the homely twang of the North American Midwest. And while his face and bearing were stamped with the imprint of a lifetime of conformity to the discipline required of a career military man, the sensitivity of his mouth, the alert twinkle of humor in his eyes, above all a sort of rakish unstarchiness of apparel—these bespoke a man capable of detachment, if not of revolt, from the restrictions of his chosen profession.

"I'm afraid my briefing must have preceded this situation to which you refer," said Elspeth. "I have received no messages since I came here—which was three months ago."

DeMestres hunched his shoulders briefly, causing his orange and silver fourragère to drum three times in silence against the short ribs beneath his shirt. He said, "A hell of a lot has happened since. If only you could have been tipped off. But you weren't and that's that." He regarded her mournfully across the desk.

"Suppose you tell me about it, Commander," said Elspeth. "I might have picked up something helpful. But mine was ostensibly a cultural mission."

"As you know," he began, "the very existence of this anachronistic planet is unprecedented." Then, at her nod: "It represents the most completely untouched mine of raw materials at present known to any of the worlds. And those that have achieved space-travel have yet to make it productive.

"However, *Antique* seems to have a corollary," de Mestres went on. "Call it an opposite number if it's easier."

"Commander de Mestres," said Elspeth half angrily, "I may be a poet by profession and I may have flunked Algebra Two in school—but I did pass plane geometry. And I do know what a corollary is."

He brushed back his graying hair, gave her a quick grin, saying, "I had a hell of a time with algebra myself, Miss Marriner. I'm sorry, but you get like this in the service—too many numbskulls on top. You don't have to worry about the men beneath you."

"A soldier's life," Elspeth paraphrased, responding at once to de Mestres' amiability. He gestured idly, went on.

"The damned space-berg or whatever it was that all but wiped out life in this probability sector and which created *Antique* seems to have produced a counter-effect in a probability sector directly opposite. Here the normal blocking out of the sun's heat was weakened and a flock of Earths were burned to a crisp.

"However, one among them survived. And having had its last ice age practically eliminated, it developed, as the storybook boys used to say, apace. In short, it is presently on its last legs. Most of its land surface has been radioactive for centuries as a result of this precocity. Its late discovery by the Watchers hasn't helped, either. The name of this Earth is Heartland, for only in an area roughly corresponding to Western Asia, Central Europe and the Mediterranean regions does life remain."

"A return to the womb," said Elspeth breathlessly.

De Mestres looked briefly puzzled, then nodded. "Correct," he told her. "With a few variations only the original fount of what we laughingly call Western Civilization is left. And by way of carrying the analogy further, such civilization as remains seems to be a matriarchy. When the men had been pretty much killed off, the women got fed up with the whole sorry business and took over."

"Sounds like an ideal world," said Elspeth quietly.

The Commander looked at her and his grin was quick and warming. He said, "Take my word for it, it isn't. Our people are doing what they can to bring Heartland back to self-sufficiency, but a couple of primary mistakes were made by the first agents to visit it. The matriarchs played it cute and a man was made resident agent."

"Sounds just like a bunch of males," said Elspeth mercilessly. "Taking it for granted the men were superior."

"Scourge me with whips if you wish," said de Mestres,

"but I wasn't even there. It was just one time the percentages failed to pay off. If we'd sent a woman agent—but we didn't."

"And is this Heartland the reason for your military mission to *Antique*?" asked Elspeth, frowning at him.

"It is," was the prompt reply. De Mestres sighed and told her. "The master chart has revealed the operation of gateways on both Heartland and *Antique* that are not known to the Watchers."

Elspeth thought this over as de Mestres gave her time. The significance, as it sank home, became appalling. One virgin planet, one planet virtually stripped of raw materials—add the vagaries of a matriarchal civilization and open gateways on both planets unknown to the Watchers. She said, "You mean Heartland is raiding *Antique*?"

"Exactly," said de Mestres. "My men and I have been sent here to stop it—by force if necessary. We effected transfer at night via one of the new Z-type submarines and flew our machines in here last night. We're here; we want to get to work. Not more than a handful of my men have the slightest idea of what we're doing. They volunteered for a punitive expedition at triple pay. They were selected more for ability to keep their mouths shut than for anything else."

"It must have been an incredible transfer," said Elspeth. In her mind's eye she could visualize the interior of the giant undersea vessel, stricken with the darkness of the void that attended all transfers between worlds. She saw its long lean deck, a black streak on the night waters of the strait, lying awash as vehicle after vehicle emerged to rendezvous in the sky above her and head north toward Rome in the silence of muffled motors. Suddenly she realized the Commander was talking to her.

". . . must understand the considerable difficulties of our assignment," he was saying. "Until we get a clue to the missing gateways or actual illicit operations, my men are confined to the palace and its yard. They're human, unfortunately. They know they're in a city and they'll want to see it. Some of them will. I risked sending you Sergeant Carhart this afternoon simply because I could not leave here

at the moment. I received a visit from the resident Watcher."

"Pliny the Elder?" said Elspeth, her mouth curving upward. "According to my schoolbooks he was a dreadful old bookworm who never spent a moment away from his work. Actually he's a charming old scoundrel with a flock of slave ghost writers from Greece."

The Commander laughed. "I must confess I thought for a few minutes he must be an impostor," said de Mestres. "He proved quite convivial. By the way, Miss Marriner, can I offer you a drink of whisky?"

"You may and I accept—the next time we meet," replied Elspeth promptly. "I'm so sick of Roman wine I'd literally give my shirt for some decent Scotch. But I'm going to a wingding tonight and I don't want to fall flat on my unpretty puss."

"I'll take a raincheck," said de Mestres, who seemed to be becoming less formal by the moment. "Unfortunately it's bourbon. In my world America is not under British dominion as it is in yours."

"Do any of us really have home worlds?" Elspeth asked him. Then, without waiting for a reply: "I gather you want me to keep my shell-pink ears open and look for clues."

"If you don't," replied the Commander, "we're sunk. And if a world—Heartland—succeeds in betraying the Watchers and embarking on a successful career of polyworld conquest, the entire cosmic balance will be knocked into the proverbial cocked hat. You and Pliny are the only contacts we've got here—and remember, he's an admiral."

"Remember, Commander, the Navy brought you here," said Elspeth with a trace of mockery. And before de Mestres could reply to the gibe: "I may have a clue; it's so tenuous as yet that I'm not going to mention it. But I have stumbled on an odd human anachronism."

"Good," said the Commander, his eyes suddenly bright. "Now, Miss Marriner, what about *Antique*? You've been here longer than any traveling agent to date—what's it like?"

"So far," she replied slowly, marshalling her thoughts, "*Antique* seems pretty much to follow the main thread of basic probability. It has its peculiarities, of course. The Etruscans have remained stronger, and trade with China is

far more extensive than on most other planets in this era of history.

"But the main thread is there. They've had their civil wars: Marius and Sulla, then Caesar and Pompey, and Octavius and Anthony against Brutus and Cassius, finally Octavius against Anthony and Cleopatra. Augustus developed the Empire; Christ was born but His influence hasn't been too much felt yet; the Claudians performed all their excesses and Nero was assassinated ten years ago.

"The city is still uneasy, even under Vespasian and with Titus coming up. But it's building—Lord how it's building! If you haven't seen it, get Sergeant Carhart to tell you about it. He seemed rather impressed while escorting me here. By the way, I'm due at a party Berenice Agrippina is tossing for Titus tonight. I'd try to take you, but I'm going to be otherwise busy."

Commander de Mestres glanced at the watch on his wrist, said, "I'll escort you to your villa myself. It might be wise for me to get acquainted with Rome."

"Thank you, Commander," said Elspeth, dimpling. "But you'd better bring along the sergeant and a few men. It isn't safe to walk alone in Rome after dark."

"In what way?" the Commander asked with a faint hint of smile.

"In any way," said Elspeth unequivocally. Then, as she had already told Sergeant Carhart: "This is a pagan city, Commander."

At first the journey was through the twilight shadows of the narrow Roman streets, then continued by torchlight at the rapid fall of night. Elspeth's escort was successively appalled and roused by sniggering comment by the early evening activity about the crumbling Murcian gate, struck spellbound by the torchlight magnificence of the Forum with its dizzying background of Palatine palaces and temples, silhouetted at the top against a yellow tea-rose after-glow. These were even forced to engage in a brief struggle as footpads tried to raid Elspeth's litter at the first rise of the Clivus Suburbanus.

Leaving her at the entrance of her villa, Commander de

Mestres pulled his toga tight about him against the cool evening wind and said, "It's been a pleasure, Miss Marriner."

"Marina Elspetia, please, Commander," she replied in Latin.

Flawlessly, in the same tongue, he said, "My apologies. I'm afraid my professional sang-froid is bubbling a bit." Then, in English, looking about him at the litter bearers and including the whole city in his gesture: "Lord, but they're small. I've always thought the Romans were a tall sort of master race."

"Average Roman man, five feet two," replied Elspeth. "Average woman five feet. I'm something of a giant freak."

"A very charming one," said the Commander gallantly.

"Commander!" replied Elspeth, "remember your wife and children."

"Not just now if you don't mind," he retorted, smiling. Then, serious once more. "I hope you uncover something soon. Old Pliny may be a wonder boy in this age, but he wouldn't know a minor deviation from a major time flaw, I'm afraid."

"Don't be too sure of that," she replied. Then, with a salute to Sergeant Carhart, she slipped into the villa. For a moment she listened to the measured tramp of the soldiers' feet as they marched off down the steep slope of the Clivus Suburbanus.

She found Lamia peering out one of the narrow atrium windows at the receding backs of her escort. Reluctantly the girl turned at her mistress' summons, saying, "Madam, where did you ever find so many *big* men? And couldn't you have asked them in for a little?"

"You know there's no time if I'm to reach the party," Elspeth replied, eyeing her little slave.

"Is madam well?" the slave-girl asked her.

The poetess smiled, told Lamia she was quite well and ready for her bath. In the chill of the Roman evening she was grateful for the hollow tiles through which a basement hot-air furnace dispensed heat evenly through floor, walls and ceiling—far more effectively than in the latter-day English style country houses which had been her own early environment.

She still found it somewhat uncomfortable to bathe under the sad black eyes of the Nubian eunuch who poured the water into her tub, to submit to Lamia's washing and drying. Yet this was Roman custom and to reveal her embarrassment would have been to betray her status as an alien in time.

Since the occasion was an important one, she had Lamia procure for her a gown of gauzy white linen fringed cloth of gold. There had been no time to try it on, and she was briefly dismayed to discover that, in the fashion then considered chic, it was scarcely concealing. Yet the steel hand-mirror informed her that it set off her figure enchantingly.

She tilted the mirror to look at her hair and sighed. Elspeth, like many ash-blondes, was in beauty-parlor parlance, a dough-head—her hair so fine that it was virtually impossible to set. She complained of her problem to Lamia, who said, "I'd give up seven nights with a Gothic chief to have hair such as yours—so silken, so light in hue. I have been studying your problem. If madam will sit down . . ."

She went to work at once, using numerous combs and a lacquer that worked wonders at keeping her stubborn curls in place—though Elspeth did not dare inquire as to its ingredients. Some of the Roman beauty aids were appallingly primitive in their composition.

Midway during the coiffure a house-slave brought word that the litter and escort sent to bring her to Berenice's palace had arrived. Lamia worked fast but carefully, refusing to let her mistress depart until she was satisfied with her work. Then, putting in place a final pin of ivory inlaid with gold, she said: "There! If madam is not careful she will catch the eye of Prince Titus himself."

"And get my throat cut by some of Berenice's bullies," said Elspeth. She made a move to disarrange her hair, causing Lamia to squeal with dismay. Then she smiled and left it alone, adding, "You've made me look like a lot more than I am."

"Oh, madam!" said the slave reproachfully, "if you had but known some of the women I have served in this villa you'd not say it."

"All right, then," replied Elspeth, rising and letting the Pamphylian girl adjust her blue and silver evening stola, "I'll not say it. Be a bad girl while I'm gone."

"I'll try, madam," said the girl, revealing twin dimples in her full cheeks as she smiled.

Elspeth climbed into the heavy ceremonial litter that awaited her in the narrow street and wondered a little at her risque remarks. Certainly Mack Fraser would disapprove heartily of this pagan world in which she was living so light-heartedly.

But Mack was full of disapprovals, though on occasion he could barely match a tomcat for morals himself. It was, she decided, this odd brother-and-sister relationship which had sprung up unwanted between them that underlay much of their quarreling. Though they were far from being lovers, neither could escape a sense of responsibility toward the other. She wondered briefly on what world Mack was working at the moment.

As the litter swayed over the uneven pavement she again considered herself and the anachronistic city about her. Certainly the Romans were shocking to one from a world nineteen centuries further developed. Their utter lack of conscience, their open immorality, their venality, their love of violence—all these were terrifying to a person reared in a neo-Christian morality.

Yet they lived with a gusto denied those in whom a sense of guilt had been implanted from birth. And the very openness of their wrong-doing had a certain element of charm. And certainly the resulting freedom of spirit and intellect made such poets as Horace and Sallust possible, an unchanneled scientific speculation as Pliny's acceptable in the most pedantic circles.

They were small in body and generally brief in life-span—but while they lived, they *lived*. There was a robust devil-take-the-hindmost quality to their existence that struck a sympathetic chord somewhere in the Irish blood that partly filled her veins.

She considered what would happen if folk from a plundered planet were to strip them of their resources, ultimately

of their gusto. It was not a pretty thought, for here, in *Antique* lay a world whose potential seemed almost limitless. No other Earth had been discovered by the Watchers so early in its development. Under the wise invisible guidance of Mr. Horelle and his successors and colleagues it might be possible to spare it the worst of the man-made catclysms, such as Ghengis Khan, the Crusades, and, later, Charles the Twelfth and Napoleon, Hitler and Stalin, that had wrought so much destruction in so many other worlds, not only of human life and spirit but of the very elements themselves.

As the litter approached its destination, Elspeth ceased her speculation at sight of the torch-bearing Praetorian Guards, tall for Romans, and made taller by their high-crested helmets. They lined the walled street for a hundred yards in either direction and held back the mob of curious. Elspeth's bearers were delayed a good twenty minutes by the press of other litters and chariots arriving.

It was the first party she had attended which was graced by a member of the Imperial Family—though Berenice herself was attached in highly personal if unofficial manner to both the Claudian and Flavian houses. Knowing well the tragedy that almost certainly lay ahead of the proud yet appealing Judaeo-Roman princess, the poetess had been drawn to her as if by a magnet.

Perhaps sensing some answering exoticism in Elspeth that lay beyond her uncommon height and fairness, the demi-Oriental princess had responded with a sudden warm friendship that had made the poetess' cultural mission both simpler and more complex than she might have wished. It was made simpler because, through the Princess, Elspeth could obtain introduction to virtually anyone she wished in Rome; it was made more complex because of the numerous social obligations it entailed.

Though Elspeth had been inside Berenice's palace on almost a dozen occasions, she was unprepared for its formal splendor when readied for a fete. Its usually cold-looking walls were hung with brilliant Oriental rugs of immense size; its high-ceilinged and frequently colonnaded rooms, usually

dim after sundown, were ablaze with wall flambeaux. The atrium was awash with the colorful togas and tunics and gowns and stolas of the guests—and by the slaves, almost as magnificent, who attended them.

There was silence when the poetess entered and handed her stola to a tiny black girl naked above the waist, whose eyes were as wise and corrupt as the eyes of a dowager Empress. Elspeth, feeling like a pale giant among the tiny dark women, could sense the hatred that stemmed from them. She smiled at two of them she had met, sat down and allowed another slave to check her coiffure.

Slowly conversation rose around her—conversation much like the the talk that had passed among women in such chambers since humanity first emerged from caves. There was much laughter in which neither Elspeth nor the slaves joined.

Elspeth, sensing antagonism directed against her alien blondness, and size, finished her toilette and let herself be escorted to pay her respects to her hostess.

A nervously arrogant girl not as old as Elspeth, Berenice Herod-Agrippina was possessed of a fierce voluptuousness of feature softened only by the quick response of her well-cut but unexpectedly wide mouth. She looked truly regal in a gown of blazing silver, her arms, neck, fingers and raven-black hair ashimmer with rubies and sapphires.

When Elspeth curtsied before her, the Princess bade her rise and whispered with a brilliant smile which revealed one of the few complete adult sets of teeth in Rome. "Stay close to me, Marina Elspetia—the Prince will soon be here and I wish you to meet him."

"Am I then a Gothic princess?" the poetess asked, recalling a story of the Prince's romantic inclinations.

"I shall be close," said Berenice. Elspeth had barely stepped from the platform when large male fingers gripped her upper left arm. She turned to find Gnaius Laconius enveloping her own perfume in his own redolent aura.

In tunic of poppy red and gold edging and belt, his flat curls replaced by wood-shaving ringlets, his bare knees knobby and slightly bowed, he looked in Elspeth's opinion

like something out of an early Hollywood movie. But she managed to suppress her desire to laugh in his face, and to turn to him eyes she hoped were limpid.

He whispered fiercely, his rouged lips close to her ear: "My darling, we must slip away from this occasion together as soon as we can. I have been counting the moments since I left you."

"You!" she countered mockingly. She thought she had never seen anything more repulsive than the poet in his present get-up.

"What sort of talk is that?" he countered. "Marina, you must be mine tonight or I shall die. I'll blast myself if you refuse me."

The word "blast" did it. Only in the most advanced of the parallel worlds were blasters coming into use, blasters and the word *blast*. Added to the anachronisms she had already noted and Commander de Mestres' statement of the situation, it made Gnaius Laconius a worthy subject for investigation. Thinking, *Well, here I go for dear old Mr. Horelle and the many worlds*, she said, "Later, Gnaius."

His face glowed beneath the paint that covered it. "You mean . . . there's hope?" he whispered, his voice trembling.

"I mean I'll go with you afterward—not yet. Berenice wants me to meet the Crown Prince. Afterward . . ." A night with Gnaius was scarcely anything for a girl to wax romantic about. Besides, if Lamia were right about him—and she was seldom wrong in such matters—Elspeth had little to fear . . .

III

THE EMPEROR-TO-BE was of no more than average height for a Roman. But as he strode toward his hostess through twin lines of bowing and kneeling guests, Elspeth received an impression of height. Perhaps it was caused by the fact the others present were lowering themselves; perhaps it came from the life-long habit of command; perhaps it was inherent in the man himself. Despite his mere five-feet-two or three inches, the Crown Prince dominated the brilliant assembly.

Upon the platform, his greeting to Berenice was affectionate. He quickly lifted the deeply curtsying Princess to her feet, smiled upon her with quick affection, then moved to the throne-chair which had been awaiting him at the platform's rear. Berenice, dark and graceful as a dancer, moved to a stool at one side of the throne.

Almost at once the entertainment began. And Elspeth, who had never been fond of such cheesecloth and plump-lady exercises as folk dances, found the dancers incurably boring.

Mercifully, however, Gnaius seemed entranced. The poetess watched him covertly, unable to believe his enjoyment was real. Yet something in the endless ritual struck a responsive chord in his bosom and for the time, at least, he forgot to press his suit.

Relieved, she turned toward the platform and discovered that Berenice and her royal lover had slipped away, evidently through the heavy drapes behind the throne, thus leaving the other guests to amuse themselves as they wished without imperial restraint.

The little Nubian slave-girl with the wise eyes slipped through the crowd, plucked at Elspeth's gown and whispered, "My princess wishes you to follow me."

Elspeth turned to make her excuses to Gnaius, but he was regarding the gyrations of a lithe and singularly effeminate saber dancer. She sighed at the evening in prospect for her and let the tiny slave-girl lead her skillfully through

the press of onlookers to a curtained door at the rear. It was guarded by a pair of Praetorians with pikes.

Inside, save for a scattering of other slaves, Berenice and Titus were alone, reclining side by side upon a double couch, flanked by tables upon which stood flagons of rare wine the inevitable roast suckling pig and baby lamb, and a centerpiece of roast peacock complete with plumage spread like a gigantic fan of blue and gold.

Her hostess beckoned to Elspeth. As she bowed again before the Crown Prince the poetess felt a sudden surge of envy for the Princess, despite the tragedy that almost certainly lay in wait for her in the near future.

Her own life, despite the fascination of being a traveling agent of the Watchers, seemed bare and sterile by comparison.

Resting a hand on her royal lover's shoulder, the Princess said, "Carissima, this is my new friend, Marina Elspetia. She is a protegee of Pliny the Elder and puts our finest poets to shame. Surely she is fairer than any of the princesses of Gaul."

Titus regarded her with good humor and remarked with a smile, "I am happy to agree, Berenice, but you neglected to include the princesses of Britain. She resembles them more than any Gaul I have met."

It was a pointed gibe for all its amiability—intended to point out to his mistress not only that she must not heed court gossip but that such gossip never included all possible facts. A shadow passed quickly over the face of the dusky granddaughter of Salome.

Noting it, the Crown Prince laughed and lifted her lips to his and kissed her. Then, to Elspeth and smiling. "My Princess has spoken well of you, Marina Elspetia. Perhaps soon I shall have the pleasure of hearing your verses—and certainly Rome has need of a Sappho it can claim as its own. But for the present, I fear, I must reassure my Princess that it is to her I have run, rather than fled from any rude lady of the northern forests."

Curtsying again, Elspeth backed out. She had a curious feeling of dissatisfaction with herself. Even though Berenice had carefully stacked against her any cards Titus might

have been moved to deal her way, the poetess sensed the evident lack of interest she aroused in the Emperor's heir. True, Berenice had not had her brought in until she had eliminated all competition—and Titus was doubtless not eager to incite his mistress' wrath by showing interest in anyone who even faintly resembled a Gallic princess—yet Elspeth was convinced that his lack of interest was genuine and final.

Why, she wondered, did she repel such dynamic figures, and draw such oddities as Gnaius? Was she fated to go through life in such fashion? Her thoughts were not happy as she returned to the main reception room. Had it not been for her promise to Commander de Mestres, she would have slipped out and ridden home by herself.

Gnaius was awaiting her, both angry and frightened by her absence. "When are you going to see the Crown Prince again?" he asked her, the fierceness of his voice marred by its querulous uncertainty.

Repelled by his possessiveness, Elspeth was coy. She said with lifted brows, "Really, Gnaius! Isn't that up to the Crown Prince? After all, we are both his subjects!"

"Fantastic backward world!" exploded Gnaius. He took her by the arm and led her toward the anteroom beyond the banquet hall.

