

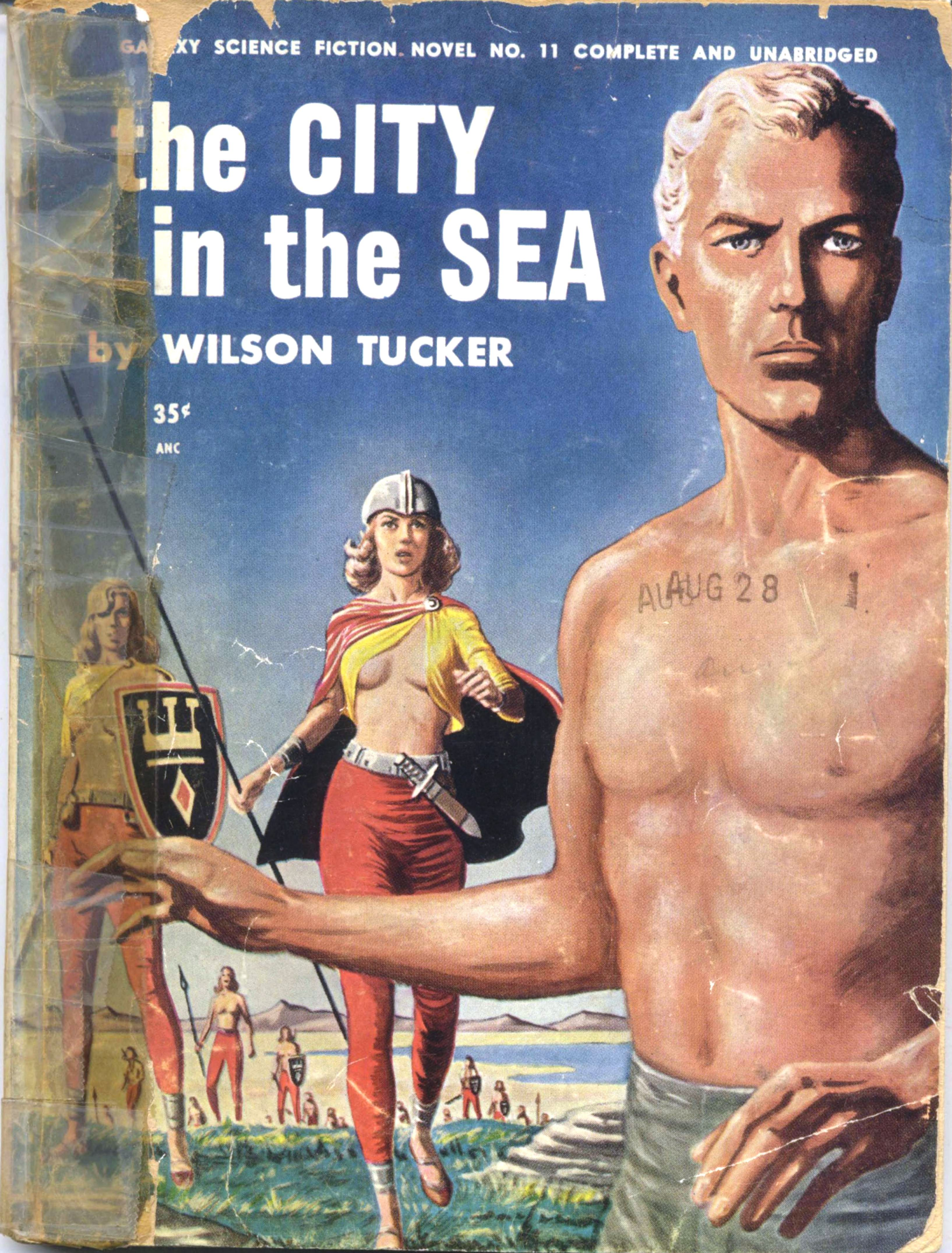
GALAXY SCIENCE FICTION. NOVEL NO. 11 COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

the CITY in the SEA

by WILSON TUCKER

35¢

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THE CITY IN THE SEA

by **WILSON TUCKER**



Who knows whether the strange events of this story might not one day occur?