Elspeth has been on the verge of refusing to go with him but this further evidence of the poet's alienness tipped the scales in his favor. A small escort of Praetorians to attend to such services, marched them to Gnaius' white stucco villa on the Caelian Mountain, close to the old-wall gate.

It was Elspeth's first visit to her would-be lover's home. It was built around a poplar-lined patio. He led her to a sort of combination dining and living room, equipped with tables and couches and murals in brilliant color depicting aspects of the gods and goddesses at play that had been carefully excluded from her textbooks on mythology.

Regarding these, Elspeth felt a pang of regret that her twentieth-century upbringing prevented her from becoming truly acclimated in this alien world. It caused her to feel a sharp and disappointing sense of failure.

"Carissima, you have left me!" Gnaius stood in front of

her, proffering a huge gilded flagon of wine. She smiled at him and took the drink and sipped its contents—more of the sharp Marsala she disliked—then handed it back for him to quaff.

"A true loving cup!" he exclaimed and drank deeply. Then he set it down and led her to a couch. "Where do you go when you withdraw so completely, Marina? Beyond your strange fair loveliness and intelligence, I believe it is your trick of turning in on yourself that so fascinates me. My mother . . ." His voice trailed off and, hesitantly, he laid his fingers on hers, then withdrew them as if they had touched dry ice.

She said, forcing herself not to show the wave of repugnance that coursed through her at his touch. "Tell me about yourself, Gnaius. After all, I know very little about you. Where is your home?"

"My home?" He laughed without mirth. "My home is the world, a world of my own imagination, a world far different from this primitive jungle of sword and statue, slavery and stupidity."

"Nice alliteration," she murmured, wondering how he could be aware Rome was primitive if he came from *Antique*.

Anger flickered over his weak features and his fingers tightened painfully on her arm. He said savagely, "You make fun of me, Marina. You should not. I cannot help it if I find women frightening—though yourself least of all."

"Thanks for those kind words," said Elspeth icily, striving to rise from the couch. But Gnaius, revealing unsuspected strength, held her with a grip of iron. His rouged lips came down on hers and the ardor of his embrace was not to be denied. There was nothing Elspeth could do to stop him, not without betraying Commander de Mestres and the Watchers. She had one annoying thought that, for once, Lamia had been wrong. . . .

Afterward, watching him struggle to mask his disgust, she knew she had not misjudged him. While passion ruled him, Gnaius had spoken strange syllables in a language she did not recognize. Yet his reference to his mother—

Elspeth understood suddenly, and, with understanding

felt a certain amount of pity. Gnaius' eccentricities were all the result of his formative years, and he had all too evidently been ruled by his mother in an unhappy fashion.

His was, after all, scarcely an unusual psychological affliction, even in her own world, Elspeth thought. Then she remembered what de Mestres had told her that afternoon about the decadent survivors of Heartland's wars of extermination being a matriarchy. At the moment this was the final piece in the jigsaw puzzle that had been Gnaius Laconius. At once she began to plan.

Elspeth fed him more wine and stroked his head, which she held against her bosom, until he began to snore regularly.

She waited five minutes, to make sure he was really asleep. Not once was the regularity of his breathing disturbed. Then, with care, she placed his head on the roll-end of the couch, slipped her left arm from beneath him and stood up.

What she was looking for she did not know. Evidently, Gnaius had dismissed his slaves for the occasion, or sent them downstairs to their cellar quarters. This in itself was almost sufficient to brand him as un-Roman. The need for privacy was virtually unknown among these people.

Gnaius grunted and stirred in his sleep, causing Elspeth to catch her breath and return her thoughts to the specific issues at hand. Surely, if Gnaius were a transferee from Heartland, he would have brought with him some indication of the land of his origin, some device to be used only in dire emergency, some gadget to head him back to the point of transfer that had brought him here.

He could scarcely have used the Straits of Messina gateway. If he had, the Watchers would have known it; they had apparatus that recorded interworld transfers through all known portals. The fact that someone was using a gateway of which the Watchers had no knowledge restored Elspeth to awareness of the seriousness of the situation.

Where, she thought, would Gnaius have hidden any such device? Presumably in his bedroom, so that it would be handy in case an emergency arose while he slept. Thanks

to her new-found knowledge of Roman interior housing, Elspeth had little trouble in finding the poet's chamber. It was on the other side of the house, with windows only on the courtyard, thus offering maximum quiet and security.

She also saw why Gnaius had not taken her there but rather to his dining-living room. One whole wall was a sort of open closet, hung with stolas and gowns in all cuts and colors. At one end, in a tiny minority, were men's clothes, most of them familiar. Above and encircling the walls were more suggestive murals. Regarding the pictures briefly, Elspeth brushed back a lock of blonde hair and murmured, "Never the twain shall meet."

Gnaius was ashamed of his eccentricities. Elspeth thought she would hate to be hated by anyone as much as his mother must be hated by him. Then she got down on her hands and knees and began her hunt for the unknown.

It took her a little while. In spite of her suspicions of Gnaius, she persisted in thinking of his mental processes as typically masculine and looked first in masculine hiding places: under the bed, in hidden wall recesses, in the bottoms of his sandals. She found nothing.

Then, realizing the probability of her error, she began methodically searching the gaudy stolas that hung along the wall. And by the time she had finished with the last of them she had found two items to justify her search: one was a map; the other was a weapon.

The map was no product of Roman civilization. It was a highly machined and scientifically accurate result of far, far more advanced civilization. It showed rivers and lakes and forest regions, unmarked by any vestige of roads or towns or other hints of civilization. It was printed on some sort of plastic which was thinner than India paper and tougher than vellum.

The weapon she judged to be some sort of blaster. It was of a dull black alloy and its body was disc-like in shape, with a narrow, belled snout protruding from one of its edges. Apparently it fitted into the palm of the hand, was fired by squeezing the hand and emitted some sort of bolt or ray discharge through the tiny barrel. It was, she surmised, only useful at close range.

Elsbeth managed to stow the objects safely away in the blue-and-silver stola. Gnaius had removed it when they entered and placed it over a side table in the living-dining room. Certainly her gown offered no slightest place for concealment. Finished, she returned to the couch on which her host slumbered and looked down at him.

She said, "Gnaius, it's growing late. I think I had better return home." Inwardly she cursed the lawlessness of the pagan city which made it impossible for her to pass through the streets alone.

He opened his eyes and stared up at her without recognition. Then he rose hastily and, falling to one knee, pressed the hem of her gown against his lips. "Forgive me . . ." he began.

"I do," she said, barely controlling the revulsion with which he inspired her. "I want to go home now."

He made no protest though he did have the courtesy to accompany her—this despite the fact that being abroad in the early morning hours evidently made him uneasy. They made the journey without incident of any kind, and Elspeth left him outside, alone in the litter, surrounded by four sleepy slaves.

Within her own villa, Lamia was curled up in a curved-bottom Greek chair in the foyer. Her mistress studied the voluptuous little Pamphylian, then moved silently close to her and kicked the edge of the chair.

The girl screeched and tumbled to the floor with considerable display of her short but shapely limbs, then scrambled to her feet with an air of sleepy but outraged dignity. "Madam," she said reproachfully, "surely I did not deserve such treatment."

"Surely you did!" said Elspeth resentfully. "You told me Gnaius Laconius was harmless as far as women are concerned. You were wrong."

Lamia clapped both hands to her mouth and her eyes went round with surprise. Then they closed and she began to shake; for a moment the poetess feared she was crying. And then she saw that her slave was convulsed with laughter.

"I want you to understand right now," Elspeth began

angrily, "that I am not a woman who—" All at once, to her own mixed horror and relief, she found herself laughing with Lamia. *Heavens*, she thought, *what is this world turning me into?* But she kept on laughing till the tears rolled down her cheeks.

But there was little time to wallow in any sort of reaction to her experience, as it was imperative that Elspeth get her loot to Commander de Mestres at once. Not only might time be all important, but there was a distinct possibility that Gnaius might discover the theft and come after her with his slaves to recover the map and weapon she had stolen.

While Elspeth changed into warmer and less conspicuous attire, the slave-girl roused her litter-bearers from slumber in their quarters. By the time the poetess was ready, her Iberians were waiting in the atrium with the litter. Beside them stood Lamia, wrapped in a dark blue stola of warm wool.

"Please, I feel I should accompany you, madam," begged the girl. "It isn't proper that you should go out attended only by these Spanish dogs—not at this time of night."

Elspeth cast a quick glance at her men-slaves, who were waiting sullenly by the litter poles close to the door. Never before, she thought, had they looked so forbidding. Then she eyed Lamia, noted the alert resourcefulness of her expression and bearing. She supposed fondness for the girl was making an idiot of her.

Drawing the girl well away from the bearers, she said in low tones, "Lamia, if I let you come with me I want your promise to keep your lips sealed, no matter how strange the sights you are about to see. And I want you to keep your mind only on service to me. Do you understand me?"

"I understand," said the girl, with what appeared to be utter simplicity. "Thank you, madam, for letting me come. Left here in the house I should have worried for you."

"You may worry a lot more for coming," warned Elspeth. They went outside with the Iberians into the narrow street. Shadows slithered like lurking assassins from the attack of the torches carried by the bearers. The women got into the

litter together and Elspeth told the leader of her slaves. "To the Aventine palace we visited this afternoon. As rapidly as possible."

The slave bowed and they got under way. Once, while passing through the Forum, they heard the clash of iron on iron, followed by a sobbing scream as some man died in quick anguish. Elspeth shuddered and felt Lamia move quickly by her side, but neither woman spoke.

Not until they had passed the Murcian Gate were they molested—and then the attack came furiously and without warning. All at once a bearer cried out and the litter thudded unevenly to the pavement. Swift footsteps sounded about them, followed by a hoarse cry and the sudden yelp of a man in pain.

Lamia, plucking a knife from beneath her stola, slipped out of the litter, leaving Elspeth alone. There was a horrid bubbling gurgle as another man died, followed by sounds of panting breath. Somewhere close Elspeth could hear the snap of a bone, followed by a hoarse scream of agony.

Suddenly, on the far side of the litter from that through which the slave-girl had moved into the fray, the curtains were thrust rudely apart. The interior was flooded with erratic light from a torch that still flamed on the pavement outside. A man thrust his head through—a horrid filthy unshaven head with broken nose and one empty eyesocket and sweat-stained pock-marked cheeks. The brigand's one good eye gleamed at her with an unholy expression of pure lust.

Elspeth shrank back and opened her mouth to scream—but no sound issued. In the sheer horror of the moment she became possessed of a sort of hyperacutia, noted every scrape of sandal, every grunt, every exhaled breath in the struggle that still raged beyond the other curtain. Everything seemed to happen in slow motion.

But her thoughts were racing. While the one-eyed brigand revealed a hand whose filthy fingers gripped a rude stiletto already dripping crimson, she felt an instant of sheer panic. And then she recalled that she was not really a helpless Roman matron, beset by footpads in the ancient city. She was a free-wheeling and supposedly resourceful agent of

the Watchers, selected from among hundreds of millions as best able to persevere on her assignments among parallel worlds.

She felt a moment of regret that she had not brought with her the blaster she kept concealed in the strongbox in her chamber. Then, as face and hand and knife drew inexorably closer, she thought suddenly of the strange gun she had stolen from Gnaius Laconius—if it were a gun. Fumbling for it beneath her stola, she realized with odd detachment that she was going to learn in a hurry just what it was.

The robber's hissed syllables made no impression on her consciousness. All her awareness was concentrated on the knife approaching her bosom. The lust in the brigand's one eye was evidently not for her person but for the jewels he supposed she was wearing. She felt the odd, disc-shaped weapon fitting into the palm of her hand. She said a quick prayer lest there be some sort of safety attachment, pointed the nozzle toward that ghastly face and squeezed.

She felt the little disc leap in her palm, but no flame emerged from the belled nozzle and for a moment she felt disappointed that Gnaius' weapon had proved a failure—not fear, just disappointment. Too much was happening for her emotions to react with the logic expected of less abnormal situations.

Then she looked up at her attacker—and felt fear. The man's hideous face had vanished, to be replaced by a bubbling, smoking, stinking thing of burning flesh and bone that crackled as it seared. His bloody knife fell harmlessly on her stola as he tumbled backward beyond the curtains.

"Good God!" exclaimed Elspeth in English. The litter began to rock and, holding the alien weapon, she plunged through the curtains. One of her feet came down solidly on the body of what had been the one-eyed attacker, and she leapt clear just as the litter toppled over on his gruesome remains.

There were no other attackers on the near side of the overturned litter, but Lamia and the surviving two of her Iberian slaves were penned in by a half-dozen ragged

bandits, whose knives flashed in the torchlight as they closed in. At least as many bodies, lying like crumpled heaps of discarded clothing on the pavement, testified to the fact that her slaves were resolved to defend her with their lives if need be.

Elspeth slipped along the wall behind her as the footpads closed in for what was meant to be a final rush. She rounded the litter and pressed Gnaius' weapon against the side of the nearest bandit. He screamed as the blast burned him almost in two, then collapsed like an airless balloon.

Quickly Elspeth eliminated the next bandit and the next, as a fourth fell before the short sword wielded by one of the surviving Iberians. The remaining pair of attackers, seeing the carnage about them and finding themselves unexpectedly outnumbered, fled crying into the night.

Returning the weapon to safe concealment within her stola, Elspeth surveyed the situation and said, "We shall walk the rest of the way. Come on—let's go. We're not yet out of the woods."

One of the surviving Iberians was wounded, and Elspeth put a tourniquet about his upper arm to stop the bleeding of a torn wrist artery—an operation the slave endured stoically but which filled Lamia with admiration.

The Pamphylian girl, who had wiped her crimson blade on the ragged tunic of one of the dead attackers, picked up a still-flaming torch and handed it to the sounder of the Iberians. As they proceeded past the gate toward the Aventine palance, she walked close to her mistress, regarding her intently from time to time with awe.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Elspeth finally asked.

"The way you stopped Janisius from bleeding to death!" she exclaimed. "The way in which you struck down the bandits with bolts of black lightning. Madam, you didn't tell me you were a witch!"

Elspeth smiled at the reproach in the slave-girl's tone. But she said, "Keep up with me, Lamia. You have a lot to learn."

"I didn't think so," said the girl with disbelief. "Not until just now." And Elspeth only then remembered that, in

Roman folkways, a witch was no broomstick-riding hag but more or less synonymous with a goddess. The thought made her feel better for reasons she didn't wish to explain to herself.

IV

THROUGHOUT THE FIGHT in the street, Lamia had shown no trace of fear. But once they were inside the palace yard she shrank against Elspeth, muttering some invocation to the Pamphylian gods in her native tongue. The big war-machines, the size and uniforms of the sentries, the alien words Elspeth exchanged with the corporal of the guard combined to fill her with terror.

Not until Sergeant Carhart's large and sleepy countenance reflected the glow of a flashlight did she recover herself. Then she said, "Ah, the slave messenger of this afternoon."

Apparently the sergeant's Latin was better than his speech implied. Interrupting himself in a series of low-voiced orders to take care of the damaged Iberians, he swung on Lamia angrily and tried vainly to express himself in Latin. Then he said to Elspeth, "Ma'am, tell this creature I'm no slave!"

Elspeth explained the situation briefly, and the girl regarded the sergeant with new interest and respect. As they were conducted into the palace after the wounded had been arranged for, the poetess drew from her stola the map and the little hand blaster that had served her so well in the street fracas.

Lamia, with a little cry, offered a mate to it, said, "Here, I have one too if you want it, madam."

Stunned, Elspeth stopped in her tracks, said, "Where'd you get it?"

"Oh, I plucked it from the robe of one of those barbarians who tried to slay you, madam," was the girl's reply. "He'll never have use for it again. I thought it an odd trinket."

"You don't know how odd," replied Elspeth, freezing at the implications it presented. She had the girl wait outside while she went into the office where Commander de Mestres, sipping a cup of coffee, awaited her. There she

gave him an account of what had happened, omitting only the details of her rendezvous with Gnaius Laconius.

"Evidently the attack was planned by him or by someone to whom he reported the theft," said the Commander. "What's your bet?"

"My guess is someone else did it," came the reply. "What I don't understand"—Elspeth shuddered, paused briefly—"is why, if the supposed bandits had such weapons they didn't use them on us."

De Mestres regarded her thoughtfully, sipped his coffee, made a face as it scorched his tongue. "Probably," he suggested, "only the leaders of the group were so armed. You say their attack was going well until you caught them in flank with the blaster?" And, at Elspeth's nod: "It probably never occurred to him you'd have enough savvy to use the weapon properly." He eyed it distastefully where it lay with its mate on his desk and added, "Nasty looking little gun!"

"Do you think it's a Heartland weapon?" Elspeth asked.

De Mestres picked up the nearer one gingerly. "From what we know of their culture it fits," he said. Then, rising from behind his desk, he said, "But we can soon find out for sure."

He crossed the room, unlocked an oblong metal box that stood on a table against the wall and lifted its case to reveal a transferometer. Seeing it Elspeth said, "Good!" and leaned forward to watch the proceedings. She was a little frightened at the reassurance she received from de Mestres' unshakable poise, from the homely twang of his Midwestern American accents. It made her realize how close to the margin of fear she had been living now for three months.

She was well acquainted with the marvelous instrument the Commander was operating. Each of the myriad Earths, existing in parallel space, had a slightly different atomic variation from all the others—a trade-mark that remained the same no matter how frequently an object or person from such a world was transferred to others.

The transferometer, whose face resembled the front of an old-fashioned radio in the multiplicity of its dials and indicators, was built not only to check the world-source

of such an object. It also located any alien object to which it was tuned. At the moment its use was the simpler first of these.

Suddenly de Mestres swore and Elspeth asked what was wrong. Turning to face her the Commander said, "Apparently Heartland is so newly discovered that its atomic gauge is not listed. We'll simply have to content ourselves with whether this weapon is alien or not to *Antique*."

It very definitely was. And since the A-gauge was not that of an object from any of the listed worlds, both Elspeth and the Commander thought it safe to assume they had captured two Heartland weapons. They returned to the desk, where de Mestres unfolded the map Elspeth had filched from Gnaius Laconius.

"Any idea where it is?" Elspeth asked him.

De Mestres shook his head, told her, "No . . . sorry. But I've got a lad here who knows most of Europe by heart. And from what we know about this problem it's Europe odds-on. The Mediterranean Basin is much too settled not to show some roads or towns. My guess is that it's somewhere in Western Germany. There's a hell of a lot of forest."

A few minutes later a slim dark young captain, wearing his combat jacket over striped pajamas, entered rubbing his eyes. He regarded Elspeth with sleepy appreciation and helped himself to coffee from the Commander's silex. Elspeth, who hated coffee, again wondered when, if ever, she would get a cup of tea.

At work on the map, the newcomer, whose name was Johnson and who spoke with a definite Southern drawl, quickly proved his commander to be wrong. After rubbing a bristly chin he said, squinting at the map, "That looks like Silesia to me. I'll check."

"It couldn't be the Rhineland?" de Mestres asked plaintively.

"Nope. Sorry, Commander, but that smaller stream looks familiar." At his request an ordnance map of Silesia was brought in, and Captain Johnson located the area shown on the stolen map. "This cross marked on it," he told them, "is about six miles above the junction of the Meisse and

Oder Rivers in Silesia. It's not far southeast of Breslau, closer to a little place called Brieg."

He paused, fingered the material of which the stolen map was made, said, "I wish we put ours on something as good."

"Thanks, Johnson," said de Mestres. "That does it."

Reluctantly, the captain withdrew, casting sheep's eyes at Elspeth, whose ego derived an almost juvenile lift therefrom. When Johnson had gone, de Mestres said, "I think we should check that marked area. How do you feel about it."

"Perhaps we should inform the resident agent," she said.

"I don't think there's time," was de Mestres' reply. "After what happened on your way here they're bound to get the proverbial wind up sooner or later. I'll send him a message, of course—but I have a hunch we ought to investigate right away."

"Why not check on the transferometer just to make sure," said Elspeth. "I'm afraid you're right about Pliny. He's with the fleet at Misenum." She watched while de Mestres put the instrument to its use as a locator, retaining the A-gauge previously revealed by the hand weapons.

"This is it, all right," he said a minute or two later, revealing the coincidence of indicators. "Both direction and distance check—north northeast and about a thousand kilometers." He glanced at his watch, uttered a curse, said, "It's close to dawn. I wouldn't dare send out a flier this near daylight. It would be spotted for sure. "We'll have to wait till evening."

"That should be soon enough," she said, "unless they have radio or fliers themselves."

"We don't know what they have," was the reply, as de Mestres paced the floor, frowning. "What's more, I don't know who to send. I daren't go and I'm the only person sufficiently briefed at present."

"What about me?" Elspeth asked promptly. "I can fly a pipit."

The Commander stopped short, peered at her as if seeing her for the first time. "It's those damned clothes," he told her. "I keep thinking of you as a Roman matron." He

hesitated, then said, "I hate to think of asking you to risk your life, but if you really feel you can handle it—after all, this is an emergency."

"I've handled some tough ones," Elspeth said simply. "And in view of what's happened I'll probably be safer on the move than hanging around Rome, waiting for another attempted murder."

"You'd better stay right here," said the Commander, pressing a buzzer. "I'll see you and your woman get quarters. By the way, I hope she won't let the men frighten her."

Elspeth burst out laughing—she couldn't help it. The idea of Lamia being afraid of any man! The worst of it was she couldn't very well explain it to the Commander without giving him all sorts of ideas about her. He looked bewildered, slightly aggrieved, but accepted her apology and said, "I might send Johnson along if it's all right with you. He's the best navigator-flier I've got."

"Glad to have him along," replied Elspeth. Then: "By the way, Commander, am I under your orders or what?"

He regarded her somberly and told her, "According to Mr. Horelle we're in different command echelons. We're supposed to work together."

"It's a pleasure, Commander," she told him. Unexpectedly he offered his hand and she took it. She hoped he never found out about Gnaius Laconius. She felt no sense of guilt at being a thief, it was the other matter that troubled her conscience.

A pair of army cots were set up in one of the smaller and less-eroded rooms of the crumbling palace, and Lamia exclaimed at the miraculous softness of them. Finally, however, she decided to sleep on the floor lest the cot give her a backache.

Lamia regarded her mistress with somber speculation and said, "Madam, those men are soldiers—but soldiers of a sort my world has never dreamed of. They could destroy or capture Rome in a day with their weapons." She shivered. "Madam, it may not be my place to ask—but why are they here?"