This is the story of an expedition—a strange and exciting expedition of one man and an army of women.

He had come into the land of the women suddenly—and without warning. Tall, bronzed, muscular, he stood out among their pale skins and meek spirits. And when they learned of the land from which he had come—the land they hadn't even known existed—they had to follow him to it.

One man and an army of women crossing the remnants of a post-atomic United States in search of the Unknown; it was an amazing trek. Miraculous things happened to the women. New emotions rose up to plague them. Once there was a near mutiny. Another time, seven of their number were killed. But it was when they reached the city in the sea that the strangest thing of all happened....

Exciting, imaginative, prophetic, **THE CITY IN THE SEA** is also something rare in science fiction—a compellingly human story.



the **CITY** in
the **SEA**
by
Wilson Tucker

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A compelling human story of one
man and an army of women!

A COMPLETE SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL 1

GALAXY PUBLISHING CORP
421 HUDSON STREET
NEW YORK 14, N.Y.

**GALAXY Science Fiction Novels, selected by the editors of
GALAXY Science Fiction Magazine, are the choice of science
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BOOK ONE

THE future of the world is a political problem, with statesmen and philosophers and plunderers holding sway. But the far-future of the earth is a different thing and firmly in the hands of dreamers and the science-fictioneers. The far-future which the science-fictionist builds is based to a certain extent on the political near-future; probabilities in the one foreshadow possibilities in the other. Changes are to be expected in both.

Mother Nature first invented chain reaction.

Political changes, geographical changes, evolutionary changes, all are to come. Under the terrific impetus of a series of explosions—political explosions—the others will follow. Geographical barriers can arise where none exists now; genetics and its parent, biology, can wear new raiment.

The political future of the world is your life-time. The science-fictionist's far-future may be only a few hundred years away or it may be many thousand. There is no Methuselah around to count the number of their passing.

O n e

HE came down from the low, blue mountains to the west. From the mountains or somewhere beyond them where the silence of a vast, unexplored plain posed a perpetual mystery.

Tall, lean and straight, his body was an incredible brown which contrasted sharply with the coastal natives in the settlement. The guards in the sentry box failed to notice that, failed to see him, and he wandered unmolested through the town. His height, a full foot above the tallest of the natives, and his brown skin stood out among them, caught and held their wondering gaze but with the timidity of their kind, they avoided him.

He was bareheaded, bare chested, and without shoes or protection of any manner except for the knee-length trousers hanging from his waist. That too set him aside from the people in the settlement, marked him as different from all the tribes up and down the great seacoast, whether they lived in towns under the eyes of the soldiery or in the open country.

The stranger wandered the streets of the settlement, watching the townspeople with a keen, inquiring interest, staring at their fires and the few tools they possessed, all the while seemingly fascinated with their mode of living and the various jobs they were doing. He looked wonderingly at their pale, white skins devoid of the sun's coloring, couldn't help noticing the uniformity of their small stature, and paused occasionally to inspect the highly colored clothing worn by both sexes—clothing that covered the natives from neck to ankle.

He was an outsider. They realized that in their first glimpses of him and watched furtively for the approach of soldiers. He wasn't one of their kind—and yet he was. He was of the same race, the same blood. They sensed that in the second glance at his body. He was the same, and yet he was not. The stranger was too tall—none of their kind was ever that tall—

why, he was as tall as the soldiers! His skin was too dark, too bronzed, the color of copper that was worked in the forge. No one in the world, the entire length of the coast, wore skin like that.

His clothing was next to nothing, the cloth of a barbarian; the mountain men who occasionally came down into the settlement for fire wore more clothing than that. It was indecent. And yet, it didn't seem to be indecent. On this stranger the brief garment seemed enough. But the soldiers would have him soon. He couldn't wander around the town like that.

The stranger bided his time.

He paused at an open market and fingered the fruit displayed there, studying with his eyes and the pressure of his fingers the ripe yellow bananas from the far south, a pile of shrunken grapefruit and half-size oranges. He picked up a banana, looked his question at the stallkeeper.

He had no method of payment—that was obvious. The merchant wasn't too sure of the next move. In quick decision, the stallkeeper shot a hasty glance both ways along the street, saw no watching soldiery, and waved the stranger on. Smiling, the outlander picked up the banana and moved on.

He spent almost two hours in the settlement, ranging it from the field's edge where he had entered to the wharfs jutting out into the sea, from the small farms to the north to similar acres on the south. And then he waited. He did nothing, walked nowhere, spoke not a word. He simply waited for something to happen.

He had not long to wait.

A security patrol spotted him.

T w o

DOCTOR BARRA sloshed her way across the parade ground and down the company street to the commandant's office.

The usual evening rain beat down on her head and shoulders, cascading down the waterproof garment tightly wrapped around her body to trickle off onto the high boots she wore. The parade ground was its nightly fine sea of mud, barely holding its surface and semblance of a parade ground because of a thin layer of crushed rock spread over the topsoil.

Barra cursed the rain without any real anger behind the curse. It was always there, every night and morning, and had been there daily since she came to the colony. It was a part of this strange country. She had long ago become used to it, to the always-present grey clouds covering the sky from mountaintop to the sea horizon. It was a rare thing when the sun was observed 'twice in the same month.

The company street was firmer underfoot and as usual lights burned in the commandant's office. A doleful sentry stood guard outside.

"Barra." The doctor spoke to the sentry.

The sentry performed a halfhearted salute and reached past her to open the door. Barra stepped through the opening and closed the door behind her, stamping water from the boots. The raincoat was making a puddle on the floor.

"Top of the evening," she greeted.

A corporal glanced up and grinned.

Captain Zee was rummaging through the desk drawers, her glistening hair barely visible above the surface of the desk. The captain's only answer was a growl. Doctor Barra pulled off the wet garment and hung it on a wooden peg beside the door; the heavy boots were removed to reveal soft sandals. Finally she fished through her pockets for tobacco.

The captain shot up straight.

"You aren't going to smoke that pipe in here!"

"I am," the doctor contradicted. "When you are as old as I am, it's a comfortable thing."

Zee made an accusing face. "You've gone native."

"Umm—probably. I've been here several years longer than you. Wait your turn." She filled the pipe with rough tobacco and lit it, seating herself across the desk from the commander of the colony's military post. "I saw some of the export permits the other day. Judging from the tobacco shipped overseas, half the population of the homeland have gone native."

Zee growled again. "It's a filthy habit."

"Perhaps. But someone at home is getting rich."

"That is none of my affair. I was placed here to operate a military establishment. If the people at home wish to wallow in mud, that is their business."

"Speaking of mud," Barra grinned, "the grounds need another layer of rock. I'd like to see their faces and hear the comment at home when you requisition another shipload." She blew a great mouthful of smoke at the low ceiling. "They bleed this land dry and begrudge every farthing turned back into it."

Captain Zee stared at the smoke. "I sometimes wish," she said absently, "that I had chosen another profession. A politician perhaps, or even a lowly page at the Queen's court."

"You and millions of others," Barra answered. "We picked up a stray today. An outsider."

Zee nodded. "I have the report here somewhere."

"Have you read it?"

"I glanced at it. Why?"

"I'd read it carefully," Barra advised. "This was a man from outside."

"A mountain man," the captain shrugged. "Come down to steal food or beg a fire, most likely."

"No," Barra contradicted again. "This one is far different. I said this one was a *man*, not one of the weak sisters we have along the coast. This one is neither a native of the coast nor of the mountains."