"To save your world from far more vicious invaders,"

Elspeth told the girl. "Remember, you are vowed to secrecy. And your master is a party to the plan. He'll have you flayed alive if you reveal a word of what you've seen except to him or me."

Lamia snorted. Apparently, Elspeth decided, the elder Pliny was not too stern a master. Yet the poetess sensed that the Pamphylian girl could be trusted. Beneath the undiscipline of her morals lay a solid base of integrity that had revealed itself in a hundred different ways over the past eight weeks. It was Elspeth decided, time she got a few hours' sleep while she could. A long night loomed ahead.

Commander de Mestres did not rouse the women until close to noon. Then he sent Sergeant Carhart to rap on their door. Lamia peered around it at him. Elspeth, awakening, heard the sergeant say, "Hello, honey, here's some duds I rustled up for you and the lady. I hope they ain't too big."

"What did you say?" Lamia inquired in Latin, and the sergeant began to stammer awkwardly in the alien tongue. Elspeth told the slave girl to accept the clothing, then assured the sergeant in English that it was all right and they would both be down shortly.

The clothing both fascinated and repelled Lamia. Measuring against herself a pair of battle dress trousers that reached from bosom to toe of her tiny body, she cried, "Barbarian clothing! But see how well-made it is. Feel how light!"

Without thinking, Elspeth plucked a cigarette from the package Sergeant Carhart had thoughtfully stuck in a breast pocket, and lit it.

"Madam!" cried the girl. "You're on fire!"

"Just smoking," said Elspeth, inhaling with joy. It was her first cigarette in three months. Evidently Commander de Mestres was not a smoker and she herself had been too agitated and too accustomed to doing without to ask him for one during their earlier sessions. Regarding the girl, she said, "Better get dressed."

"I'd prefer to keep my own clothes on," Lamia replied thoughtfully. "Madam, you are big and blonde, and the

gray-blue goes with your eyes. Me, I should look like a pig trussed for roasting."

"Suit yourself," said Elspeth, seeking a non-existent mirror to check her own appearance. She had a feeling of being at home in the uniform, even though military dress was new to her. At least the things came from her own time, if not from her own world. She reminded herself to ask Commander de Mestres, the next time she saw him, just which of the worlds he was from.

"Madam," said Lamia plaintively, "I don't pretend to understand any of this, but it is evident that you are a witch of great power."

"I'm no witch," said Elspeth, dropping ashes on the floor and pushing a stubborn lock of hair back from her forehead. "I'm just—well, let's say I'm from a very different place. Outside of that I'm merely a woman like yourself—perhaps not quite as much so."

"Don't say so," countered the slave-girl. Then: "And this strange tongue you speak—what language is it?"

"Believe it or not we call it English," replied Elspeth.

"Then you must come from Britain," said Lamia, happy at having found an explanation that satisfied her. "Perhaps from the mysterious provinces of the north. They say there are many fair women there."

"We thank you," said Elspeth, "Let's just say again I come from a very long way off. Now, let's see if we can eat."

To Lamia's evident disappointment they were not permitted to share their mess with the soldiers but ate in the Commander's office, served by Sergeant Carhart.

Lamia, of course, was astounded by the alien food, though she managed not to make too much fuss about it.

The meal finished, Elspeth asked permission to visit her wounded littermen, whom she found stunned but comfortable in a jury-rigged dispensary at the other end of the palace. They greeted her appearance with something close to terror, and Lamia, more conventionally clad by their lights, had to reassure them all was well.

"They think they have died and been conveyed to heaven," the slave-girl told Elspeth outside the dispensary.

"They think the illumination is bits of sunlight stolen to give them warmth."

"What do you think?" Elspeth asked the Pamphylian girl.

Lamia shrugged her shoulders and said, "I've stopped trying to think. I'm merely trying to learn and see. And I'm glad you are here to protect me against things I do not know or understand."

"I'm leaving you tonight for a bit," Elspeth told her. "And while I'm gone—don't be an idiot, you'll be all right—I'm leaving you in charge of those two poor littermen. And I want you to behave yourself. Do you understand? I shall probably be busy from now on."

She spent most of the remainder of the afternoon closeted with Captain Johnson and the Commander, completing plans for the trip to Silesia. It was agreed that they should take off in a light combat car as soon as darkness had fallen, be back before dawn or wait over until the next night if there were any question of flying over Italy by day. No check-up or relief would be sent them unless they failed to return within thirty-six hours.

"Fair enough," said Elspeth, a cigarette in her mouth. "Now, how about route? That's in your province, Captain."

"Call me Bill," said the flier-navigator with his boyish, disarming grin. Elspeth shot a quick glance at Lamia, who sat curled on a bench, silent and uncomprehending.

That evening, after dining on steak and French fried potatoes, she and Captain Bill Johnson took off in a helipipit whose thin coat of light gray armor and caterpillar treads proclaimed it to be a light combat car. Before they rose from the ground, the Commander said to Elspeth: "Try to get back here by morning. I can't keep my men cooped up here much longer. They want action."

"They may get it," said the poetess. She clambered into the cockpit and sat down beside the captain, waved through the window at Lamia, who looked on, apparently expecting the worst.

Bill pressed the starter button and Elspeth could feel the faint vibration as the wings above them began to whirl. Once they had risen clear of the city the pilot would switch

in the jets, and the rotor vanes would fold neatly into the cabin roof above them. All in all, Elspeth decided, it was a very neat vehicle, improved upon its opposite numbers in her own world. But then, for the moment, her world was not threatened with large-scale warfare.

They lifted easily and, looking down, the poetess saw Lamia standing there, stricken by her mistress' airborne departure, a hand pressed against her mouth. Even as the beamed light was turned off, killing the view, Elspeth saw Sergeant Carhart's bulky form loom up behind the girl and place a reassuring arm on her shoulder. She smiled to herself in the darkness—Lamia was going to be all right.

According to plan they flew due east, thus passing only over the southern outskirts of the city. But even from this angle, Rome was impressive. The Forum was lit like a volcano, its facades reflecting in pink or white or lemon yellow the bright lights of the huge torches that shed their smoky glow upon it.

But soon the Eternal City was a mere spot of light in the distance behind them as Bill Johnson guided the heli-pipit's passage over the lower Apennines before swinging due north. They flew across the Adriatic, Illyricum and Pannonia to their destination, in the supposedly uncharted northern forests of this primitive world.

At seven thousand feet he cut in the jets and seemed, until Elspeth grew accustomed to the greater speed, to be taking leave of the world. The poetess looked up at the stars and wondered what it was like to travel in space.

Not that any person or group on any of the known planets had succeeded in reaching the stars. However, certain of the more advanced parallels *had* succeeded in reaching the planets—though not as yet with spectacular results, economically at any rate.

A star, she thought. I am a star whose beam extends its slender glow beyond galaxy's rim, a star chained to the rhythm of the universe, a universe which must be cold and whirling ash before my light is seen by men or other galaxies.

"What's on your mind, Elly?" Captain Johnson asked, bringing her abruptly out of her self-imposed spell.

"Oh," she replied, "I was just thinking what it must feel like to be a star—a little gay, a little sad."

"It'd be mighty hot," said Johnson. "You sure you feel okay?" he asked.

Elspeth laughed and told him, "Don't mind me—I used to be a poet before I got tangled up in this business."

If anything this statement frightened him more than her previous one. He said, "A poet! But what in hell can a poet . . ." His voice trailed off in something approaching Donald Duck frustration.

"I know," she said with moderate sympathy. "It's frightening. But sometimes poets are able to view people with a certain amount of detachment. And oddly enough, no matter how many worlds the Watchers attain, all of them seem to be more or less full of people."

"I hadn't thought of it from that angle," mused the young captain. Then, evidently at last aware of his lack of tact, he said, "When I saw you with the Commander last night I thought maybe he was off his rocker. I thought you were one of these dames from the city in that get-up. Then when I heard you talking American I felt better."

Elspeth decided to make him suffer. She said, "It might interest you to know that I'm a British subject. In the world I come from, the United States belongs to the British Commonwealth."

There was uneasy silence. Then, in a small if not still voice the Southerner drawled plaintively: "I reckon I've got a whole lot to get used to in this business. You see this is the first time I've jumped worlds and it's all a mite strange."

"I understand," said Elspeth in more kindly fashion. "Making transfer by submarine must have been quite an experience. That's one method I haven't had to use yet."

"Elly, it was downright frightenin'," said Bill Johnson. He went on to give her some of the details of that fantastic change of worlds. Meanwhile, he piloted the plane expertly northward over the barren hills of the Northwest Balkans toward their destination.

Under full jets the helipipit was capable of speeds up to six hundred kilometers an hour—not fast for fighter planes

in its own world but more than respectable for a combination vehicle. They had taken off at nine o'clock and their route was about twelve hundred kilometers each way. They had, according to Bill, encountered no appreciable air currents in any direction.

"If we were a sailin' ship we'd be sittin' in the middle of the pond," he informed her as the clock on the instrument panel registered six minutes of eleven.

"If we're on course we ought to be seeing something soon—if there's anything to see," said the poetess.

"We're on course!" There was outraged pride of profession in the captain's voice. He might not, Elspeth thought, appreciate poets and poetry, but he certainly could handle a flier with more dash and finish than anyone she had ever flown with—even Mack Fraser.

"Look down there—at two o'clock," he said a moment later. His questing eyes were on the silver tape of a river winding far beneath in the moonlight. "That's the Oder. Just a little beyond the Meisse conflows with her. After that—well, we'll see."

He began to bring the ship down in a gentle glide as it passed above the juncture of the rivers. Peering out at the ground below, Elspeth thought she had never overlooked so desolate a panorama. As far as the eye could see in the semi-darkness of the moonlight, forest rolled unbroken like some might land-ocean. Nowhere did pin-pricks of orange or yellow break the stretch of darkness. It was utter blackout.

Elspeth felt certain depression seize her. The road had been too easy, too clearly marked. They were, she felt sure as she let her gaze follow a moon-bathed spur of rock that jutted up through the dark carpet below, doomed to a wild-goose chase. The Heartlanders, if it was those unfortunate people who were responsible for the invasion, had been too clever for them. If she and Bill found a thing beneath that forest sea, it would be a decoy, perhaps a booby trap.

At the sound of a click she turned abruptly, said, "Why are you turning off the cockpit lights, Bill?" She had a fleeting suspicion of his motives.

But all the Southerner said was, "Look ahead."

Elspeth peered vainly through the plastic windshield, and then she saw it: a dim bluish flow that came not from the moon's reflection but from some source still hidden by distance and the trees.

Perhaps it was not going to be a wild-goose chase after all.

V

CAPTAIN JOHNSON cut the jets and again the helipit vibrated gently to the silent swirling of the vanes. The bluish glare increased as they approached it at an altitude of about a kilometer. Conscious of a movement at her left, Elspeth saw her companion, his lips compressed, checking levers on the instrument panel.

He caught her glance, grinned quickly, said, "Just in case, maybe we could lay an egg on them. I've got a hundred-pound sodium bomb aboard. Maybe we can mop this whole business up right now."

"As you were," said Elspeth sharply. "You may be the pilot, but I outrank you on this trip." She had no idea whether she did or not, but she sensed and feared Johnson's eager-beaver enthusiasm. "We came here to observe, not to destroy."

The Southerner actually pouted, and Elspeth had to explain. "Bill, we don't know enough to show our hand yet. This may be only one center of operations. Besides, dropping a sodium bomb on that layout would be like attacking a hornet's nest with a spitball."

They were well within sight of their target and it was evidently a large-scale mining operation, covering ten times the area one small bomb could affect. She surveyed it, frowning at its odd circular prefabricated domes, its evidence of round-the-clock activity, its number of men over machines.

This feature puzzled her until she considered the fact that these interplanetary pirates were new to transfer between worlds. Undoubtedly, they had not yet had time to test the limits in size and tonnage of what could be sent from their own world into this one. Also, much of their machinery might be below ground. Such of it as did show impressed her untechnical eye as being compact and efficient, perhaps beyond that of any world she had seen.

"Okay, General," said Captain Johnson, "We've seen it

and I've had the infra-red cameras on it. Want to go back now?"

"Sure you've photographed it all?" Elspeth asked. At his nod, she said, "I suppose we might as well. Commander de Mestres wants us back as soon as possible."

"It's your red wagon," drawled the Southerner, giving the wheel a twist. "What the hell!" he suddenly cried as a bolt flashed past their wing, exploding above them in a rocket-like shower of varicolored blazing trails.

Elspeth cried out as something burst through the cockpit behind them with a sizzling roar, leaving a smell of burning ozone behind it, cutting through the thin armor of their flying vehicle as if it were butter.

At once the plane began to buck like a mustang out of control while the Southerner, swearing softly but fervently, strove to reassert his mastery. Flames flickered in the fuselage at their backs and the dark forest tilted and rose until it filled half the sky.

Elspeth had always supposed herself to be a physical coward. All her life she had fled from the threat of physical violence and pain. In her creed violence belonged only to nature, while pain was a part of the ugliness that belonged to the foul family of death and sickness and the filth that bred them.

Yet now, for the second time within twenty-four hours, she found herself acting promptly and efficiently in the face of probable pain and possible death. Her hands flew without volition to the extinguisher that was clamped to the instrument panel. Bracing herself so that the violent gyrations of the helipit would not send her on her ear, she sprayed the spreading flames, which were licking angrily at paint and upholstery, with fire-killing foam.

Heat seared her face and a sudden pseudopod of flickering yellow licked at the wrists of her coverall. She swore as efficiently as her companion and put out the last flaming assault with a last burst of extinguisher foam. Her knees felt like eggs in a waterglass, and little imps were snapping rubberbands at the backs of her eyeballs.

"I guess I'm as brave as anybody," she said aloud, "as long as I don't have time to think."

"Good gall" said Captain Johnson, darting a hand from the controls to give her near knee a quick pat. Then, grimly, he said, "But I reckon we aren't out of the woods yet—that's for sure."

"Or rather we're still in them," said Elspeth with a pitiful attempt at humor. The helipit was still rocking but less violently. They were well-away from the blue-lit mining camp now and the tops of the trees seemed to be reaching up to embrace them.

"If I can clear this next hill," drawled the Southerner from between set teeth, "we should be able to ditch in the river."

"Here's hoping," said Elspeth, mentally crossing her fingers. To her annoyance, her teeth were actually chattering.

Though Johnson was racing the motor for all it was worth, the helipit was still losing altitude—and he was far too low to cut to the jets. Worse, if he tried to while the vanes were still whirling, he'd strip them and inevitably crash in the trees beneath.

Desperately he worked with the plugs on the instrument board, turning them, pressing buttons savagely. Then, as Elspeth braced herself for the inevitable crash, the lagging motor seemed briefly to catch hold again. The helipit lifted some fifty feet, barely making the rise. The hill fell away on the other side and the silvery Oder curled broadly before them.

"Mother always said I'd make the grade if I ate my oatmeal," muttered the flier. Elspeth felt such a surge of relief at the narrowness of their escape that she was unprepared for the shocking jolt of their striking the water in a sheet of spray that momentarily shut out the world.

The poetess had one quick watery glimpse through the windshield of the dark shore rushing toward them. Then there was a shock that left her lying bruised and shaken on a tilted cockpit floor. They had missed one crack-up to fall into another.

Suddenly fear of fire returned to bring Elspeth out of her punch-drunk condition. If Bill had not cut the switch before they struck, they might be incinerated. Pulling her-

self onto the seat, she checked the instrument panel. She felt sobbing relief as she saw that, with his last conscious gesture, the Southerner had cut off the engine.

For Captain Johnson was definitely out. He lay across the wheel like a collapsed drunkard, blood trickling from his right ear and from an ugly bruise on his forehead. For a minute or so Elspeth sat paralyzed, thinking him dead. Then, without warning, he began to snore. The poetess found herself giggling like a hysterical schoolgirl, for the moment unable to do more than sit there.

She found herself eying the unconscious pilot with a dislike she knew to be utterly unfair. After all, he had done a magnificent job. Yet, annoyingly, a voice within her kept repeating that Mack would never have got them into such an impasse, that he always managed to come up with a way out no matter how hopeless the situation seemed.

Yet Captain Johnson needed attention. Though she was aching and bruised from the smash and her wrists were blistered from the cockpit fire, she was going to have to do something for the Southerner. She considered getting him out of the helipit, but a look at the forbidding forest border in which the vehicle had wedged itself caused her to decide such a move was beyond her at present.

The rear of the cockpit, penetrated as it had been by the incendiary charge, was out of the question. So the poetess managed to pull and tug at her companion until he lay on his back across the seat. He had stopped snoring, but blood was still trickling from his ear. His forehead was beginning to purple.

All she could do, she decided, was to bind up his head. She did so, then threw over him a half-burned seat cover from the rear of the cockpit. She wished she had managed at some time or other to learn medicine, or at least to have got some nurse's training. She had no idea whether her pilot was dying or not.

She opened the cabin door and stepped out into icy water that rose to her knees. Its chill was unpleasant but helped to restore her senses fully.

The helipit itself was battered but still looked serviceable. Its blunt nose was driven almost a foot into a high

bank of moss, loam and underbrush, but did not look hard to pull out. Elspeth's spirits rose as she toted up the damage. Then she scrambled up out of the water onto the bank and saw the vanes—and her morale plummeted.

Only three of them were intact. The fourth looked like a piece of taffy at the wrong end of a taffy-pull. Grotesquely twisted and torn, it hung forlornly from its mooring. No wonder, she thought, that the machine had behaved like a sailor three days in port.

As nearly as she could calculate, Bill Johnson had come down in a curve of the river. This had caused him to run the helipit into the bank on the same side as the factory they had seen from above. She wondered if those same forces that had shot them down would institute a search. She decided they probably would.

Overhanging trees hid the vehicle against air search fairly well. But if the miners had scanning or other search equipment to match their other machinery, it seemed unlikely to her that she and Bill could hope to escape detection.

She lit a cigarette and looked about her in the moonlight and thought, *So this is the forest primeval!* Then, as some creature made a rustling in the trees beyond the bank, she checked her blaster, made sure it was in order and ready for use. There was no point in doing anything until morning, so she crawled back into the helipit and tried to doze in the charred rear of the cockpit. In the front seat the unconscious Southerner was snoring again.

Elspeth managed to get a few hours of broken sleep. But when at dawn the forest awoke to a chattering of birds and other animal sounds, she scrambled out of the damaged vehicle to the bank. She was determined to scout around before trying to restore Captain Johnson to consciousness.

Once beyond the barrier of thickets that lined the river bank, the forest thinned out to become almost a grove. Elspeth found herself treading upon a soft carpet of pine needles, and her poetic soul responded to the natural Gothic cathedral created by nature around her.

The growth of new timber thickened as she went on, until she found herself walking along a sort of path. It was no

more than four feet broad, banked on either side by baby firs, struggling for life amid the great strangler roots of the older, taller trees that seemed to ignore the upstarts striving to rise against them.

Even here in the untouched forest, she thought, the dog-eat-dog struggle for survival went on, intermeshed as always in the very warp of existence. She turned a corner and barely suppressed a gasp, as, in a little clearing, three savages, half-clad in animal skins, clustered busily about another.

Her hand darted to the blaster at her belt. Some inadvertent sound must have betrayed her, for the wild men turned like one, their mouths agape, their dark eyes staring. Elspeth had only time to note that their faces were shaven before, with queer unintelligible utterances, they took to their heels and fled toward the depths of the forest. They left behind them the object that had drawn their attention.

At sight of it Elspeth gasped. Dangling upside down, his ankles caught in the simplest sort of rope-trap, was Mack Fraser. He looked slightly the worse for wear, and his blood, rushing to his face, had given his complexion the hue of a cocktail cherry.

His choked, angry voice brought her out of her surprise. He said, "Dammit, Elly, get me the hell out of this, will you?"

So unexpected was the sight of her erstwhile partner in such a scrape, that she could not suppress a giggle as she moved forward to blast the rope from which he hung. He landed with a thump on the pine-needle floor beneath.

He said, "Shut up, you idiot—it's not funny!"

She said, "Dr. Livingston, I presume," and got a dirty look. Impulsively she offered him a cigarette.

Inhaling it with unspoken gratefulness, he got up. Testing his limbs and finding them all there, he told her, "You've got to get out of here in a hurry. The Heartlanders are scouring the woods for your ship. I figured you'd have come down around here and tried to get here ahead of the Martinez when those damned nature boys bushwhacked me."

"Come on—I chipped a few trees so I wouldn't get lost.

My pilot ditched us in the river after the ack-ack got us."

"How badly are you damaged?" asked Mack, ever pragmatic. He shook his head doubtfully, when Elspeth told him as best she could. "If you can't get out of here it's going to be a hell of a mess. The Martinez and her gang are mining and transferring uranium by the ton, and they aren't going to let you or me or anyone else stop them.

"What's the Martinez?" Elspeth asked him, feeling unaccountable security in the nearness of Mack and stealing a look at his tough rough-hewn, handsome-homely countenance.

"You'll be lucky if you don't see her," was the reply. "She's the boss of this operation—and just about runs Heartland as well. Ana Kai-Martinez—she's the toughest, smartest, best-looking Amazon in a world of Amazons. How those women treat their men!" He shook his head.

"You seem to be doing all right," said Elspeth. "If you weren't why should those phony cave men have tried to do you in?"

"I'm in a hell of a spot," Mack said ruefully. "Men on Heartland are an inferior sex. They get no practical education, are given no hand in politics. The women run the show. But I'm supposed to be a phenomenon because, although I'm a man, I know a little engineering. So I've been getting privileged status on this deal and naturally the rest of the men hate my guts. They're being treated like beasts of burden. This hunt for your ship gave them a chance to get me."

"And you fell into a rabbit trap!" gibed Elspeth. "Gracious, Mack, do you suppose the condition of these Heartland men is contagious?"

"Shut up," snapped Mack. Then, softening: "I suppose I ought to thank you for getting me out of that mess. They were just figuring what they were going to do next. None of their ideas was . . . pleasant."

They reached the river bank, and Mack studied the ruined vanes of the helicopter. Then he went inside and looked at Captain Johnson, who was still unconscious and snoring again. He gave Elspeth a look of reluctant admiration and told her, "Looks like a good first-aid job, Elly, even

though I hate to admit it." Then, glancing into the rear of the cockpit, he said, "Kind of a mess-up, isn't it? Doesn't look too bad though. How come you idiots flew right over the mine?"

"We had no instructions it might be defended," said Elspeth.

Mack frowned and said, "These Amazons aren't fooling. They've made a hash of their world and now they think they've got a chance to reclaim it. It's big stuff, Elly."

"How come they don't use sodium if they're so short on uranium?" Elspeth asked curiously.

"Believe it or not, they don't have enough radioactives left to trigger a pile of radium itself," said Mack. "Come on, let's take another look at that busted vane. Got any tools?"

She sat on the roof of the helipit, handing Mack the instruments he needed while he worked to put the vehicle in operable shape. After a while she asked him, "Mack, how does it look?"

"Can't tell yet," was the reply. "But if I can get rid of this damned vane and this whoosit can fly on three instead of four, you may get her out of here by sundown." He paused, squinted down at her and add, "Gee, but you look beautiful today, Elly."

Well aware that she was smooched with grease and in a general condition of disarray, she said, "You're lovely too, you big creep."

He grinned briefly and blew her a kiss, then got back to work. Finally, as the shadows of later afternoon were beginning to cover the top of the vehicle and inch out across the water, he rubbed his hands on the sides of the overalls he was wearing. Sitting down beside her, he said, through puffs on a cigarette, "Well, that's it, Elly. Back her out of the bank in full reverse, head her upstream and take off. Cut in the jets as soon as you can. Those damned vanes took a beating."

Grease and all, Elly leaned over and kissed him. For a moment one of his strong arms tightened around her shoulders. Then he sat back and said, "The Martinez would have a fit if she caught this."

"Ohi!" said Elspeth, drawing a little away from him and hating herself for being so vulnerable. Then, in a small voice: "What does this Ana woman look like?"

"Like a king-sized Diana with red hair," was the reply, "She's good, too—knows a hell of a lot about running this show. But she made a mistake when she gunned your ship. I knew it was a Watcher's plane and tried to tell her. But she said it would teach them a lesson and cut in the automatic cannon." He paused, wiped his greasy face with the back of a hand, added, "How much of a show have we got in this damned world anyway?"

"A big one," replied Elspeth. "The biggest I've ever seen. We came up here to check the location of the gateway and to get a line on the extent of the operation if possible."

Mack grunted, then said, "Stationed in Rome, I suppose? It must be quite a job to keep things out of sight."

"It is," replied Elspeth. "But it's being done. Well, I've got to get Bill Johnson back in one piece if I can."

Mack looked at her oddly. He said, "Good-looking guy—if you care for the type."

"Thank you, Mack," said Elspeth sincerely. She gave him another quick kiss, and, before scrambling down off the helipit: "Better get rid of that grease, honey. Your Martinez might wonder how you got into it out here in the forest primeval."

"Good idea," he said grudgingly, handing her the tools, which he had assembled before sliding down. "Thanks again for getting me out of that jam in the woods."

"Think nothing of it," she said airily, Then, more softly: "Mack, it's nice to know we're on the same job—even on opposite sides."

He gave her a half-grin, scratched his grimy nose and said, "Yeah—remember, full reverse, then upstream, then up. You ought to make it okay, if nothing else happens."

"I know we will, Mack. Good luck." He was still standing there, half-merged with the shadows of the underbrush, as she pulled the cabin door shut. Propping Captain Johnson in the other corner of the front seat, she was able to get the engine going.

There was a sucking jar as the vehicle asserted its power and came clear of the bank. She cut in the vanes once they were clear of the overhanging shrubbery, felt the unrhythmic vibration as they caught hold of the air in three-quarter time. Looking down as the ground fell away beneath them, she could not see Mack at all.

She cut in the jets and headed due south, thinking over the eventful scouting trip on the way. Poor Mack! She could not help smiling to herself in the darkness as the helipit sped through the night, recalling him, hanging upside down in the super-rabbit trap the false barbarians from Heartland had rigged for him.

She wondered why she had seen no evidence of the real Goths and Germanic tribes who presumably roamed the Silesian forest. Probably, she decided, there were too few of them over too large an area for her to have stumbled on any natives save through merest chance.

Yet the fact the Heartland Amazons dressed their men as primitives while touring the woods suggested another idea. The natives might be in the vicinity, but could have been scared out of showing themselves by the weapons and threats of the planet-looters. The skin costumes could have been adopted to prevent barbarian rumors of the invaders from seeping south to the borders of Dacia and Pannonia, thence to Rome and, perhaps, to the ears of the Watchers.

Elspeth reached the Adriatic coastline before she realized she was lost. Looking down, she had not the slightest idea whether she was over Aquilacia or Salona. However, she continued to head south, diagonally across the long narrow sea, resisting the temptation to veer west and fly down the boot of Italy to Rome. It would never do to risk being spotted from the ground.

The moon passed under gathering clouds at that moment, which helped her not at all. For the first time since being airborne, Elspeth felt the clutch of fear beneath her breasts. Having come this far with the wounded man, the photographs and a report of her conversation with Mack, she had no desire to mess up the trip.

Beside her Captain Johnson stirred and mumbled in his sleep. She hoped that he would not recover consciousness

and be out of his head. However, she certainly could use his navigational help. She was debating the wisdom of trying to wake him when a *blip-blip-blip* sounded from the instrument panel. Commander de Mestres was operating a radio beam for her benefit. She all but laughed in relief.

From then on it was easy. Less than an hour later she had cut the jets and was hovering uncertainly over the courtyard of the Aventine palace. During this peaceful last leg of the journey, she had had time to wonder about a number of puzzling factors.

Why, for instance, had not the Heartland invaders transferred to the Congo, or the Urals, or one of the other really great uranium deposits instead of mining the relatively low-grade ore of Silesia? Several answers occurred to her. One, in this world the Silesian ore might not be low-grade. Two, perhaps in decadent Heartland all record of the Congo deposits might have been lost. Three, no convenient transfer point might have been discovered.

Another possibility entered her head: Perhaps the Heartland pirates might be engaged in looting other uranium deposits on Antique, unknown to the Watchers. But this was unlikely—certainly transferometers must have scanned this and all adjacent worlds.

A searchlight beam illuminated the palace courtyard beneath her, and she brought the limping helipit gently down, managing to mangle the landing so that the craft bounced twice before coming to a halt. She scrambled out in a hurry, all at once feeling dead tired.

As she was lifted down to the ground by the strong arms of Sergeant Carhart, Captain Johnson sat up and looked around, a puzzled expression on his bandaged face. He scowled at Elspeth and said, "For Pete's sake, get in. We're already late for the take-off."

Elspeth smiled and turned away, willing to let someone else do the explaining. She felt her knees hugged and looked down into Lamia's upturned face. The slave-girl was crying and saying in Latin, "I was sure you were slain, madam. I was sure you were slain."

She managed to reassure the girl, who was in a state of happy collapse, by the time she reached the Commander's

office. There she made her report as concisely as she could, omitting only the portion in which Mack had been strung up by the Heartland men.

He heard her out in grim silence, his lips tightening as she described the effect of the weapon used to bring down the pipit. When she had finished, he looked at his folded hands, then at her, and said quietly, "You know what this means, of course, Miss Marriner—it means war for the first time between different versions of Earth. It also means things are coming to a boil."

"Yes, sir," said Elspeth meekly. "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to return to your villa," replied de Mestres. "You must get in touch at once with the resident Watcher and inform him of what had happened. And I want you to keep an ear to the ground for anything untoward that goes on in the city."

"Why? What could happen?" Elspeth asked.

"I don't know," was the reply. "But I must remind you that my men and I are in a highly precarious situation here. Oh, we can defend ourselves, never fear—but whether we can do so without destroying our chances of accomplishing our mission is the problem. I shall call on you tomorrow, when I return from transfer. I fear a conference with Mr. Horelle is in order."

"Give him my love," said Elspeth, thinking of the kind, wise, old man of Spindrift Key, with the weight not of one but of hundreds of worlds on his slim, stooped shoulders.

VI

IT SEEMED STRANGE for Elspeth to awaken the following morning in her bedroom on the second story of the Cispian villa. Moving in and out among staggered time-tracks was, she decided, a great deal more demanding than the transfer between worlds, to which she had, after a fashion, become accustomed.

The effects of the Silesian crash were still with her: her body remained stiff and sore from neck to soles and her fair skin was marked with a number of purple bruises. She stirred and looked around and saw Lamia standing over her, a hand extended to shake her awake.

"Don't . . ." she murmured to the slave-girl, her tender body shrinking from any contact. The girl informed her that a messenger had arrived from Pliny, announcing that, in response to her night-sent summons, the resident Watcher was proceeding to the city and expected to dine with her at noon. Inquiring as to the time, Elspeth was informed she had scarcely two hours to prepare for her guest.

"Princess Berenice Agrippina also sent a messenger," Lamia informed her. "She wishes you to meet her at the Bath this afternoon."

"I'll be there," said the poetess, placing her feet on the floor and slowly standing erect. In keeping with the custom of the city, she wore no clothing while in bed. The slave-girl's dark eyes widened at sight of the bruises on her body.

"You have been hurt, madam," she exclaimed.

"You should have seen the other guy," replied Elspeth, smiling again at the memory of Mack Frazer dangling upside down in the trap.

Eyeing her askance, Lamia busied herself expertly with giving her mistress an oil massage that, within an hour, worked much of the soreness and stiffness from her limbs.

Later, while the poetess was relaxed languidly in her bath, Lamia eyed her sternly and said, "I don't understand what is happening. What are these strange soldiers in the Aventine palace and what was this wizard's machine that carried you to the clouds?"

Elspeth sat up in the tub and studied the girl before saying, "Lamia, I cannot explain now, but witchcraft and wizardry have nothing to do with it. I have been sent here to help your world against enemies of which it is not as yet aware."

"I do not doubt you, madam," was the slave-girl's response. "I only wish I could be of more assistance."

There was no mistaking the sincerity of her wish. Elspeth hesitated, then said, "There is a chance—just a chance—that if all goes well I shall be able to take you with me when I leave. You would, of course, no longer be a slave, for there are no slaves in the land I come from. You would have much to learn, much hard work to do. Do you think you would like it?"

"Oh, madam!" cried the girl eagerly. "I will gladly be your slave forever."

"That's just what I don't want you to be," replied Elspeth. "I believe, in time, you might be a very valuable person. What's more, I like you and I want to see you get the chance. But this is not a promise. Many things might happen to prevent its fulfillment."

"I shall help you in any way I can," the girl said simply.

Bathed, Elspeth refused breakfast in consideration of her coming dinner with the resident Watcher. Lamia, she discovered, had already arranged the meal with the chef. Since both were former slaves of the Admiral, she had no worry that the meal would not suit him.

It was, for that era and for a man as important as Pliny the Elder, a most simple repast, fitting to a life-long scholar and sailor. There was soup flavored with vegetables and the bird's nests of China, a baked carp in aspic, adorned cunningly with colored flowers by the chef, a saddle of baby mutton roasted in herbs and wine. For dessert, fruit, biscuits and a small cheese from Malta were served. A flagon of the Admiral's finest Falernian accompanied the dinner.

Gaius Plinius Secundus, who had arrived shortly before noon with a small escort of horsemen, was small even for a Roman. A man of modest mien and nervous mannerisms,

he seemed to resent each minute that moved, like a link in some immutable chain of time, into his past. Yet, despite his restlessness, he discussed during the meal his wife and son, still in his villa at Lake Como; the state of his vineyards; the excellence of the food, the recent indisposition of the Emperor, and the strength of a new Scythian hemp in the fleet hawsers.

His speech was slow and precise. Yet, underlying the almost terrifying gravity of his preoccupations lay the half-laid pavement of self-mockery that made the man, to Elspeth, at any rate, far more a dear than a bore.

He paused while describing to her the problems of Roman ship-architects in designing a rigging that would be of help to the oarsman between decks while heading into a wind. And somehow she sensed that he was not hesitating merely to arrange his words in order but in the hope that she might give him some advice on the problem.

"Sir," she told him, "you know that I am not permitted except in emergencies or under special orders to give you information that belongs not in this era. However, have you considered the advantages of a sloop rigging on a large vessel—or of using more than one mast?"

Pliny pondered the statement gravely, then with a spark of excitement. He held a dripping piece of mutton skewered on his knife and said, "But would not that make the vessel cant dangerously in a heavy wind, Marina Elspetia?"

Elspeth shrugged, then added, "I have said too much—but have you also considered eliminating oarsmen entirely? With skilled rigging and hull design you can do better in all weathers with sail alone."

The admiral-scientist dropped his knife with a clatter, staring at her in disbelief. Then, his voice low, he muttered, "And what if such a vessel should be becalmed?"

Elspeth wrinkled her nose and told him, "I'm no sailor, but I believe in that case small boats with oarsmen can use tow-ropes."

Her visitor-host remained silent while digesting her radical suggestions along with the rest of the meal. Then, after dismissing Lamia and adjourning to a secluded chamber where they could not be overheard, she told the resident

Watcher something of the situation. She ended with, "We have reason to believe that, now the Heartlanders know we are aware of what they are doing, they will take more drastic action. What we don't know is where the move will come."

Pliny pondered her statement, then said thoughtfully, "Were I in their situation I should seek to take advantage of the Emperor's sickness and do my utmost to attain influence over Titus. It would be difficult for your people, my dear, to move if the Emperor's son and heir were against you: The Princess Berenice we can trust. But I like not the rumors of Titus' alliance with a northern princess!"

"Princess Berenice has been quick to reassert her claim," said Elspeth, recalling the scene of her introduction to the Prince. "She has asked me to meet her at the Baths of Agrippa this afternoon."

"Then go to her," adjured the scientist-sailor, "and impress upon her to the best of your persuasive abilities the importance of ensuring the allegiance of Titus." "I doubt that I shall have much persuading to do," replied the poetess. Then, because of something in Pliny's tone: "Have you any definite indications of what they plan in this direction?"

"Nothing definite," was the reply. "Yet there is a rumor among the officers of the fleet that Titus is far more attached to his barbarian princess than is generally supposed. Some of those who saw her during the recent trip have described her as a blaze-haired giantess, whose beauty is that of a goddess."

"I shall do my best," said Elspeth, as a sudden thought occurred to her. The mysterious Gallic princess, as described by Pliny, seemed to fit uncommonly well with Mack's description of the Amazonian leader of the Heartland invaders. She said, "What is her name?"

Pliny gestured his indifference and told her, "It is some barbarian nomenclature—Anna Martiana is the closest Latin equivalent."

"Why do you suspect her?" asked Elspeth, sure now that the Heartland leader and Titus' new flame were the same woman.

"I did not say I suspected her," replied the scientist precisely, after pausing to bury his face in the crimson juice of a pomegranate. "However, I mistrust anything out of the ordinary in the present circumstances. And this princess is reputed to come from the wilds of the East, where beauty such as hers is not known to exist."

"I'll find out what I can about her," said Eslepth.

"It might be wise." He slurped up more of the fruit, pointed his knife at her and added, "Would that I could know more of the strange machines and vehicles you and your people have brought into this world to help us defend ourselves. I feel like an orphan lad not invited to share in an imperial banquet."

"They would, I fear, be of little use to you, sir," said Elspeth. "I'm not impugning your intelligence or learning, but the techniques of centuries to come would look more like magic than science."

Pliny sighed and wiped his face on a towel. "I suppose you're right," he told her wistfully. Shortly afterward he took his leave and Elspeth, in company with Lamia, prepared to visit the Baths.

To Elspeth the Baths were the most impressive of all the impressive structures of *Antique*. It was rigid custom that, while men and women thronged together as bare as when they came into the world, no allusion to this general nakedness was ever made. Oddly enough, although Elspeth had found it difficult to keep her eyes from wandering during her first few visits to the Baths, she was becoming more and more adapted to the customs of Rome.

She took a quick plunge in the cold pool, then moved to the corner of the huge central pool, where Berenice as usual was holding court. The Princess was reclining on special cushions brought by her attendants, her magnificent little figure on proud display. At Elspeth's approach, she looked up curiously. Her dark eyes narrowed and she said, "We have missed you since the fete. You look as if Gnaius Laconius had shown you more of the beast than we thought was in him. Tell us, what have you done with the poor creature?"

"I?" Elspeth was surprised. "Why nothing. It's true I did

leave your fete in his company, but I have not seen him since."

The Princess' mocking eyes seemed to count in detail the bruises on the blonde girl's body. She said, "Then truly it is odd that both of you should vanish at once, and he in such a passion for you. Now only one of you has returned."

Elspeth was annoyed. She said, "Your mood is scarcely a pleasant one, Highness. Did you invite me here to abuse me then?"

At once contrition patterned the Princess' face, which became a mask of tragedy. She said, "My apologies, Marina. I had hoped sight of you would cheer me. Surely you have heard the news?"

Elspeth felt a stab of alarm. Something, she sensed, was going very wrong for the Princess. Under the circumstances it probably meant something was not going well for herself. She said, "I went to the country for a brief rest. I have heard neither news nor gossip."

"Then I might as well tell you," said the Princess, who had dropped her royal *we*, "my lover's barbarian princess arrived in Rome this morning. I am of a mood to pay him back in kind."

"Which would only lose him to you forever," Elspeth said promptly. Berenice's face crumpled, and for a moment she looked about to burst into tears.

Then, rallying with a magnificent display of hatred, Berenice said, "You're right, of course, Marina. I shall have to gain vengeance through *her*. She is expected to visit the Baths this afternoon. That is why I wanted my own friends at my side." She gestured about her and Elspeth realized with pity that, save for slave-attendants, the proud Princess was alone.

Thinking of Mack and his problematical relations with the red-headed Amazon, who had become such a sudden and threatening menace, she said, "I have my own axe to grind in this contest, Berenice. And then when we have won the others will come trooping back."

"A neat phrase—axe to grind," said the Princess, seizing on the cliché. But Elspeth's thoughts were elsewhere. If the redoubtable redhead had journeyed so swiftly from Silesia,

the Heartlanders must be equipped with vehicles to match those of Commander de Mestres. She felt a sudden dart of illogical relief that Mack at any rate had apparently been separated from his outsized female protector.

And there was something to consider in the arrival of Ana Kai-Martinez, or Anna Martiana, at the capital. The fact that she had felt impelled to leave the mining operation so vital to her planet and come to Rome to assert her influence meant that affairs were definitely coming to a head.

Elsbeth, essentially a dreamer, felt the little knot of fear within her that always came at the prospect of violence. She wondered if the newcomer would be able to force Titus, virtually in power now with the Emperor ailing, to get his legionnaires to storm the Aventine palace. The prospect was surely a fearful one.

What would Commander de Mestres be able to do?

He had expressed no fear as to his detachment's ability to defend itself against any odds. But under the assault of tens of thousands of Roman troops they might be overwhelmed, notwithstanding the immense superiority of their weapons.

They could take off, of course. But that would mean defeat of the Watcher's purpose, would give the Heartlanders a start on what might be an unparalleled course of conquest among the hundreds of worlds. Elsbeth shivered, wondering illogically what had happened to Gnaius and what his role in the whole proceeding could be.

She said to the Princess, "Highness, you have really had no word as to Gnaius Laconius' whereabouts?"

The Princess, whose attention was focussed on the entrance diagonally across the central pool, shook her head and said, "There is some fear he was slain two nights ago in a footpad scuffle close by the Murcian wall. I scoffed at the rumor, feeling that he was with you. If he was not, perhaps he is dead. A pity, for he showed promise as a composer of small satires."

Elsbeth wished to ask more questions, but dared not. She had seen no sign of Gnaius in the fight on her way to the Aventine palace either among the survivors or the corpses. Yet such a rumor could hardly have been started had he not

been seen by someone near the battle. A sense of alarm and guilt swept through her.

If anything had happened to the poet it must have come as a result of her theft of the map and weapon from his bedroom. She felt an unexpected shaft of sympathy for the sadly confused young man who had forced his attentions upon her—or was “forced” the correct word? She pondered the problem. Certainly, in view of her own assignment, Elspeth had encouraged his suit once she became aware of the odd anachronisms in his speech. Such thinking made her feel only the more guilty.

She was thus wrapped in wretched thought when a stirring of excitement about her, a sudden tenseness on the part of the Princess, caused her to look around.

A group of attendants, wearing Imperial Household insignia, had entered and were clustered just within the main entrance. Dividing into two groups, they moved on either side of the portal. The entire population of the huge structure buzzed and grew attentive at the spectacle, looking, the poetess thought, like a collection of hairless pink seals alerted by an approaching grampus whale.

First member of the Imperial party to enter was Prince Flavius Domitianus, younger brother of the Crown Prince. He had been recalled from the pleasures of Nicaea, close to the Ligurian-Narbonensian border on the Mediterranean, by his father's severe illness. He peeled off the towelling robe he was wearing to reveal a magnificent compact muscular body, as well-conditioned as that of a gladiator.

Next came Titus himself, smaller, more nervous, more dynamic. His wry slimness was marked by the scars of years of strenuous campaigning on the northwestern frontiers where the restless German tribes were forever probing and pushing against the walls of men and masonry that forbade them the loot of soft, civilized peoples within.

The Crown Prince paused for a moment, unembarrassed by his nakedness, turned and looked up at the next entry. In Elspeth's ears, as she watched the unfolding drama, the sudden exhalation of Princess Berenice's breath sounded like the hiss of a snake.

Magnificent was the word for Ana Kai-Martinez—Anna

Martiana. A murmur of something like awe coursed through the hundreds of pink hairless seals on the scene—of awe mingled with sheer appreciation of an object of beauty whose magnificence put it beyond mere mortal desire.

The supposed Gallic princess towered over men and women alike that stood around her. Elspeth estimated her to be at least an inch over six feet in her unsandaled feet. Long-limbed, full-hipped and deep-breasted, strong, slim of waist, here was a goddess indeed.

Nor did she fail from the neck up. Her head, held erect, was perfectly in proportion with the rest of her, its features commanding, passionate, beautiful. The mouth was full but firm, the nose just missed the stigma of straightness, the cheekbones were sufficiently wide to give the eyes an almost Slavic tilt. The eyes themselves, even from a distance, seemed to flash green fire. The hair that framed this arresting face, rising from a broad, low, intelligent forehead in a provocative widow's peak, was cut short. Unlike Elspeth's shoulder-length dark blonde tresses or the long black hair of the Roman matrons, it flamed like a copper helmet on her perfectly shaped head.

Here, Elspeth sensed, was a woman who could love or kill or reward or torture, as the spirit moved her—a spirit directed always by the cold intellect that lurked behind those eyes of green. Elspeth thought, *Poor Berenice!* Quickly she looked at the Princess, who was studying her rival with a malevolence unmatched in the poetess' not inconsiderable experience.