The captain and the corporal stared at her.

"Then where is he from?"

Barra shrugged and said softly, "I don't know."

The two women held a startled silence, watching the doctor. The rain beat down on the roof and in the darkness outside a small body of troops sloshed past, their feet producing a queer, wet slapping on the company street. In the far distance, near the center of the town, a bell struck faintly.

Zee leaned across the desk, her eyes bright with anticipation. "From *across* the mountains—from the other side?"

"Perhaps. Quite probable."

"By the blessed Isles! I'll have to see this." She turned to the waiting corporal. "Get him. Under guard." The corporal saluted and snatched up a raincoat to plunge through the doorway.

The captain rummaged through the paper on her desk, unsuccessfully seeking the report turned in by the security patrol. "What is he like?" she shot at the doctor.

"Tall," Barra said, and watched the captain. "Taller even than you."

The jolt was reflected on Zee's face. "Than I?"

Barra nodded. "By two inches. I told you he was a man. Six and two, by my measurements, and I measured twice to be sure. Weighs a hundred and eighty and has muscles like . . . like . . . well." She spread her hands. "I don't doubt but what he could handle any five of your troopers."

"By the blessed Isles!" The captain searched frantically among the papers strewn over the desk. "How did we capture him? Did he put up a fight?"

The doctor grinned at her. "He did not. The patrol simply walked up to him and said, 'Here now, come along.' And he came. He doesn't understand the mother tongue, doesn't speak a word from what I've been able to determine, but he came along as peacefully as a sheep. Almost as if he were waiting for them."

"An outsider!" Zee repeated in exhilaration. "From over the mountains." She gave up the search for the report. "For eight long years I've lived in this sinkhole, eight boring years of rain and mud. My skin has turned white, and I've lost my ambition. Eight years of lazy, sloppy natives and export quotas to meet, eight years of begging supplies and extras from home. I've swum in the sea and climbed the nearer mountains, I've taken bananas from the trees on the southern peninsula, and I've made ice rocks from the winter snows in the north. And for eight years I've wondered what lay beyond the mountains!"

"My predecessor before me, rest her soul, wondered what was beyond the mountains and never found out. And now, after eight years, I'm going to find out!"

"Perhaps," Barra said.

"And the meaning of that?"

"I've just told you the man can't talk."

"Shamming."

Barra smiled, disarmingly. "There is another way."

"And that is—?"

"We have a guide. Send out an exploring party."

Zee fell back in her chair at the audacity of the suggestion. She opened her red lips to curse the doctor for a fool and then closed them again, the words unspoken. The spark of desire flamed within her momentarily, to be beaten down by training and caution.

"That . . . that is foolhardy," she said finally.

"Zee, look at the map," Doctor Barra turned in her chair and pointed to the wall. "Look at it: a long slice of unknown territory stretching from the snow country to the tropical peninsula. Less than two thousand miles from tip to tip, the Crown Colony of Western Somerset. Two thousand miles—" She jumped from her chair and approached the map, to jab a finger at the northern end.

"Here there is nothing profitable, here a few squalid natives

live off the land in the summer and freeze or starve to death in the winter. And down here it is slightly profitable; here we work metals for export, raise grain. And here we grow apples and grapes, and here tobacco, here cotton, and finally in the far south, fruit such as never grew in the Home Isles. Zee, that is the length of this land, and we know it all. How much do we know of its breadth?"

Barra ran her finger from seacoast to mountain range. "We know this, a paltry few hundred miles. Think of that, Zee, only a few hundred miles and the mountains stop us. And what is beyond the mountains? What does the map show? A great, white empty space labeled 'uncharted.' Zee, don't you see the possibilities?"

"I see a great, white empty space."