The Princess caught Elspeth's covert glance, and her dark eyes returned the gaze unconquered. Thin lips curled in a faint, mirthless smile, and she said, "In truth, my love has been taken by a cannibal queen. We must save him from the stewpot."

Elspeth managed a slight nod and said, "I fear not many men would be averse to such a fate."

"My lover is no fool," was the unconvincing reply. "Nor will he risk an empire by alliance with such a barbarian." To Elspeth, it seemed that her royal friend was whistling in the twilight of the Baths.

She watched the progress of the Imperial party, which

seemed headed directly toward them. To her amazement Titus, his face composed as rigidly as if he were personally leading an assault against a phalanx of Scythian swordsmen, strode up to Berenice, stood before her and said: "Princess Berenice—Princess Anna Martiana. We are extremely anxious that the two of you be friends."

The devil! Elspeth thought as Berenice, refusing to rise and display her tininess along the unadorned king-sized red-head, managed a nod and a formal acceptance of her lover's charge.

In a deep husky voice that merely added to her charms the newcomer said in perfect Latin: "His Highness gives me to understand that you know him very well. I shall be grateful to whatever information toward his pleasure you can give me."

It was war at first sight, of course. For a moment Elspeth wondered if the Crown Prince were actually a fool. The idea of asking his current love to brief her successor seemed at first thought idiotic. Yet no Roman leader, she had come to discover, was ruled by women. If he let himself be hen-pecked his leadership was soon discarded.

Even Marc Antony, reputed to have cast away the Empire for love of Cleopatra, had considered women mere playthings, companions and potential mothers, rather than objects of undying affection. At the close perspective given her by *Antique* she had discovered an entirely different version of the Antony-Cleopatra myth than what she had acquired in her ancient history schoolbooks.

The purpose for which first Caesar, then his erstwhile lieutenant had married the Egyptian queen had been political and economic in basis rather than romantic. The facts of the so-called great romance, Elspeth had learned, had been a matter of political haggling, or straight power politics, with the body and heirs of the Egyptian queen an important factor in the dealings.

Only its near-success had been the foundation of an empty, romantic legend. Politicians, not poets had cleverly created the legend to discredit Antony rather than to idealize him in the eyes of such of his followers and sympathizers as remained.

To the average Roman of good family, the idea of permitting love of any woman to stand in the way of his duties toward country or career was both shocking and degenerate. *Antique* was a pagan world, where physical love was abundantly available for all; emotional love was a suspect rarity save when constricted within the rigid limits of the ancient Roman marriage laws.

Even in a later looser age of Empire, where emancipated women made willing bankrupts of their admirers and divorced unwanted husbands as frequently as they themselves were divorced, no woman in her senses tried to steer the ship of state. The idea was as alien in this retarded world as, in Elspeth's own, would be the idea of a ruler selling out his state through unnatural passion.

Hence she doubted the seeming idiocy of Titus in asking friendship between the two warring princesses. And, regarding his expressionless countenance, she sensed that he was putting both women to a cruel test.

He was deliberately setting them against one another, with himself as prize, probably preferring to let one of them destroy the other rather than let himself be torn between them. Sympathizing with the odds against which her friend Berenice must contend, Elspeth felt swift anger at the Emperor-to-be. Yet, mingled with anger was reluctant admiration. For truly here was an Imperial maneuver, even if limited to the confines of the Emperor's domestic life.

Berenice, choosing to ignore the magnificent redhead as much as possible, addressed Titus directly, saying, "Such news as we have of your father, Highness, is not reassuring. I hope he soon turns for the better."

Titus shrugged, replied. "My father is old and much worn by campaigning and the affairs of state. I fear I cannot hold out much hope for his recovery. Hence it is the more important that those close to me unite in friendship and mutual support."

"We hear, Highness," said Berenice. Elspeth followed her dark glance toward Anna Martiana and Domitianus, who were now standing a little back behind Titus. She caught the speculative glance the Gallic Juno cast at the

younger brother, the matching speculation with which it was returned.

There was relief in Berenice's voice as she went on with, "We shall do our best to serve Your Highness in every way possible."

Which, thought Elspeth, did not bode well for the newcomer to the Imperial family circle. Berenice, sensing the treachery of Anna, knew it also an opportunity for herself and her cause. She was rallying and would fight with all the ruthless wile and cunning a granddaughter of Salome possessed. Realizing this, Elspeth felt better.

Finally the Imperial party moved away toward the side of the pool and prepared to bathe. With their recession some of the retainers behind them became visible—and Elspeth suddenly felt herself blush. She was staring directly at Mark Fraser, and Mack was as bare and blushing as she was!

VII

FOR ONE startled moment Elspeth felt like diving into the pool. It was one thing to wander naked among people who were, after all, strangers and to whom nakedness under such conditions was the accepted condition. It was another to encounter Mack in public with neither of them wearing a stitch.

She saw something close to sheer terror flicker across his somewhat battered countenance. It was followed by excruciating embarrassment as the humor of the situation struck home to her. It was with difficulty that she managed to suppress a snort of laughter. And the increased discomfort with which he regarded her barely concealed mirth only added to her enjoyment.

She thought, *I'd like to paint ugly little Tobey-jug faces on those knobby knees.* Something of what she felt must have showed in her face, because Mack ducked partially out of sight behind Domitianius and glared at her over the Prince's brawny shoulder. Seeing that no one was paying either of them any attention, Elspeth stuck out her tongue at him. Mack looked shocked at her brazenness.

The Imperial party having moved off, Princess Berenice summoned her slaves and allowed her robe to be draped around her. She said to the poetess, "We are grateful for your support, Marina." Then, dropping ceremony: "Come and see me tomorrow." With a quick squeeze of her hand the Princess moved gracefully toward one of the side entrances.

Mack, still looking thoroughly abashed, lingered behind his party as it moved off in the other direction. Approaching Elspeth with the diffidence of a teen-ager forced to ask a wall-flower to dance, he said: "Get into the water! I can't talk to you like this. And there isn't much time."

Playtime was ended. Elspeth slipped quickly into the pool and turned in time to see Mack diving in beside her in graceless belly-flopper fashion. He came up alongside her, close

to the edge and out of sight of the Imperial party. He muttered in English, "What the hell kind of a world have you got yourself into, Elly?"

"I could ask the same of you," replied the poetess, nodding her wet head in the direction of the red-headed Martinez.

"Okay." Mack was all business. "I'm glad as hell to see you. The Martinez brought me down here in an air-car yesterday. It seems things are about to pop. She's set to make a deal with Titus, allowing her to loot *Antique* in peace and freeze out the Watchers."

"How do you figure in it?" Elspeth asked softly.

Mack shrugged, looked faintly embarrassed again as he always did when asked to give himself a pat on the back. He said, "The men in Heartland are so hopeless that these she-zombies seem to think I'm an engineering genius. I'm going to be lend-lease and help the Romans put up a few new aqueducts or something as part of the deal." His modesty became grimness as he added, "These Heartlanders are loaded for bear. Your trip the other day put their wind up properly. You'd better get word that things are warming up."

"I'll pass the word. How much freedom have you got on this job?"

Mack shrugged, wagged his head. "The Heartland men are so cowed their women simply don't expect them to breathe without asking permission. They think I'm a throwback. I can get around, I imagine, if I want to—inspect something or other, maybe."

"They could be right about that throwback business," Elspeth said tartly. Then, more seriously: "Try to inspect a palace on the Aventine Hill tomorrow afternoon. I'll meet you there."

Mack's brow furrowed. He said, "If it's the palace you mean, I know where it is. That's the place my gang is out to get."

"It's Watcher headquarters," Elspeth told him. "They may get more than they bargain for."

"I'll be there," Mack told her. He added with a trace of mockery. "How will I know you with your clothes on, baby?"

Elspeth splashed water in his face and scrambled out of the pool before he could reach her. Fortunately he was wise enough not to follow her, thus perhaps calling attention to their being together. She half waved at him as she slipped out of sight to where Lamia waited with her robe.

The slave-girl said, "Who was that man you talked with?"

"An old friend," replied the poetess. Catching a certain gleam in the Pamphylian girl's dark eyes, she said, "Hands off, Lamia." She wondered, not for the first time, what it was about Mack's generally unlovely exterior that seemed to attract so many women. Of course, if they knew the fine realistic sturdiness of the soul within . . . But the attraction she was considering had nothing to do with soul. Perhaps it meant something—but past experience suggested his concern was more fraternal than passionate. She led the way to the dressing room in silence.

On her return to the Cispian villa, Elspeth was informed by a house slave that a woman was awaiting her in the ante-room. Her first thought, as the visitor rose from the curved Greek chair on which she had been seated, was that here was a remarkably tall woman for a Roman, even in comparison to the red-headed Heartland leader masquerading as a Gallic princess. Alarm bells rang again within her at the thought that perhaps this was one of the invading Amazons, sent to do away with her.

Instinctively Elspeth's hand flew to her waist, where during the flight to Silesia her blaster had hung in its holster. Her fingers brushed the soft material of her stola. Nor was her alarm abated when the visitor leaped toward her and all but smothered her in a fierce embrace.

Elspeth struggled vainly to extricate herself for several seconds before she realized that not a woman but a man was holding her. She jerked back the parka-like hood that shadowed the stranger's features and found herself looking into the eyes of Gnaius Laconius—eyes as frightened as her own.

"You must fly with me," said Gnaius, still holding her close. "I've come to take you away from here." Then, as Elspeth opened her mouth to express surprise, his hand quickly muffled her and he added with angry despair, "Had

you not taken advantage of my hospitality, I should not have had to flee."

Elspeth sputtered and finally was able to say, "I'm not going to give the alarm, Gnaius. But you must be mad."

"I plead guilty to such a charge," he replied, suddenly sorrowful. "Only a madman would seek you out after the irreparable harm you have done me. But without you I am lost."

Elspeth rallied, her mind begining to function. She said, "I know now what harm I have done you. Surely the two poor momentoes I took were small return for what I gave you willingly."

Her innocence seemed to stop him in his tracks. He stared at her, gave vent to an ironic laugh, released her and smote his brow. "Truly," he exclaimed, "fate plays curious tricks with me. I had thought myself the victim of conspiracy, with you, Marina, its most treacherous jewel. Now I find myself the victim of mischance."

"Suppose," said Elspeth, "you make yourself a trifle—"

He cut her off with a tragic gesture and told her, "All the more reason, since it was not you but some petulant goddess that betrayed me, for you to fly with me from a world in which such persecutions can exist." He seized her hands, looked deeply into her eyes.

There was something close to pathos in the floridness of his declamation. She averted her laughing eyes as if in perplexity. Unexpectedly she saw that his right hand was clutched tightly around some object whose tiny snout protruded from between the covering knuckles. Suddenly she became aware of the extent of his desperation.

His intention had been to take her with him or slay her if she refused. Her false innocence, she suspected, had momentarily put him off his purpose. For, she remembered, Gnaius Laconius—whatever his name in his true planet home—was one of the Heartland men so despised by Mack and their own Amazonian womenfolk.

Just how he had managed to reach the Rome of *Antique* was a question she could not answer. But she had an idea the answer was a vital part of the problem facing the Watchers and she intended to learn the facts.

The reason behind Gnaius' disappearance was more easily guessed at. Evidently he had awakened shortly after she had left him. Or perhaps he had been roused by an agent of his own people. The theft had been discovered, the other agent and a crew of professional footpads had probably been sent to her villa. Finding her already in progress toward the Aventine palace, they had ambushed her party near the Murcian Gate.

Berenice's remark that Gnaius had been seen within range of that sanguinary combat seemed to Elspeth to prove the point. Doubtless he had held himself well out of harm's way and had fled when the bandits had been so disastrously defeated. From that time on, of course, he was probably in great trouble with his own people—while she herself must have become a thoroughly marked woman to the Heartland leaders.

Disguised as the woman which his society favored, Gnaius must have lurked hidden in the sprawling city. Frowning, she said, "If you are in such danger, Gnaius, why have you lingered in Rome? Surely, if flight lay open to you—"

"I could not flee until I had seen you, either to take you with me or to decry your guilt and slay you," he replied dramatically. "Now that I know your innocence, I must have you with me. Lacking your strength, I am lost."

Elspeth made up her mind to go along. Gnaius, she felt certain, was much too poor an actor to be baiting some trap set by others. She said, quietly, "Very well, Gnaius, where to?"

Her acquiescence took the wind completely out of his spinnaker. He sputtered, seeking to continue his course of persuasion. Suddenly he stopped speaking to regard her incredulously and say, "You'll come?"

"Of course," she replied. "If I have caused you unwitting harm it is only right that I should make amends."

He looked at her, horrified, and cried, "You come with me but through pity! And I will not be pitied by any woman."

Cursing him for an incorrigible egotist, she sought to mend her fences by melting against him, stroking his arm and saying, "Your heart should tell you pity has no part of what I feel for you." She did not trouble to explain further

that her chief feeling toward him was and had always been repugnance.

It worked. He folded her in his ridiculous woman's garment and kissed her with lips that were for once unrouged. Taking her hand in a firm grip, he said, "Come—this way. My litter awaits."

It did, drawn by four burly ruffians, who looked as if they had been culled from the sewers of the city—and smelled the same way. Noting her distaste, Gnaius said: "They are safe enough."

"Very well," said Elspeth, subsiding beside him within the sheltering curtains of the litter. "Where are we going, my dear?"

He peered at her intently, and she saw that he needed a shave. He said, "My dear, I must ask you not to be frightened by any strange or wondrous things we encounter. Truly I am taking you with me on a fabulous voyage—a voyage to a land where I am of royal lineage."

Like the sons of the kings of Ireland in my world! thought Elspeth suspiciously. But with a stir of inner excitement she sensed that instinct had not played her false. Gnaius was planning to take her with them to his world—perhaps through a gateway as yet unknown to the Watchers. She decided to keep track of the route as the litter was borne through the Esquiline Gate.

"I shall try not to be frightened," she told Gnaius gravely as they turned right beyond the turreted portal. "But where is this land you speak of as yours? Surely it cannot be far from the city."

"It is both far and near," was the reply. "We must pass through a portal of night whose secret I alone know. Once we are safely past its barrier I shall spirit you to a warm ocean island, far from the meretricious intrigues, where together we can compose verses to express the twin glories of our souls."

"You flatter my poor talent," said Elspeth. Meanwhile, she noted that they turned left on the Via Tuscalna, proceeding directly away from the city into the tilled and landscaped story-book countryside that seemed to lap in waves of green grass and brown earth against the very walls of Rome. She

began to speculate on whether the matriarchy of Heartland might not implant unexpected weakness in the female sex as well as in the male, thereby leading to a means of bringing failure to the triumphant Anna Martiana.

"My story is truly a strange one," Gnaius confided. "So strange that I have dared tell no one in Rome about it. To them I am merely a young man of means who has come to Rome from Utica. Actually, I am from a world both like and different to the world you know."

"Hades, perhaps," offered Elspeth, playing her part.

"Nay, not Hades nor any other land of legend," was the poet's response. "My world is very real. Only by a miracle was I able to find my way into yours—a miracle and a dispensation."

He went on with his story—how, although a prince, he had been held in bondage of sort by the Amazons who ran his version of Earth.

Elspeth offered at this: "Then you come from the land of these fierce women warriors? You would take me and deliver me into their hands?"

"Nay," he replied again. "It is from them I flee." He told her how he had been quietly approached by a stranger—Gnaius called him a son of the gods to make him more comprehensible to Elspeth—and given instruments that enabled him to make passage between worlds. And, in conclusion: "But my secret, or part of it, was discovered before I could put it to use. But one of the gateways remained in my possession and through this I fled to your world. I longed to escape the bondage of my sex."

"You seem to have done pretty well," said Elspeth, regarding the woman's raiment her companion wore.

Mercifully, he misunderstood her and replied, "But they have followed me and seek the few remaining possessions I brought with me. When you took them from me through mistaken desire for a memento of our love, my life became forfeit. Now I must flee again."

"How do you expect to escape death in your own world?" Elspeth asked him, puzzled.

"Because, once through the portal, I know where to hide," was the reply. "Great portions of my world were laid waste

by war long before my own time. Yet in the heart of some of these wastelands lie regions untouched by the holocaust that all but destroyed my world. Like oases in the desert they are green and fruitful—and unmarked on any map. It is to one of these that I would flee."

"I see," said Elspeth drily, contemplating with a shudder the dismal thought of playing Virginia to Gnaius' Paul in a radioactive-locked Madagascar. She all but blurted *Adam and Eve* before she recollected that she was scarcely supposed to know that myth.

While her companion continued rhapsodically to paint the life they were to live together—with herself, she gathered doing most of whatever heavy work was to be done—she considered the coincidence of Gnaius and herself, two aliens in a city of perhaps a million souls, managing to land together in such a situation.

Yet, on second thought it was scarcely remarkable. Elspeth had been on the alert for any alien indications, and Gnaius had given her plenty. It was natural for each of them to seek the highest possible circles in the Eternal City, thus to be thrown together in what was actually a small and close-knit society. There her own alien detachment must have drawn him in the same way as his own out-of-place modernity interested her. About the only true coincidence, she decided, lay in their both being poets.

Three miles southeast of the city, they were borne, in response to a sharp command from Gnaius, off the paved roadway for perhaps two hundred yards. The littermen stopped over the brow of a low hill. There Gnaius, after helping Elspeth to alight, paid off the litter-bearers and stood within the shade of a tall poplar. He kept his arm around Elspeth until they had vanished.

"Come *carissima*," the poet said, the softness of his voice underladen with excitement. "We are about to seek the portal of another world. Come with me."

They walked perhaps a quarter of a mile over uneven terrain through the oncoming dusk. Then they came to a ruined farmhouse, an unreconstructed casualty of the civil wars, whose fields were shaggy and overgrown and gone to seed. Gnaius led her to a barn whose thatched roof had party

fallen in, leaving skeleton rafters silhouetted against the pale western sky.

The ship, no larger than a pipit in Elspeth's own world, lay on the dirt floor. Except in size it was very different from any vehicle she had ever seen. Evidently designed primarily for flight than surface use, its wheels were many and small. In shape it was something like a sea sledge, with sharply pointed bow and a flat stern from which rocket tubes protruded.

The cockpit was small but held them both comfortably. The instrument panel was remarkable for its simplicity. Half-reclining in her seat, the poetess watched her companion narrowly as he got the vehicle running. He cast her a quick glance, laid a reassuring hand upon her wrist and said, "Don't be afraid—there is nothing to fear."

Deftly handling the few instruments, Gnaius backed them easily and almost silently out of the barn, swung the sharp nose around and, with a quick burst of power, sent them soaring aloft. Aware of the neatness of the machine, Elspeth understood Mack's concern about the possibilities of a Heartland victory over the Watchers. Certainly it was far more advanced than anything she had ever seen or heard of in any of the other worlds.

There was almost no sense of acceleration, almost no sound, virtually no vibration. They soared high over the vast Pontine marshes and, briefly, out over the Mediterranean itself. In a mere matter of minutes, through the fading twilight, they swung back toward land over the bay of Naples.

Only then did Elspeth feel fright. For it seemed to her that Gnaius planned to crash them against the sloping side of Mount Vesuvius as he rapidly slanted the vehicle downward.

He must have sensed her sudden tension, for he cast her a quick smile of reassurance. "I promise," he repeated, "there is no cause for fear. You are being a remarkably brave girl, *carissima*."

"Sure," said Elspeth, holding tightly to the edge of her seat as the rock mountain swept up toward them, "I'm a

whole flock of heroines rolled into one. Well, here goes nothing."

He frowned at her as he slowed his aircar until it hovered above the rim of the gaping crater, and said, "You puzzle me at times, Marina. You are so brazen, so unlike yourself."

"Well, the real me has no desire to commit suicide—not even in a volcano," she replied, letting out a yelp as the walls of the crater itself rose slowly around them. She had a sudden new sense of the date of her mission. As nearly as she had been able to compute it was close to 80 A.D. in *Antique*. For the first time she remembered that the eruption of Vesuvius which destroyed Pompeii and Herculaneum in most of the other worlds took place in 79 A. D. The recollection was scarcely a reassuring one, especially as a curl of subterranean steam took that moment to rise ghostlike past the windows, yellow and sulphurous in the searchlight beam Gnaius had switched on.

She was just about to make an effort to overcome her companion and lift the aircar out of the crater when they moved slightly ahead and came to rest on a sort of shelf projecting from the huge shaft. She cast an inquiring glance at her companion, who was squinting as he studied what appeared to be a clock on the instrument panel. It was marked for twenty hours in numerals which bore only a faint resemblance to the familiar Arabic figures of her world.

"What now?" she asked him, wondering if he had gone mad.

"For a little while we must wait—then, a new world!" was the reply. He reached for her, drew her close, kissed her.

Her response was scarcely electric. The full enormity of undertaking interworld transfer with such a practical ignoramus as Gnaius scared her out of her wits. She had been informed, before going on the mission to *Antique*, that the worlds of *Antique* and Heartland were in a condition of parallel alignment which made direct transfer between them

It was not difficult to visualize Vesuvius as a transfer point; surely the ancient mountain bore both the geologic and animate historical violence that made transfer possible. Wondering briefly what had happened to the forests of

Silesia to create such a portal in that desolate region, she decided the story belonged to pre-history.

Then she felt the sudden taut tingling of nerves that reminded her of a cat on the eve of a thunderstorm. Idiot or not, Gnaius had timed his expedition well. They were going into transfer almost immediately. Somewhat to her surprise she found herself still in his arms. Pulling clear of them, she set herself for the ordeal ahead.

Then the darkness was about them—not the dark of night nor of the crater, but the almost palpable darkness that was the passage between parallel worlds. It seemed to Elspeth, as always, that she was unable to breathe, yet breathe she did as the unseen moments crept slowly by. At her side she could hear her companion's teeth chatter; she resisted an impulse to tell him there was nothing to be afraid of.

Then, when it seemed no longer endurable, the darkness was gone. They were resting on the lip of an eroded Vesuvius with the moon and stars giving them light and revealing a washed-out and eroded panorama about and beneath them. Far below, in the great arc of the bay, gleamed a few sparse lights—few even by the standards of the *Antique* Roman Naples over which they had so recently flown. There was a desolation to the landscape reminiscent of Walpurgis Night. Gnaius suddenly laughed, ringingly, triumphantly. He cried, "At last, carissima—this is my world!"

"It doesn't look much like an oasis from here," said Elspeth, evading his hungry arms and lips. "It looks desolate."

"And so it is, Marina," he replied. "So it is, save for the few forbidden spots in the great wasteland. Come—let us take off and fly to our private paradise."

Elspeth began to be truly worried. Now, she told herself, was the time to escape. She had found a gateway, passed through it. Her job now was to get back through it, back to Rome and Mack and Commander de Mestres, so that she could report the portal's presence.

She opened the door at her side and slipped from the aircar, barely escaping the poet's clutching fingers. He cried out in perplexity and she saw him emerge, reaching for his

tiny hand-blaster. She wondered fleetingly if it could be in his heart to kill her.

There was small sense in giving him the chance. As his feet touched the ground, she tripped him, pulled his stola over his head, seized his hand while he was struggling in its folds and bit it until the dangerous and ugly little weapon fell clear.

By the time he had unwrapped himself, Elspeth was holding the blaster, pointed at his belly. Speaking English, she said, "All right, my fine Heartland friend, not another move."

He looked at her in horrified perplexity and she realized he didn't understand. She repeated her command in Latin and felt a pang of regret as he crumpled under the impact of her words.

Pale in the moonlight, he said brokenly, "So you were merely pretending all the time."

"Pretending Hades," she exclaimed. "I was performing a dangerous and disagreeable du—" Her voice trailed off as she saw another aircar approaching.

So fast did it come that she had barely time to slip behind the poet's vehicle before it had landed alongside with a faint scrape of gravel. A couple of tall women got out, said something to Gnaius that seemed to paralyze him. He stammered, tried to speak, could not.

One of the women, apparently the leader, laughed. She said a few words to her companion, in a language Elspeth could not understand. Then, walking forward, she felled Gnaius with a single blow that a slaughterhouse slayer might have envied. The two women bundled the unfortunate poet into their car. Then the leader got in and took off, leaving the other to guard Gnaius' vehicle. They had been unaware of Elspeth's presence.

VIII

THE AMAZON guard leaned against the other side of the aircar behind which Elspeth was hiding. After a while she began to hum a tuneless sort of melody in a low contralto. The poetess wondered briefly what fate lay in store for Ganius Laconius. Probably, if he were a member of an important family, as seemed true in view of his having been singled out by the first Watcher visitors to Heartland, he would be spanked and confined somewhere. For this Elspeth felt small regret. The poet was too unworldly, too undisciplined emotionally, to be a safe factor if allowed to roam loose among the worlds.

A foot scraped on gravel, then another. The humming stopped. The guard was about to walk around the ship. Elspeth battled an intense desire to take to her heels in flight. She steeled herself, raised the hand-blaster, tried to tell herself that she should have, under the circumstances, no compunction in killing her foe.

Yet, when the Amazon appeared around the nose of the aircar, Elspeth could not put the pressure that would release the dealy beam of heat. Both women stood there, frozen, for a long second. And then the Amazon's right hand darted for her own belt.

Elspeth fired then—and turned away from the sickening charred mess that lay on the ground in front of her. She scrambled into the aircar, tried desperately to work the strange controls to turn the vessel about. She felt, however illogically, that unless she could turn it around she would never achieve transfer back to *Antique*. She knew something of the two-way oscillation governing the transfer process but, while her mind trusted the knowledge, her emotions refused to.

However, the controls were beyond her mastery. She did not dare try to work them all lest she plunge the machine into the now-dead volcano; she might even send a craft soaring in wild flight, hopelessly away from the interworld portal. After a few desperate moments she sat still, shivering.

It was then that she saw the lights of approaching aircars, heading with definite purpose toward the mountaintop. Evidently Gnaius had talked—and they were coming for her. Feeling as if she were trapped under a falling skyscraper, Elspeth sat helplessly watching their rapid approach. She felt herself in a paralysis of resignation.

Her fate depended upon the pulse of the interworld rhythm. A transfer would probably occur within minutes—but it could be a matter of days or weeks. Its timing depended upon the frequency of the portal itself, which in turn depended upon its importance as a probability point of decision. Sitting there, with the lights of the approaching flotilla coming rapidly closer, she felt suddenly damp with perspiration that trickled chillingly down her spine and breasts.

If—rather when they reached her, she would be in for a bad time. Heartland was at war with the Watchers and she was an alien spy. Furthermore, in a world dominated by women, her sex would scarcely be a protection—quite the reverse. She thought of Mack and, in sudden rage and frustration, struck a useless blow at the instrument panel in front of her.

She hit something that swung the aircar slowly about. Noting the motion, flame flickered from the nose of two of the leading ships and bits of the mountain below her blazed with sudden fire. She looked at her tiny hand-blaster and flung it to the cabin floor.

The aircar stopped moving—and the blackness was around it once more as the very gravel around her seemed to burst into flame. She shivered and thought of Mack and wondered if she would ever see him again. The whole course of their odd, combative relationship passed before her, and she all but wept at the uselessness of their squabbles, the stubborn idiocy with which they had each fought dependence upon the other. For surely, if two people were ever meant to be perfect complements, she and Mack were that couple.

She resolved, if she ever did see him again, to reveal the true warmth of her feelings toward him, her trust in him, her—yes, her love. And then the blackness was gone and she was back on the ledge deep within the crater of the

Antique Vesuvius—and the aircar was still turning, turning toward the edge . . .

Elsbeth screamed and scrambled out just before it dropped from sight in the bottomless crater beyond. For a long moment she leaned against the volcano wall behind her, trembling and weak and unable to lift a finger.

Then, cursing the awkwardness of her Roman woman's garb, she began the long difficult climb out of the volcano, sure that at any second it would erupt and engulf her in boiling lava. Sulphur fumes made her cough and weep, and sharp stones scraped her legs and body and caused her hands to bleed.

Somehow though, under the press of desperation, she made it. Finally, she lay full length on the ground outside the immense shaft that all had but swallowed her alive. After a while she got to her feet and began a staggering progress down the side of the mountain.

Unaided by Gnaius' aircar, she took the better part of two days to get back to Rome. She might not have made it at all had not a kind Senator, proceeding to an emergency session in the capital, taken pity on her and given her a place in his suite. He was a plump, perturbed man of middle age, more concerned with animal husbandry and his olive crops than with the intrigues of the city.

But the Emperor was dying and it was necessary for the Senate to meet in rubber-stamp fashion, to appropriate the monies needed for the funeral, to confirm Titus as his successor, to preserve the outer form of a republican process long since moribund. He seemed much interested in such gossip of the city as Elsbeth could give him.

Once he said, wrinkling his forehead almost to the top of his bald pate, "I must confess I do not like what you tell me of the Crown Prince's new favorite. Just now a willful barbarian might well tear Rome apart more fully than Cleopatra herself. But I fear the populace will never consent to an alliance with Princess Berenice. Their distrust of all Asiatic rulers is too deep-seated to allow it."

"Poor Berenice," said Elsbeth, feeling sympathy for her semi-royal friend. Truly, her life had been incredible, with three marriages before she was well into her twenties. In-

deed, Berenice was in a most precarious situation, not only because of popular feeling but because of the rivalry of the Heartland princess.

It was late the second afternoon after her escape from the crater when, weary, tired and bedraggled, the poetess stood once more before the bronze doors of her Cispian villa. Yet, as one of her Iberian slaves admitted her, she was nerving herself, rallying her energies for what she had to do. She must get at once to the Aventine palace to report to Commander de Mestres. The Vesuvian gateway was no longer a secret to the Heartlanders and, being so close to Rome, might well be the portal to a new invasion of Italy itself by the Amazon warriors of that tired but aggressive world.

And there was Mack, of course. He would probably be angry with her for having stood him up the day before—until she explained what had happened. Then, she foresaw with rosy anticipation, he would give her the devil for taking such chances by herself. This would be followed by the scene of which she had dreamed while making the return transfer from Heartland: the fond declaration that would end their long feud.

Wondering where Lamia could be, she strode toward her own second-story chamber—and stopped short on the door-sill. Lamia, clad only in the briefest of wispy shawls, was reclining beside Mack on her own couch. A table was pulled up alongside, and on it were two flagons of Pliny's choicest Falernian—one obviously empty—and a bowl of fruit, much of it evidently eaten.

Mack saw her first and lifted a hand in salute. He was evidently feeling the wine, for he grinned with lazy impudence and said in English, "Better late than never, Elspeth. Come on in and join the party."

Lamia saw her mistress then and leapt from the couch with a little scream. Then she stopped, taking in the poetess' torn and bruised condition. Solicitude replaced fright on her provocative little face. She gasped, "Madam, you're hurt!"

"You're telling me!" countered Elspeth. She slapped the girl and sent her sprawling, then faced Mack, her eyes blazing and said, "What the hell are you doing here?"

"As a matter of fact," he replied cheerfully, "I'm hiding out. Pal Ana seems to be onto me and I had a devil of a time getting here at all. The whole city's upside down with the Emperor dead." Then, squinting: "Hey, Elly, you do look a bit banged up. Better have a snort to pull yourself together." He offered her the unfinished flagon and she knocked it out of his hand to the floor.

Lamia, on her knees, cried, "Madam, I didn't want to, but when Macronius Frazius came last night he demanded entertainment."

Elsbeth felt her anger toward the sobbing girl dissolve. She lifted her up and said, "Get my bath ready." Then, turning on Mack when the girl had darted from the room, she said, "I'd forgotten what a tomcat you are."

On his feet, he shrugged and replied, "She's a cute little dish. What did you want me to do while you wandered off with that cute poet of yours? You know I can't even read in this language."

With great effort she put personal problems behind her. She said, "I've got to get to Commander de Mestres at once. I've been through a new gateway in Mount Vesuvius."

"In Mount Vesuvius!" The fumes of wine seemed visibly to fade as his alert practical mind seized on the problem they faced. "You mean you've been into Heartland and back through the crater?"

She nodded and said, "What's more the Heartlanders know of the gate there now. They may decide to use it themselves."

"It wouldn't surprise me if they already have," said Mack quietly. "My brick-topped girl friend is really making things hum. That's part of why I had to get out. But how in hell we're to get into the Aventine palace beats me. Titus camped four legions around it this morning." He paused and added, "Nice fellow, that de Mestres."

Elsbeth made no response. The neatness with which Ana Kai-Martinez, or Anna Martiana, had used her influence over the heir to *Antique Rome* stopped her cold. She had news of vital importance to convey to Commander de Mestres. But if the Aventine palace was under siege, as Mack

implied, there was no way of getting word to the forces of the Watchers.

The problems remained unsolved during her bath—which though the water was hot, suffered from a noticeable coolness between mistress and slave. Elspeth, abstracted and unhappy, spoke only when necessary to the Pamphylian girl, who waited on her in silence.

Not until the massage was finished did Lamia blurt, "Madam, if I have offended you, I am heartbroken."

Elspeth rolled over on the sheet-covered massage table and smiled at the anxiously alive little face above her. She said with an unexpected sense of relief, "I'm not angry with you, Lamia, but I'd like to wring the neck of our mutual friend in the next room."

And then, remembering the girl's resourcefulness, an idea struck her. She sat up and said, "Lamia, do you think you could manage to carry a message to the Commander of the force within the Aventine palace?"

Eagerness and excitement flooded the little slave-girl's face. "If it will be of service to madam . . ." said the girl submissively, but her eyes were aglow at the prospect of adventure. Elspeth then wrote a brief note in English to the Comander, telling him of the Vesuvian gateway and her fear lest the Heartlanders should employ it to launch an expedition to Italy proper.

When Lamia had left and Elspeth was clad once more in tunic and sandals, she went down to the dining chamber where Mack was awaiting her. He had sobered up considerably and was looking both sheepish and a trifle hung over. He said, "I hope you weren't too hard on the kid. I was way out of line, but I didn't know this poet character was part of your assignment."

"Lamia's merely running an errand for me," said the poetess. Then, as the first course was brought in, she said, "Mack, what about these people? How long have you been on this job?"

"About four months," he told her. Then, slashing into the suckling pig and smearing both face and hands, he sighed. "This is living, Elly. If I hadn't stolen time off to get some game, I'd have had to live exclusively on bran muffins and

yogurt. You've been having it good."

"You haven't done so badly yourself," said Elspeth a shade tartly. "What about that Glamazon boss of yours?"

Mack had the grace to blush.

Elspeth laughed. She couldn't help it. The picture of Mack being reduced to inferior status by a proud woman who outstripped him physically was salve to her own recently bruised ego. But she said, "Poor Mack. How'd you ever manage to get established with them anyway?"

"It was pretty much makeshift all the way," he replied in English, since a classical education had not been part of his training. "The first Watcher who reached Heartland walked into a radioactive zone before he knew it and came down with a fatal case of poisoning. If he hadn't been half out of his head, he'd never have selected a man as resident Watcher. But he was dying and handed the torch to some decadent prince, who tried to use the gift for his own ends."

"I know," said Elspeth quietly, thinking of Cnaius.

"You don't know what Heartland is like," was Mack's reply. He seemed to shudder visibly, then went on with, "It's the used-up end of a world that's knocked itself out with war. There's life in some of the forbidden areas—and they comprise Asia, Africa, both Americas, Australia, England and Antarctica—but you wouldn't want to see it."

"Mutations?" Elspeth asked, shivering herself.

He nodded. "Some beauts—and every one of them recessive. It's a starving world that's forgotten most of its own existence. But they've got machines left—some lulus. You've had a taste of their technical stuff. The trouble is they operate by rote. They've lost the knack of new ideas—probably scared to death of them after the destruction their planet has taken.

"So I got through the Silesian transfer point and made like a character from one of the borderland provinces," he said, half piling his plate with greens. "Anyway, I fixed up a couple of gadgets that were out of whack and got myself marked as a genius, masculine gender."

"Clever, clever fellow," said Elspeth. Mack glowered at her, then went on.

"Understand, no man can rate as an equal with the

Heartland ladies, Elly," he said. "I was just a talking horse with them. So they kept me warm and fed and discussed me as a potential menace if more like me turned up. Finally, just as I got the Silesian mine job, I began to get hep to what was happening.

"The damned fool our pioneer made resident-Watcher had spilled the beans, of course, then taken a powder through another gateway. Which left just the Silesian portal. But that was enough. It was right on top of Heartland's last worked-out uranium bed and the Martinez got the idea of bringing through an expedition and replenishing her planet with radioactives pirated from this world.

"I made a quick transfer and outlined the setup to Mr. Horelle and he sent me right back and told me to go along with it. So I did. I helped get the diggings working, while the Martinez was looking around and discovering this world wasn't full of deadly continents and might have a lot more uranium mines. Needless to say, I didn't tip her off to the Congo or Northwest Canada.

"She took a trip and tied up with this Titus in France—or Gaul," Mack went on, "and from then on things went into high gear. She sent a few spies to Rome—a few of the Heartland men make good undercover operatives—and found out her missing Prince was hiding out here. And from then on the operation was stepped up."

Elsbeth nodded and, over dessert, they chatted about their problem. Shaking his head, Mack said, "Somehow we're got to get word to de Mestres. I was lucky to have a chance to talk with him before my lady-boss got suspicious of me. One of her damned spies saw us talking in the pool and it seems you're already suspect."

"Sorry," said Elsbeth. "But I wonder why they haven't made an attack here yet. Surely they must know you're with me."

Mack shrugged, then said, "You haven't seen the city for the past couple of days. Ever since the Emperor died it's been a madhouse: crowds, games, public sacrifices, parades, street-corner speeches, drunks, bandits—a real bedlam. I've got a hunch they haven't many operatives here—and those they have have been too damned busy to bother much with

a couple of minor issues like us."

"They'll get to us in time, never fear," said the poetess.

"I don't," was the far-from-reassuring reply.

A round-eyed slave interrupted the meal with word that the Princess Berenice requested entrance. Elspeth issued hurried instructions in Latin and, when the slave had departed on the run, Mack looked at the poetess with reluctant admiration. "You certainly know how to spout this damned lingo around here," he told her.

"Advantages of a classical education," she retorted. "In spite of your scorn for dead languages they do come in handy at times."

"Maybe," replied Mack, "but it took a freak cosmic disaster to turn the trick!"

The Princess came in without ceremony, brushing quickly past the slaves. She sank onto a couch saying, "Thank As-tarte, I'd forgotten there was such a thing as food."

Not until she had satisfied the sharp edge of her hunger did Elspeth have a chance to introduce her to Mack, who nodded gravely, saying nothing. He looked, the poetess thought, absurdly like an unwilling guest at a costume ball in her own world.

After studying him briefly the Princess said, "Is your guest a mute barbarian that he doesn't talk? He must be a relief after poor Gnaius. Have you heard anything from him?"

"Nothing, Highness," said Elspeth. "I fear for his fate." Then, with a sidelong glance at Mack: "Macronius Frasus is an old friend. He is not a barbarian, but he does not speak Latin."

The Princess said with some surprise, "Not a barbarian, yet not able to speak the language of civilization? Perhaps he comes from Cathay?"

"What in hell are you talking about?" Mack asked in English. His head had been turning back and forth between the women like that of a sideline spectator at a tennis match.

Elspeth laughed and said to him, "Princess Berenice is curious about you. I'm trying to explain."

"You'd think I was a freak or something," growled Mack with a surly expression.

"What is this strange tongue you speak with your friend?"

"It is a dialect from a distant part of Britain," the poetess said. "Macronius hails from there and we shared the same slave-tutor as children."

"It is a rapid tongue," mused Berenice. "But Rome is full of strange tongues at present. Is not this the young man who appeared in Princess Anna Martiana's suite at the Baths?"

"The same," said Elspeth. "But he is no friend of hers. He is, in fact, hiding from the Princess and her followers."

"So!" said Berenice, after a thrusting glance at the subject of the conversation. Then, with a shrug: "Perhaps he can be of service, as I hope you can, in my campaign against this barbaric invader. For I fear for my place in Rome if her power over the new Emperor is not sapped. Titus has stripped me of half of my suite, and there is gossip abroad that he plans to install this . . . barbarian witch in my palace."

Save for the slight hesitation in her last sentence, Berenice spoke with a calm matter-of-factness that wrung Elspeth's heart.

Turning to Mack she said, "Princess Berenice is in danger of being ousted from the Emperor's favor by your ex-boss. Do you know any chinks in her armor? We've got to do something, for our own sakes as well as hers. Can you think of anything?"

Mack looked thoughtful and said after a long moment, "Damned if I know any—unless it's her contempt for me. You might be able to humiliate the Emperor."

It was Elspeth's turn to think. She frowned, saying, "The chances are she won't show her hand until she has the game in hand—and we can't wait that long. Darn it!" She frowned, and then, out of nowhere, an idea occurred to her.

She saw in retrospect, without closing her eyes, the mutual speculative glance exchanged at the side of the pool between the red-headed menace and the new Emperor's younger brother. Domitianus, she knew from rumor, was both jealous and ambitious, a young man who was impatient of his chances of sitting on the throne. Perhaps something could be made of that.

She glanced at Berenice. Reading the curiosity in her eyes, she said, "I wonder—if Domitianus received a note from her asking him to come to a rendezvous at a time and place we know Princess Anna Martiana will be present, and some trusted servant were to warn Titus at the last minute . . . But no, it is a clumsy subterfuge."

"You noticed too, at the Baths," said the Princess Berenice, her face alive with eagerness and renewed hope. I thought my eyes must have deceived me out of wishfulness. Marina, you are indeed a friend. Though why my poor wits could not supply the answer—"

"You'd have thought of it, Highness," said Elspeth consolingly. Suddenly she felt quite proud of her newly developed talent for court intrigue. It felt so—Persian was the only suitable word. There was another word, too, of course, one far less romantic—Machiavellian. But, she reminded herself, when in Rome . . . Certainly Mack seemed to have accepted Roman hospitality with unequivocal enthusiasm.

Princess Berenice rose and moved around the table and embraced her. Elspeth felt surprise at the frailty of her guest's body. She marveled at the indomitable will that had maintained her close to power for so long, when stronger men and women and far greater reputations fell almost daily.

She accompanied Berenice to the door, Mack trailing uncertainly behind. Seeing her to her well-guarded litter, which all but blocked the narrow street outside, the poetess remained to wave farewell to the jeweled and shapely arm which saluted her through the rift in the litter curtains, which were gay with the lion of Judah and the eagle of Rome.

Thus she was still standing in the lighted doorway when the bundle, hurled from somewhere in the darkness beyond the oval of torchlight, landed with a horrid thud in front of her feet and brushed her ankles as it bounded past her and rolled into the doorway. Involuntarily she shrank back with a slight scream.

Moments later, her eyes bulging with horror, she watched disgust followed by deadly anger cross Mack's familiar face as he opened the bundle to disclose the bloody, severed head of Lamia!

IX

THE happenings of the next few hours were, to Elspeth, like passages in a nightmare—dramatic, terrible, unescapable. For even in that ghastly moment, while she and Mack gazed at the lifeless head of the slave-girl who had once been so vividly alive, Elspeth knew that they were trapped.

The Heartland invaders appeared to have every contingency covered. With a new transfer point close to Rome, they could easily counter-effect the strength of the Watchers' contingent in the Aventine palace. With the support of Titus and his legions in the capital itself, thanks to the Martinez' successful intrigue, they had sealed off de Mestres' forces so that it was impossible to get word to them of what was going on outside the crumbling walls of their citadel.

Any haphazard show of force by the Commander's troops would inevitably turn the rulers of *Antique* even more strongly against the Watchers and would place them more securely in the hands of the planet-looters. Elspeth felt sick, not only at the brutal slaying of Lamia, but at the prospect of the matriarchy in full control of *Antique*.

It would not take them long to discover the huge sources of untapped mineral wealth in the retarded planet—even in regions so long poisonous in Heartland that their existence had been all but forgotten by the people of that unfortunate version of Earth.

Mack, suddenly the grim-faced man of her own world, said, "Come on, Elly—we've got to get the hell out of here."

"Where can we go?" the poetess asked helplessly.

"We've got to get a message to de Mestres," said Mack. "And if I have to, I'll *blast* a way through to the palace myself."

Elspeth moved uncertainly to her room. But once out of sight of the ghastly relic of Lamia, her thoughts began to organize themselves. She said, "You haven't a chance—we haven't a chance just now. I suggest we entrust that part of the job to Berenice. She still has some friends and influence.

If anyone can get a message through to de Mestres, she can. Maybe not for a day or two but soon—with the city demoralized as it is."