"But it isn't like that at all! Recall your history, Zee. Remember the maps of a hundred years or so ago. What were they like? There were the Isles and a narrow channel separating us from the Big Continent, across the channel were colonies of the crown, and behind the colonies, what? More great, empty spaces marked 'uncharted.' All of the Big Continent uncharted, Zee, and the job isn't completed yet! Remember what the exploring parties found there, remember the untold wealth and food they discovered and are still discovering. Look at the map of the known world today for your answer . . . The Isles are there, the channel is there, the colonies are there, but behind the colonies, where uncharted spaces used to exist, whole countries are mapped and open today. That's your answer, Zee."

"The Big Continent and Western Somerset are different."

"But only in one respect—there was no mountain range behind the channel colonies, nothing to stop the exploring parties but the ambition to push. Here, we have the mountains. Beyond the mountains lie great plains—the natives have spoken of the land often."

"The natives also speak," the captain reminded her, "of barbarians who play with lightning and wild men who eat flesh."

"Silly superstition! What do these coastal people know of the interior? They've never crossed the mountains. Before today they had never seen a man from out there. They concoct stories to frighten the young and amuse the old."

"Perhaps, Barra, perhaps. But what makes you think a paradise exists out there?"

Barra shook her head impatiently. "I don't believe it to be a paradise. I'm only suggesting the possibilities of what may be there, as compared to what we found in the 'uncharted spaces' of the Big Continent. Haven't you a drop of gambling blood in your veins, Zee?"

"No."

"Zee, I'm a doctor, I've studied the human body for more years than I care to remember. The security patrol brought the stray to me today, following procedure. I examined this man from the crown of his hair to the nails on his toes. He's a *man*, Zee, the likes of which you and I have never seen. His body is healthy, solid, vital. No—I'm not saying a paradise exists on the other side of the mountains, but I *am* saying there is a land far healthier, far better than this climate we live in. Wait until you see him, see the power in his body. You don't grow bodies like that in blank spaces."

"Doctor, you're acting strangely. I've never heard you talk like this before." Zee stared at the older woman.

"I have a right to act strangely—I'm fired with a sudden ambition, Zee. I want to see what lies on the other side of the mountains!"

A silence fell. Barra smoked her pipe and blew smoke at the ceiling. The captain listened to the rain on the roof and watched the slate-colored smoke curl upward. She seemed not to notice the odor of the tobacco. Outside there was only the

occasional passing of a sentry walking her beat.

Zee's eyes wandered to the map. The Crown Colony of Western Somerset stretched from north to south like a great quarter-moon, with the depths of the ocean on the one side and the mountains on the other. To the north the frozen country stretched out to meet the mountains and beyond that was—"uncharted." No one had ever been into the far north, no one knew what lay there and few cared. To the south the land narrowed down to a thin peninsula where tropical fruit grew, and west of the peninsula the mountains came down to meet the sea. Beyond the mountains and the sea? "Uncharted."

One thousand, four hundred and sixty-two miles from northern blank-space to southern tip: she knew, she patrolled it, had patrolled it for eight years. Eight years ago Captain Zee had won her bars, paid a farewell visit to Her Majesty the Queen, and sailed westward from the Home Isles to the colony of Western Somerset. She had been fired with duty and ambition then, before she sighted the colony, before she saw the everlasting cloud blanket that filled the sky, before her tanned skin had lost its color and turned pale.

The sea was rough for swimming, the mountains hard to climb, there was little else to do but range the coast—one thousand, four hundred and sixty-two miles of it. She covered it, periodically, at first because she wanted to and finally because regulations required it. She watched the natives packing fruit in the south, picking tobacco and cotton, harvesting grain, working metals, growing apples and grapes. And she saw to it that the larger portions were duly shipped home to the Isles, on schedule.

She policed the native population—although little policing they needed, weak, mild people that they were—and kept a constant check on the morale, health and fitness of her troops. That was the extent of her duties because there was nothing

else to do. Up and down, up and down. A few hundred miles wide between the mountains and the sea, and up and down. Her eyes came to rest on the coloration which indicated a mountain range. What might be on the other side?