Mack frowned, "Okay," he said. "But what do we do in the meantime? Sit here and wait to be slaughtered?"

"Mack!" said Elspeth, "Mack—we've got to get to that Vesuvian gateway and block it somehow. Suppose no one can get word to de Mestres in time—it's up to us."

"And what do we use for transport?" countered the more practical member of the team. "Besides, don't tell me our friends won't have every road from Rome blocked—at least to us."

"There is still Pliny and the fleet," she said.

"Too damned slow," was the discouraging response. "Even if we made it we'd never be in time."

"But it's the only way left," said Elspeth. She felt the sudden reaction from her slave's tragic murder, felt tears well up unwanted behind her eyes. Suddenly she could restrain her grief no longer. The pressures of recent days, Lamia's death, the hopelessness of the position—all united and burst from her in weeping.

Mack offered her clumsy comfort, repeating over and over again, "Come on, Elly, snap out of it. We've got to get going!"

Red-nosed and sniffing, she finally managed to write a note to Berenice in Latin, and one to the Commander in English, apprising him of the situation outside the walls of his palace prison. Enclosing one within the other, she entrusted the mission to the stoutest and most resourceful of her remaining Iberians. Ordering him to leave by climbing the portico balustrade and climbing down the face of the Cispian hill on which it fronted, she hoped, he would be able to evade the spies and sentries at the street entrance.

"We'd best leave together," said Mack. He had pulled from under the bed a small but apparently heavy suitcase and was checking its contents. He noted Elspeth peering at some of the odd gadgetry it contained—gadgetry utterly alien to her experience. He said, "I was going to turn this stuff over to Mr. Horelle, but if we're going to blow up Vesuvius we'll need a few explosives."

"Heavens, Mack, I'd forgotten!" said Elspeth, realizing the futility of her swift planning unbacked by Mack's practicality.

"We'll give 'em something to remember us by," Mack said grimly, closing the case with a snap and checking its fastenings. "It's a good thing I brought a few samples with me when I scrambled."

"Yes, Mack," she said, wanting desperately for him to hold her in his arms and give her, however briefly, the illusion of safety.

But Mack's mind was not on her. It was on avenging Lamia's murder and, more intently, upon their making a getaway. He eyed Elspeth's clothing, then his own, shook his head. Then, from another suitcase, he procured coveralls of some light, warm material, evidently of Heartland origin. He tossed her a pair.

They quickly got into the more practical garb of a more advanced version of that on her own Earth. The Iberian procured a stout rope and after fastening it to a pillar of the balustrade, they began their descent.

The cuts on Elspeth's hands from her climb out of the crater a few days earlier were quickly reopened by the coarse fibers of the rope and the rough bark of the trees that got them down the hill. But she barely noticed the injuries in her desperate hurry. The Iberian led, with Elspeth second, and Mack and suitcase bringing up the rear. Each time the Iberian reached firm footing, Mack would hand the bag down to Elspeth, who would transfer it to the slave below. Then they would begin the slow process all over again.

They parted company on the Via Subura, the Iberian darting into an alley to work his way toward Berenice's palace. Mack and Elspeth, their coveralls now hidden by toga and stola, carried the suitcase toward the river and the small naval basin on the Tiber River island across the Pons Fabricius. As far as they could discover, their flight had not been watched and they were not followed.

The nightmare continued for Elspeth as they fought and pushed their way through foul-smelling, half-drunken street

crowds. They worked around the fringes of the great Forum to avoid being spotted by agents of their foes.

Once they had to pause while a legion, recalled from the provinces, marched across their path on their way to the Palatine. And despite the urgencies of their situation, the poetess could not help but thrill at the sight of the eagles and fasces, the reflections of torchlight on glittering bronze-and-steel armor and helmets and weapons, the raw stirring notes of the immense curled horns and the measured tramp of heavy service sandals on cobblestones.

Mack shook her roughly to snap her out of her reverie as the last detachment of legionnaires marched past. "Come on," he urged, "let's step on it."

When at length a sentry challenged them at the Fabrician bridge the game was up to Elspeth entirely—for Mack, of course, could not speak Latin. Asking to be taken to the Admiral, she was informed that he was asleep on his flagship and could not be disturbed. But she finally managed to be taken to the officer on the watch aboard; there she raised such a clamor that at last old Pliny appeared, blinking away sleep. Immediately he had Mack and herself taken to his cabin.

"Nice going, Elly," Mack said softly, and she felt much like an Arthurian knight just promoted to Round Table status.

Within half an hour they were under way, the gilded wooden flagship with its single bank of muffled oars, shipped mast and furled single sail cutting through the smooth water in magic silence. Standing on the poop, with Mack at her side, the poetess watched the glowing reflections of a city alive with torches and flambeaux as they barely made clearance with shipped oars under the low Tiber bridges.

She caught a glimpse of the eroded walls of the Aventine palace, silhouetted against the glowing night-sky of the city. All about it glowed the fires of the encamped legions, supposedly bivouacked for the funeral and coronation processions, but actually sealing de Mestres' men and machines with an airtight ground blockade.

She wondered what would happen if de Mestres decided to take action and sent his flying armor over the walls, spit-

ting flame and missiles at the primitive weapons of the legionnaires. It would provide a spectacle never before recorded in the history of any of the worlds—a spectacle far more horrible and magnificent than any the new-built Colosseum of Rome would ever know.

"I hope the Martinez can get Titus to keep his boys in hand," said Mack looking worried. "A blow-up now would queer the works."

"I wish we had your pipit," replied Elspeth illogically.

"You and me both," replied Mack. "Look at the way they make those poor devils sweat!" He nodded toward the half-open decks ahead and below them, in which they could see the scarred and sweating backs of the oarsmen, bending to with a will under the threat of the lash.

"It looks like a cinema," said Elspeth. "It can't be real."

"It's real, all right," said Mack gloomily. "And if we don't knock these Heartland so-and-sos out of the picture these people are going to be in for a lot more of it. Our friends didn't wreck their own world by being humanitarians."

"A pity!" exclaimed the poetess. "Think of the chance to watch the culture of a world develop, to see its artists at work, its builders, its philosophers, its spiritual leaders! Think of the understanding it would give us for all other worlds!"

"Yeah," replied Mack drily, "and think of all the famines and torturing and wars and pillage and rape and disease this world will know if we don't step in and give them a few of our benefits!"

"It might be worth all that," said Elspeth defensively.

"You can say that," Mack retorted, "because you aren't one of them. How would you like to starve or die of some plague or—or have your head cut off simply because we didn't step in and speed up the growth process? Would you really enjoy it?"

"You're right, of course," replied Elspeth, a trifle sadly. She thought of Lamia, who had died for her so recently, of some of the inhuman horrors she had been compelled to witness at games in the Colosseum.

They reached Ostia well before dawn and without incident. There they transferred, along with the Admiral, to a

huge swift trireme, whose prow and stern were too lofty to pass under the Tiber bridges and whose oarsmen were fresh and unwearied by the pull downriver.

Dawn was rising when they put out from the harbor at the mouth of the famous stream. Behind them were the still-dark fronts of the surprisingly tall four-and-five story warehouses and apartment buildings along the waterfront. They moved serenely among the scores of galley and smaller craft, the bright colors and giltwork of their ornate sterns and figureheads reflecting the first rays of early light.

But once in the open water of the Tyrrhenian Sea, they struck rough water and favorable winds. The great sail went slowly up the mainmast, billowing like some immense pink parachute as it filled. Oars were shipped and the big war vessel plunged through mounting waves at a good clip without manual aid.

Elsbeth descended to an aft cabin, where Mack, under the inquisitive regard of the Admiral, was assembling a bomb from materials hastily brought aboard before they left Ostia. He seemed unmoved, as was Pliny, by the rolling and pitching of the galley and went about his work with methodical efficiency.

Elsbeth was forced to act as interpreter between the curious Pliny and her colleague. "What sort of a machine are you making?" she asked. "Our pal here wants to know."

"Tell him," said Mack, rubbing an arm across a grimy face, "that I'm trying out a sort of gun cotton to be triggered by a couple of Heartland percussion caps. You might ask him if he hasn't an atom bomb stowed somewhere in his hold."

Elsbeth repeated this message in Latin as best she could. Turning to Mack, she asked. "Do you think it will do the work?"

"It ought to kick up a bit of fuss if Vesuvius is active at this time on this world," he replied. He added, "And if we can detonate her deep enough down the shaft. Now shut up and let me work."

Later, lying on a bed of torment because of the unfamiliar rocking of the boat, the poetess felt intense homesickness for

Lamia and the care and service to which she had become accustomed in her nine-odd weeks of residence in the Admiral's Cispien hill villa. Tears rolled down her face as she recalled the slave-girl's gaiety, the unswerving devotion with which she had sacrificed her life for her mistress.

After a while, mercifully, Elspeth slept.

Thanks to the following wind, which stayed with them all the way, they were able to make the harbor at Misenum late the following afternoon. While the galley was rowed through the calmer waters of the Bay of Neapolis, Elspeth recovered somewhat from her malaise of the night before and, after downing a bowl of broth, managed to pull herself together and stagger upon deck.

There the fresh salty air revived her further, as did the magnificent sweep of the bay, dotted with villas of pink and white and pale blue and backed by the Fuji-like cone of the big volcano. The panorama reminded her of murals in a Chelsea or Greenwich Village Italian restaurant with its gay bright colors and knife-sharp contrasts between dark and white.

Truly, she thought, there was beauty in this fantastically retarded world—beauty of spirit and feeling as well as in outer garb. Her own emotions soared anew and she watched Mack directing a quartet of brawny picked sailors as they gathered the explosives together.

"Think you're up to the climb," Mack asked her when they stood on the pier. She nodded. After a doubtful moment he said, "Good—after all you've been up there and I haven't. I'll get you a burro."

Slowly they made their way up the foothills of Vesuvius as the sun set behind the massive shoulder of the sea in back of them. As twilight thickened into darkness, Pliny exclaimed when Mack produced a powerful electric torch to light their way up the mountain. His aide and the three sailors who made up the rest of the party murmured uneasily at this sudden magic.

"Tell them it's okay," said Mack. "I'd let them use torches. But if our Heartland pals should come through, I want to turn this light off in a hurry. Tell them it's good magic."

Elspeth did as best she could. Their initial surprise over,

the men seemed to accept the flashlight with increased faith in the purpose of their mysterious assignment. But Gaius Plinius Secundus' questions were a lot harder to answer. Ultimately she had to serve as harassed interpreter while Mack tried to explain the functioning of an electric flashlight to the scientist-admiral.

They were within a few hundred yards of the near rim of the crater when a droning sound from within it caused Mack to douse his light quickly. He snapped an order to Elspeth to tell the others to hold still where they were. She had barely repeated it when a beam of light rose from the crater and a sharp-nosed Heartland aircar came bursting out of the mountain and rose rapidly in the heavens.

"Damn!" Mack exploded. "We're too late."

"Wait—we'd have seen them all coming through if they were really operating," replied Elspeth more hopefully. "If this is a single scout it will go back for information and further orders."

Mack ignored her suggestion and burst into lurid profanity as the picked sailors, terrified at sight of the Heartland aircar, decamped noisily, shouting their alarm as they stumbled and ran down the side of the mountain. Mack, the Admiral and Elspeth remained alone with the burros.

"Some mob you've got!" Mack exploded at the Admiral.

Elspeth, not wishing to make a bad situation worse, said in Latin, "It's a pity your men are not as staunch as yourself, Admiral."

"They have not been educated to the scientific mind, which is curious rather than afraid of the unknown," replied Pliny shortly, through the chattering of his teeth. Admiring his bravery in terror, Elspeth felt warm sympathy and liking for her prosy and somewhat dull little sponsor in the Eternal City.

"You may be right, Elly," said Mack suddenly at her elbow. He pointed at what seemed to be a shooting star falling toward the top of the mountain. The Heartland craft was that of a scout, after all. It was returning to the transfer point to report its successful passage into *Antique*.

When at last it vanished below the rim of the crater, Mack said, "Come on—let's put the show on the road. Elly,

skin a couple of those damned mules. At least they didn't run."

"Burros—not mules," said Elspeth, as she grabbed hold of a couple of halters. Moving at a fatiguing pace, Mack led his two remaining companions rapidly up the steep slope that led to the shaft in the volcano.

When at last they peered cautiously down into the immense shaft, it was empty and dark as if nothing had transpired within its perpendicular walls. The Admiral stared down into it as if stunned, then said to Elspeth in his flawless Latin, "I am afraid of what you are about to do—yet I am more afraid of the machine that disappeared."

"It's got to be done," Elspeth told him practically, her own resolve having hardened at the sight of the Heartland aircar. Then, in English: "Mack, we'd better get this business over with. More of them will be coming through at the next opening of the portal."

"Right," said Mack. Then, in the act of unleashing the packs on the burros: "You know, Elly, this isn't a very good gateway from the point of view of putting a large-sized expeditionary force through. They have to come single file—not all at once like Commander de Mestres and that force of his."

"I hadn't thought of it that way," said Elspeth, staggering under a bulky package which Mack shoved into her arms. Yet his optimism did much to lift her own spirits. Mack's usual approach to any problem was in a mood of skeptical pessimism.

He took at least a quarter of an hour to assemble his bomb and encase it in three layers of beef-hide to protect it from damage as it rolled into the crater. He had encased the timer—a shockproof Heartland super-gadget—in the gun cotton itself as an added precaution against breakage after setting it twelve minutes ahead.

Finally, while the timer ticked faintly and ominously, he sewed the outermost of the hide coverings together. This done, he gave the outsized volleyball that resulted an almost careless push that sent it rolling over the edge and deep into the bowels of the Earth.

"Here's hoping she works," he said with a smile, holding up crossed fingers. "If she doesn't—"

"Look!" Elspeth pointed down into the crater, where the familiar shelf was suddenly ablaze with artificial light as a Heartland air-cruiser suddenly appeared. It was an ugly-looking ship, boasting a number of turrets and gun emplacements from which protruded the ugly muzzles of exotic cannon mounted singly and in pairs.

"By all the gods, including even the Christian!" exploded Pliny, gazing at the scene below with his mouth agape. "What manner of thing is that?"

"A very bad manner of thing," said Elspeth. Mack, she saw, had removed his toga in favor of his coveralls and she did the same. Then, moving swiftly and letting the burros roam as they would, the three of them began their descent down the steep side of the volcano.

"The further away from that ship we get the happier I'll be," Mack panted. "What a deadly looking job! I've never seen that one before."

"I hope they haven't got many like her," said Elspeth.

A little further on, as they stopped for breath, she felt a faint jar in the volcano beneath them. "She went off," said Mack. "Now we'll see what—"

He stopped talking as, after a long moment of silence, the mountain began to shake more violently and a hissing roar sounded through the thickness of its side. Almost at once a shriller sound made itself heard—or rather felt.

"What's that?" the poetess asked, beginning to be frightened.

"A ship—trying to get altitude in a hurry." A grin flashed across his battered face. "We must have kicked up some hell with that gizmo." He laughed and added, "Hell, it was put together with spit."

The Heartland cruiser suddenly appeared above the rim of the crater, from which a redder glow than the vessel's headlights was beginning to make its fitful appearance. The ship shot directly upward and seemed to hang in the air perhaps a hundred yards above the summit of the volcano, its rocket tubes ablaze.

Then, with a roar too loud for human ears, the mountain

seemed to explode. A sudden burst of bright white flame shot directly upward into the sky. It caught the Heartland cruiser and, for an instant, there was a blob of extra brilliance in the pillar of heat. Then—nothing but nature blowing her top.

X

ELSPETH CEASED playing the role of spectator as panic overwhelmed her. Racing, she stumbled and rushed down the mountainside. More than once she fell, only to pick herself up, panting, to continue her flight.

To her left a blazing fragment seemed to settle slowly to the ground—only to land with a crash that sent flaming tracers rising in all directions. She cried out and flinched as something stung the side of her neck. Her racing footsteps veered to the right, only to be turned again as another ball of fire struck and flared up almost in her face.

She shook free as a hand gripped her shoulder; she struggled against arms that swept her off her feet. But she relaxed when Mack's voice penetrated her terror with, "Not a chance that way, Elly. Here!"

She was being carried upward, then across level ground, then dumped unceremoniously under a sheltering rock overhang; Mack scrambled in beside her and held her close against his chest until some measure of rationality returned. At last, utterly wrung, and for the time being, beyond terror, Elspeth finally managed to say, unevenly, "Sorry, Mack—I didn't mean to—"

"You and me both," he replied. "If I hadn't seen you running right into those fireballs I'd still be running myself."

The area was still being bombarded in a display of cosmic pyrotechnics. Fascinated, Elspeth watched it, then said: "At least it doesn't look as if Pompeii and Herculaneum were going to be buried in hot ashes this time."

Mack shrugged, replied, "It's too early to tell yet." Then, peering at her: "You got a blister on your neck."

Elspeth felt the mark left by the blazing volcanic spark and first became aware of the pain. She looked around, then asked: "What about the Admiral? Where is he? Is he okay?"

Mack shook his head and said quietly, "Afraid not, Elly. One of those flaming hunks of rock landed on him."

She buried her face in her hands. In a way, though she had really seen little of him, she had become fond of the

resident-Watcher. Wearily she considered the deaths that seemed to be as much a part of an interplanetary mission as of a major engineering project. She wondered if the good the Watchers did in any way compensated for the loss of even one first-class life. Or did they do good?

The mountain shook dangerously beneath them, and less sharp but longer explosions sounded from the crater. "How does it look, Mack?" she said. "Think we're going to get out of this?"

Mack opened his hand and said, "I'd hate to make a bet on it. But let's take a look. The fireballs seem to have stopped."

They moved out from beneath the overhang to study their situation. Elspeth discovered that they were on a jutting outcrop from the general slope of the mountain, almost a spur. There was a level surface, a sort of tiny plateau, in front of their rock shelter. It was perhaps fifty feet in length and thirty feet broad at its widest.

Looking back at the crater, Elspeth again felt the grip of panic. What looked like white-hot liquid was spilling out over the brim, its flow blanking the stars. Even as she watched, its area spread unevenly down the side of Vesuvius. It seemed to be flowing directly toward the little plateau on which she and Mack stood.

"Mack!" she cried, pointing to it. "Let's get out of here."

He turned reluctantly and his face was grim against the light of the glowing lava. He pulled her to the edge of the plateau for answer, and pointed beneath. "Looks like we're stuck," he said, shouting into her ear to make himself heard as the mountain boomed again.

She felt her heart do a nose-dive. Another crater had been opened by the force of the induced eruption, and already lava was spreading from it down the hillside beneath them. They were cut off, isolated on the plateau.

They sat down under the rock overhang once more, finding solace in each other's company. They could do little talking, even if they were of a mind to—the volcano was making far too much noise. After a while they went out again to see how things were going. They discovered, during a lull in the sounds that had been enveloping them,

that they were now on an island, completely surrounded by rising flows of lava.

"Not so good, is it?" said Elspeth, fighting the trembling of her lower lip. What she really wanted to do was bawl like a baby.

Mack didn't bother with answering. Instead he looked at her closely, almost as if for the first time. He said, "You know, Elly, now that I've gotten used to you, you're a sort of attractive gal."

"So what do we do now?" she said, inexplicably resentful of his appraisal. "Go back to our cave and make animals of ourselves?"

"It's an idea," he replied. "After all, we haven't much time."

Perhaps it was the practicality of the proposal—perhaps it lay in its coldness, in the fact that Mack had made no mention of love . . . Yet whatever the reason Elspeth, who had for long months wanted nothing more than Mack's embrace, felt suddenly, irrationally, furiously angry.

She said, "Drop dead, will you?" At once she felt sick for her words.

Mack eyed her a moment longer, then shrugged and dropped his cigarette and ground it out carefully underfoot as if afraid of starting a forest fire. He said, "Stay out here if you want to. Me, I'm going back under the rock and try for some shuteye."

"Somebody ought to keep watch," Elspeth replied.

"For what? A fairy godmother riding on a star-beam to rescue us with a wave of her wand?" He left her.

As soon as he was gone, she felt a quick clamoring urge to run to him. Knowing him, she felt certain he had come as close to telling her he loved her as he was capable of doing. *Now that I've gotten to know you, you're a sort of attractive gal—* These were supposed to be words of passion to make any girl melt proudly into his arms! Yet she had a suspicion plenty of girls had so melted with even less provocation. She cursed herself for being seventeen kinds of a romantic fool. After all, she rebuked herself, she was scarcely a prize.

While she stood there, the lava continued to narrow the

confines of their little plateau. The explosions had ceased for some time, and a dark, smoke-blanketed dawn was no more light than the night had been around them.

Elsbeth thought of Mack, lying there, awake and afraid, waiting for her to come to him. She thought of Lamia and the Martinez and certain others she had known about. She decided that if he really wanted her, he was going to have to call for her.

And then, in a brief clearing away of some of the clouds that swirled about them, Elsbeth saw blue sky—and, crossing it, a helipit with its rotor vanes whirling. She raced to the rock to get Mack and bring him out to help her signal. She found him sound asleep.

She tried to waken him, gave it up, then ran back herself into the open, where she jumped and danced and waved and shouted. But the helipit sailed serenely on into the dark clouds, and the lava continued slowly to rise. . . .

"What's all the excitement?" said Mack, suddenly emerging at her shoulder. "Why'd you want to wake a guy up?"

"You fool!" cried the poetess in utter exasperation. "One of our planes just flew over. If you'd been out here he might have seen us—and—and taken us off this horrible place."

"Huh?" said Mack, squinting. Then, as awareness came: "Holy smokes! Your messenger must have got through to your gal-pal."

"And she got through to de Mestres," said the girl exultantly, herself beginning to understand what sight of the helipit meant.

"And meanwhile we're still here," Mack said grimly, sending her recently uplifted spirits plummeting. He hesitated, then touched her arm lightly and added: "I'm sorry about the way I talked earlier, Elly. You must have thought I was treating you just like another female who happened to be here. Actually I—well, I . . ." His voice trailed off, and his already burned face reddened in embarrassment.

"Mack . . . *darling!*" cried Elsbeth. "You don't have to say it. I'm the wordy one of the two of us."

"You sure are," said Mack. Without further ado, he swept her into his arms and sought her lips with his own.

An amused voice brought her out of it—a voice that said almost in her ear: "You two trying to start a volcano of your own?"

Sergeant Carhart was leaning through the door of a helipit, hovering no more than a foot above the little plateau. As they scrambled inside, the sergeant said to Elspeth. "Lady, I didn't know you could dance. Not till I saw you down there through the smoke."

It was Elspeth's turn to blush.

According to Sergeant Carhart, the situation in the city was still a stalemate. "We could cut through them legions like butter, but the C.O. don't want us to tip our hand," he said. "He got your message yesterday and sent me and a couple other scouts out last night." He looked back at the inferno now far behind and beneath them. He added, "You mean to say you kicked up all that?"

"With an assist from nature," said Mack quietly. "What are you going to do now? Land your ships outside the city and wait for evening?" He nodded to the other two helipits that had fallen into formation on either side of their own vehicle.

"Looks like we won't have to wait," said the sergeant, glancing ahead. The whole of Italy, from the Appennines to far out over the Tyrrhénian Sea, was shrouded in an enigmatic bank of cloud. "We'll zero right in to the palace courtyard."

"First time I ever enjoyed a fog while flying," said Mack. He gave Elspeth an odd, half-speculative, half-embarrassed look that caused her face to feel hot again, then curled up in his seat and went to sleep.

The poetess was still too keyed up to doze off—and there was little time. In a mere matter of minutes they were dropping through the mist over Rome, with jets cut off and rotor vanes whirling softly.

The troops in the palace courtyard had not been idle since Elspeth had last left them. The atmosphere had changed from one of restlessness to one of tense anticipation. Uncovered gun muzzles covered the walls, and sentries with automatic arms were posted everywhere.

In his office, after expressing relief at their rescue and

receiving thanks from Elspeth and Mack, Commander de Mestres said bluntly "Things are going to pop here any moment now. We checked a half-dozen raids on the walls last night. They've got six legions—about twenty thousand men—surrounding us now, and I'm afraid a full-scale assault is in the cards."

"What are you going to do?" Mack asked.

"You can't shoot them down!" exclaimed Elspeth. "They haven't a chance against your weapons."

The chunky Commander shook his head and said quietly, "Who said anything about shooting? We've been waiting for word about you two. Now we're going to put on a demonstration before we take off for Silesia. We're just waiting for better visibility."

"But I—" began Elspeth and checked her speech abruptly.

"Unless we bungle it you'll have plenty of opportunity to get your work assembled, Miss Marriner," de Mestres told her. "We don't intend to send all our forces north."

"Thanks, Commander," said Elspeth. "I do have much to complete of my original assignment."

"You've certainly saved the day for us on ours—you and Mr. Fraser," de Mestres said. "I'm leaving Captain Johnson in nominal charge here—he's coming along nicely now—with Sergeant Carhart in actual command. I think they'll be able to give you any protection you need. Now, what happened to the resident-Watcher?"

Elspeth and Mack told de Mestres about the death of Pliny in the eruption. They were still discussing their mission to Misenum when Captain Johnson, wearing a much smaller head-bandage than the one Elspeth had contrived for him, entered and said: "The clouds are lifting, sir—and from the look and sound of things outside the walls, a general assault is being prepared."

"Okay, Bill—stand by," said the Commander. Pulling a desk microphone close, he said "Now hear this—" and began giving his men detailed orders in a quiet, assured tone.

Johnson came over for a hurried handshake with Elspeth. Somewhat sheepishly he said, "I understand you brought me back alive, Miss Marriner. Thanks is a poor word under the—"

"It's still Elspeth to you," she told him. "Anyway, Bill, it wouldn't do to let you go to waste; you're much too good looking."

He blushed and turned to Mack and said, "I hear I owe you my life too. Maybe I can return the favor some day."

"Maybe—but I hope not," Mack snapped. Elspeth was pleased at the thought that he was actually jealous of the handsome young captain.

But there was small time for personal byplay. Things began to happen rapidly as soon as de Mestres pushed back the microphone and rose from his desk. Somehow the poetess found herself in a small observation helipit with Captain Johnson and Sergeant Carhart. Mack had accepted the Commander's invitation to come along as a passenger in his own command-vehicle.

"Hurry, miss," said Sergeant Carhart, hoisting her into the observation pipit as Captain Johnson already had it off the ground. As she scrambled aboard, the poetess saw the plumed helmet of a Roman legionnaire appear in silhouette above the top of the wall. It was followed by other helmeted heads at a number of other points where scaling ladders had evidently been set.

There came a hoarse shout from the swarming attackers as the entire squadron of alien vessels rose slowly into the sky and spread out, hovering in formation above their astonished ranks. Horses reared at the sight of the strange "creatures" in the air.

Beyond the clustered ranks of the encircling Roman soldiery, the population of the Eternal City swarmed in the narrow streets and wide squares. They clustered like an endless insect swarm atop every building that might afford them a view of the battle.

Commander de Mestres' voice, strangely amplified and speaking rather halting Latin, said: "*Citizens of Rome—we have not come here to do you any harm. The weapons at our command are capable of wiping out your great city in a matter of minutes. Regard closely the abandoned grain elevator beyond the Capitoline Hill . . .*"

It was a beautiful maneuver. A gun lashed flame from every one of the flying vehicles as the Commander gave his

signal. For a split second that seemed to hang on forever in the poetess' eyes, the indicated structure stood, apparently unharmed. Then, in a flash of flame and smoke that sent thunderous peals of sound echoing through and above the city, the elevator ceased to exist. As the fumes of the blast rose lingeringly in the air, where the abandoned building had stood was nothing but a blackened cellar pit.

"T.O.T.—perfect T.O.T.," said Sergeant Carhart ecstatically.

"What's T.O.T.?" Elspeth asked him.

"Time on target," said the Sergeant patiently. "It means every shell or charge was set to strike the same target at the same instant. I never saw it done prettier."

"Look below," suggested Captain Johnson in his slow Southern drawl. "Our little show seems to have kicked up a hell of a fuss."

The remark was an understatement. Panic was beginning to sweep the streets and housetops alike. The legionnaires were scrambling away from the abandoned Aventine palace as if they feared annihilation by devils—and their fears were communicated to the mob. Horrified, fascinated, the poetess watched a careening two-horse military chariot run over a dozen or more people in a street directly beneath. A wake of figures was left on the pavement, some struggling, some still.

"Stop it!" she cried involuntarily. "Somebody stop it!"

As if on cue, Commander de Mestres' amplified voice sounded again, sternly. In Latin, he said, "*You will cease your attempts to flee or suffer the consequences. We shall do you no harm unless we are attacked. See that you do not harm yourselves.*"

They watched the panic slowly subside as, after a half-dozen repetitions of his message, Commander de Mestres finally managed to get some sort of authority over the stampeding multitude. Then, when comparative calm was restored, a large body of the squadron suddenly closed ranks and rose high in the air before cutting in jets and heading at full speed toward the Silesian mines and gateway.

A score of vehicles, including that in which the poetess rode, then returned to the Aventine palace courtyard and

came to rest within the shelter of its walls. A handful of sentries, who had been left to guard the palace, greeted them curiously, wanting to know how it was going.

"Like silk," said Captain Johnson after assisting Elspeth out of her plane. "We put the fear of God into them all right."

"Where's Mack?" the poetess asked, only to realize that, deliberately or otherwise, her colleague had gone north with the Commander. She said a very naughty word that caused Sergeant Carhart to jump as if he'd been stung by a bee.

"Something you want, miss?" he inquired.

"Yes, Sergeant," said Elspeth, mustering the vestiges of her self-control to conquer angry frustration. "I'd like the use of one light vehicle and a driver. I still have work to do."

The flat roof that covered the central portion of Princess Berenice's palace was unguarded when the helipit landed. Elspeth swung easily out onto the flagged surface.

"Wait here," she said to the soldier who had been assigned as her chauffeur. She loosened the blaster at her belt for she had no knowledge of how the attack and panic had been accepted by the city.

Princess Berenice emerged alone from a doorway and moved toward the poetess. Her face was composed but determined; her purple stola swept about her by the breeze and revealed the tininess of her exquisite person. Approaching Elspeth, after a look at the parked helipit and its lounging pilot, she said: "I know now why you have come here, but we greet you in peace and hope for understanding."

The poetess grinned and said the Latin equivalent of "Come off it, honey—you and I are pals."

The Princess was stopped in her tracks. She peered at her visitor, first at the outlandish coverall, then at her face. A small hand flew to her mouth. Then she gasped, "Marina Elspetia—it is you! I thought you had fled the city with the Admiral."

"It's me and I'm back and we've got a lot to talk about," Elspeth said, putting a friendly arm about her hostess'

shoulders. In her new guise she felt little need of standing on former ceremony.

They adjourned to the small chamber off the main ball-room, where previously Elspeth had seen Berenice entertain Titus. There, while wine and fruit were brought, the poetess explained what she could of the parallel worlds, of the Watchers and of her mission. At the conclusion of her account the Princess said, "I'm honored that you have made me your friend. But why do you tell me this?"

"Because our resident-Watcher, the Admiral, died last night in the eruption of Vesuvius," said Elspeth quietly. "I want you to take his place in our service."

"I—a woman?" the Princess countered, overwhelmed. Then, looking oddly at her guest: "But of course—you're a woman too. I—it's just that I've got to get used to the idea." She paused, frowned, added: "Shouldn't such honor go to the Emperor?"

"Definitely not," replied the poetess, "It is Watcher policy of proven worth never to put such power in the hands of an individual who already has great power on his own planet. We cannot risk its being abused—as it was through an error of judgment on the planet from which comes your rival for the Emperor's affection."

Berenice murmured with a steely look, "And Anna Martiana, whoever she may be, is your enemy as well as mine?"

"Very much so," said Elspeth.

"I am glad," said the Princess. Then, with a sidelong look at her guest: "Do all women in your world dress as you do?"

The poetess laughed. "No, Berenice," she replied. "We have all sorts of costumes—including some I feel certain would meet with more approval from you. Now, what's the current situation on the Anna Martiana front?"

"She is to ride tomorrow in the coronation procession," said the Princess somberly. Then, with a glint in her black eyes: "Unless—"

"Unless what?" asked Elspeth with some impatience, tossing into a discard bowl the pit of the plum she had finished.

"Unless Domitianus keeps an appointment with her. They

should be meeting within the hour," Berenice informed her.

"Damnation!" said Elspeth. "If I'd been thinking straight I'd never have recommended such an action. With so much already going on it merely adds a tremendous uncertainty factor."

"I don't understand," said the Princess.

"You will," Elspeth told her. "On most of the other worlds your counterpart got crushed like a millstone between the Emperor and his brother. I'm not going to let that happen to you here."

"What can we do?" Berenice thus put herself entirely in her guest's hands—and Elspeth wished she hadn't.

Before she had a chance to suggest any action, a slave entered and announced breathlessly that the Emperor was approaching the palace. When he had been dismissed, Berenice rose quickly and said, "Marina, you must hide. But I want you close at hand. Quick, get behind those curtains! There's a door in back of them and you'll have an avenue of escape to the roof if you need it."

It was not difficult to read the new Emperor's mood when moments later he came striding unaccompanied into the chamber. His scowl was black, his manner aggressive, his words harsh as he said, "Why, at such a time—with the world threatened by flying devils and on the eve of my own coronation—do you intrigue against me, Berenice?" He flung at her feet the message the Princess had written his brother and added, "Seeking to turn me against by own blood!"

"Nay, sire," said the Princess. "Seeking only to retain your affection—which I have never forfeited."

"Who are you to say that?" countered the furious Caesar. "I have been advised to put you to death. Such is the proper fate of an intriguer against the Emperor!"

"If it will make you happy that I should beg for my life I will do so," replied the Princess proudly, "for your happiness is my sole concern."

Titus' right hand darted to his belt, where gleamed the hilt of a jeweled dagger. Then it fell limply away and he bowed his head and told her, "I cannot lay a hand upon you in anger, Berenice. Would that I could, for it would be far

simpler. Now I must seek some other form of punishment that, in leaving you alive, can bring only unhappiness to both of us."

"And *your* happiness, Highness, is paramount," said a mocking voice from the doorway behind the Emperor. Elspeth felt her breath catch as the Martinez, beautiful, scornful, cold as ice, stepped into the room. She held her right hand in front of her and Elspeth knew without seeing that it contained one of the deadly little hand-blasters of Heartland.

XI

TITUS SPUN about at the sound of the Martinez' voice. He thundered, "You were ordered to remain in your quarters. What are you doing here?"

It was, Elspeth thought during an instant of detachment, an odd situation for the new Emperor of so masculine a world as Rome to find himself in. For three women, counting herself, were at that moment deciding his destiny and that of his world.

Apparently the Heartland leader was as well aware of the nuances as the poetess. Her mocking smile widened as she replied, with a brief mock obeisance, "Seeking only to assure your happiness, Highness—by removing this source of your future grief."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," said Titus, his fury rising. Then, lifting his voice to match: "Guards! Come here at once!"

"I doubt they'll come," said the Heartlander casually. "I took the precaution of bringing some of my own people."

"Your own peo—Is my brother with you?" the Emperor asked.

Elspeth admired the Martinez' nerve. Despite the defeat that faced her, she was making a desperate gamble to hold *Antique*—even an *Antique* sealed off forever from her home planet—by control of the Emperor.

She had evidently sought to turn the trap set up for her by Elspeth and Berenice to her own benefit: first by exposing it to the Emperor, then by conspiring with his brother to take over if Titus, as the event had proved, was unable to liquidate Berenice.

"I am with her," was the reply as Domitianus appeared in the doorway and took his stand beside the redhead. "Surely, as a Roman, it is my duty to see that the Empire is not ruled by a Caesar too weak to set aside a traitorous love."

"I am not and have never been traitorous to Rome," the Princess said quietly.

There was an awkward silence. Then, briskly, the Mar-

tinez took action. Saying, "Stand aside or share her fate, Titus," she lifted her right hand and pointed it toward Berenice.

At that point Elspeth slipped quietly out from behind the curtains, her blaster leveled in front of her, pointing directly at the Heartland leader. She said, "Take it easy, Ana—your play here is finished."

With an articulate cry of fury, the redhead pivoted and blazed away with her tiny weapon. A section of the curtain above the poetess' head and slightly to her left disintegrated in sudden flame. Then her own finger was pressing a firing mechanism and she watched her enemy crumble into ash as the blaster caught her dead center.

The Emperor stared at Elspeth as if at a ghost. He staggered back a step and all but fell over one of the dining couches behind him.

"The Princess Berenice," Elspeth said distinctly, "is under the protection of the visitors of the Aventine palace. Her person is not to be violated by anyone—even Caesar himself. Is it understood?"

Titus nodded in a dazed sort of way, then said, peering at Elspeth, "Ye gods, you're one of them! Haven't I met you before now?"

"In this very room," said the poetess quietly. "It was the night of your return from the provinces of the North."

"The woman poet!" said the Emperor. "I did not recognize you at first in barbarian garb. What have you done to Princess Anna?"

"No more than she intended for Princess Berenice," said Elspeth.

"She murdered her!" cried Domitianus, who seemed to have been reduced to a sort of statis by the horrible sight he had witnessed. "Guards—to me! To me with drawn swords!"

Before Elspeth could make another move, Titus' brother had darted through the doorway to safety. From the ball-room beyond came the thud of many feet, racing toward them. The poetess looked at Berenice and said, "Quickly, we can escape by the roof."

"We'll be trapped like wild beasts," said Titus, seeking a weapon.

"Come!" snapped Elspeth as Berenice reached her side. And to the delight of the poetess, a Roman emperor came at her summons. He refused to hurry, however, despite Berenice's entreaties. Elspeth was forced to plant another burst at the threshold, leaving it a wall of flames and blocking temporarily the entry of Domitianus' armed warriors.

Reaching the roof safely, Titus gawked at sight of the helipit.

The Emperor's brother was just in time to throw a spear at them as the rotor vanes bit the air and lifted them from the flagged surface. The missile passed harmlessly beneath the landing carriage. The pilot grinned at Elspeth and said, "Close, but no cigar."

"We'll fall," cried Berenice, then bit her lower lip as if ashamed of showing the fear that consumed her. Elspeth consoled her, then turned her attention to the Emperor.

"There," she said, pointing at the panorama beneath them, "is Rome—Rome as no other Emperor or citizen has ever seen her before. Look well on your kingdom, Titus, and try to rule it wisely. You will have help, of course. But your reign will be one of the most difficult in history."

Terror fell away as the fascination of what he saw overcame the new Emperor. He looked long while the pilot, at Elspeth's behest, took them on an aerial tour of the Eternal City. Then she said, "See if you can bring us down safely somewhere on the Imperial palace."

Through teeth clenched tightly so that they would not chatter, Berenice said: "Marina, what a world you must come from!"

"It has its problems and injustices, like all the worlds," the girl told her. "But at least we have machines instead of slaves and almost all men and women have a chance to be educated. You will be a key figure in transition here—you and the Emperor. It will not be easy. But I promise we shan't expect the impossible."

Elspeth thought suddenly of Mack, risking his life needlessly in the expedition against the Silesian miners. Damn him! And how like a man to do exactly as he had done. She looked at Titus with disfavor.

He seemed to sense her momentary dislike, for he turned to face her and said, "I shall need time to learn my job. But while I may be wrong-headed at times, I shall always do my best for Rome." He hesitated, then added, "What of Anna Martiana—what was the witch?"

"Just a witch," said Elspeth quietly. Changing the subject she said, "What will you do with your brother Domitian?"

Titus frowned thoughtfully out at the view. Then he replied, "I have not made up my mind as yet—nor do I intend to today. The boy merits death, if only to discourage other usurpers. Yet I am fond of him and know well the merits he possesses. If I find mercy in my heart—as I believe now that I shall—I'll permit him to prove his loyalty with an assignment on the frontier. After all was I too not bewitched by the lady?"

He looked to the southwest, pointed to a column of smoke rising above the horizon and said, "That looks to be an odd sort of cloud."

"Vesuvius is in eruption, Highness," Elspeth informed him. "I came from there this morning. It was necessary to set it off to protect your world."

The Emperor looked at her and said sadly, "I do not pretend to understand what is happening. History knows not its like. But I hope none of my poor subjects is being destroyed by the calamity."

"I trust not," said Elspeth. "The lava flow was not too rapid to block escape. But it saved you from a far worse disaster, Highness."

Titus looked at her a moment longer, then dropped his head into his hands and said no more until just before the gear of the helipit came to rest on the Palantine palace roof. Then he said, looking at them blankly. "The coronation procession must be postponed—but not the games, lest the people riot."

Elspeth glanced inquiringly at Princess Berenice, who had moved into the seat beside the Emperor and slipped one of her slim arms about his chunky body. There was a look of pride in the Oriental girl's expression. She said, "He will be a great Caesar—far greater than the first."

"Yes," said Elspeth, regarding her friend fondly, "we'll

see." Well, she thought, *the probability sequence is being altered early on this planet*. She rejoiced that whatever else happened, her friend Berenice's almost uniformly tragic fate on other, more-advanced Earths had a chance of more joyous fulfillment.

She sat beside Berenice on a high balcony overlooking the Forum when, a week later, the coronation procession was held.

"You'll stay for the games?" Berenice asked eagerly.

Elspeth shook her head. She, who could not stomach a bullfight, had no intention of exposing her sensibilities to the mass slaughter of men and animals that was so much an element of any Roman celebration. Something, she decided, was going to have to be done about this facet of *Antique* civilization. Perhaps American football . . . ?

Doffing stola and gown for the last time, Elspeth got into the slacks, sweater and jacket in which she had first come to *Antique*. Berenice admired her costume violently, although the idea of trousers disturbed her almost as much as it did Titus. In Rome, it appeared, such garb was considered strictly for crude forest primitives.

"But in time I suppose we shall learn to wear them," said the Princess. Then, with a sigh: "We'll have to do something about our hips, though."

"You will," said Elspeth, laughing. "And Berry, dear, you'll be receiving my successor soon."

"Then I shall never see you again?" the Princess asked.

"Who knows?" countered Elspeth. "I shall try to return, if only to learn how your affairs progress."

"Your word on it," said the poetess. "Now I must go. You'll have to learn a lot of things you never even thought of, but you're going to be a fine resident-Watcher, Berry."

"I'll try, Marina."

They embraced and went to the roof, where Elspeth took off in a waiting helipipit, this time driving it herself. She proceeded to the Aventine palace, where Sergeant Carhart and Captain Johnson bade her farewell.

Johnson said, "They're leaving some of us here for a while—latest orders from home. You seem to know the ropes

around here better than we do, Elly—so how about fixing a fellow with some numbers?”

“As long as you use your time to improve your Latin,” said Elspeth laughing.

“Can you think of a better way to learn a dead language?” the Southerner asked. She gave him an introduction to Berenice which frankly stated Johnson’s purpose; she then told him where to take it. Then she asked him what the news was from Silesia.

“None for the last two days,” he replied. “The Heartlanders have been making a fight of it. They got some of their own machines through. We’ve lost some.”

“What about Mack Fraser?” she asked, her heart skipping a beat. And, as he looked puzzled: “You know—the man who got us out of there.”

“Oh!” said Captain Johnson with a grin. “*That* one. He got shipped back with the last message ship two days back. Seems he got hurt.”

“Oh, no!” she cried. “Where is he?”

“I’m right here,” said Mack, strolling into her range of vision. “As to what happened to me, I’d rather not say.”

Captain Johnson’s grin was faintly malicious as he told her, “It seems Fraser here was sent ahead to do some ground scouting on account of he knows the region like a book. When the second group went in they found him hanging upside down in a rabbit trap.”

“Mack!” said Elspeth, trying not to laugh. “How’d you get hurt?”

“Oh,” said the Southerner, his eyes twinkling, “*they* didn’t hurt him. It seems he busted a collar bone when our fellows cut him down. He’s going back with you when you make transfer tonight.”

“A fate worse than death,” growled Mack, and for the first time Elspeth saw the hulk of a shoulder bandage under his shirt.

“You want to change places with me, Fraser?” said Johnson. “I can assure you I’d jump at the chance.”

“Over my dead body,” said Mack as Elspeth giggled. But inwardly, for all the badinage, she felt a deep glow of satisfaction. She was going back with Mack, back to Spindrift

Key in the Carolinas, the place she loved best in all the world, with the man she loved best in all the world.

Nor was her happiness much dispelled when, later, he said: "I don't want you to be getting ideas just because that fly-boy drooled over you. He's been shut up in that palace so long he's island happy—"

"Oh shut up, Mack," she said gently, and kissed him tenderly so as not to hurt his broken collar bone—and for once, during the blackness of transfer, she was not afraid.