There had been no talk of it at home. With several thousand other women she had signed up for military service, and from that point on the military was her life, her soul. She hadn't even considered marrying, putting that vague possibility off into the dim, distant future—if ever, when retirement came. The men of the Isles were little better, just a shade better, than the native males she policed. They were a few inches taller, and naturally tanner than the colony natives. They were more intelligent, of course, personable enough, skillful at certain trades. But she had no use for them at the present time.

The doctor had put a strange emphasis on the *man*.

Again her eyes swung to the map, and the uncharted blankness beyond the mountains.

"He offered no trouble, you say?" she asked suddenly.

Barra shook her head. "None."

"Good physical specimen?"

"Perfect. I wish I had his teeth! He is a meat eater, to judge by those teeth. And I'm willing to gamble he doesn't know the meaning of sinus or indigestion or hardening of the arteries. Oh—what a body!"

Captain Zee glanced at her with speculation. "Are you getting homesick?"

"Me?" The doctor was indignant. "I can go back whenever I wish."

"I'm wondering if you've waited too long," Zee said dryly.

"You hear my profession speaking," Barra declared with injured innocence. "Not my heart."

"I hope so. The outlander won't talk?"

"Can't," Barra corrected. "Doesn't understand the language. Would you know his?"

"Why did he come down to the settlement?"

"I don't know. The natives told your patrol he was merely walking around, looking. Sightseeing, as it were."

Zee narrowed her eyes. "Spying?"

"For what? And whom?"

She couldn't answer that. "I wish I knew why he came in. If he is the physical specimen you describe, he is out of place here and surely intelligent enough to realize it. The mountain men never stay—they aren't able to live under these conditions. This man should feel the same."

"As yet," the doctor pointed out, "he hasn't been able to do anything else. Remember that he came down to look and was picked up immediately. By this time he is probably wanting to go back." She puffed on the pipe, and slowly added, "I know I would."

Captain Zee shot her a glance of suspicion and parted her lips to speak. The words were stopped. There came a brief rap on the door and it was pushed open by the returning corporal, water dripping off her raincoat. She came in, followed by two guards and the outlander.

The corporal saluted. "The stray, Captain." And she stepped aside to struggle out of the wet coat.

Captain Zee stared at the man, mouth hanging open.

"Barra! By the saints, he's naked!"

"Not quite," Barra chuckled. "The fellow is wearing breeches, of a sort!"

"But this is indecent!"

"He doesn't seem to mind."

Three

THE captain slowly moved from behind her desk and advanced across the room, to stare incredulously at the man. Doctor Barra watched her, watched the play of emotions on the woman's face. She thought she recognized what she read there. Zee paused an arm's length from the man.

"Barra, he's so tall."

"They probably grow them that way, across the mountains."

"And look at that tan! I haven't seen so deep a tan since—I've never seen anyone so brown."

"The sun shines over there, too. All the time."

Captain Zee finally looked at the man's eyes, looked into them. The double shocks followed one another so quickly they were almost one. He didn't drop his gaze nor draw away from her like the natives along the coast; he held her eyes, seeking and compelling her continued attention. And he shocked her with the intense something—force, life or whatever unknown electrical thing it was that lurked behind the eyes. He stared back at her, calm, insolent and yet attentive.

What were the words Barra had used when describing him? She had said the man was healthy and—vital. That was it, vitality. Standing in the office, quiet and unmoving, all the pent-up vitality in his body was concentrated in his eyes, lurking behind his eyes like the irresistible power of a magnet, drawing her into them. There was something else there, too, something she couldn't immediately recognize, something that didn't belong in a man.

There was an expression in his eyes that was similar to some other thing, something long ago and far away.

He blinked, and she took a step backward. Aware of herself, the focus of examination broadened and she saw that his near-naked body was wet. She turned on the corporal.

"Why didn't you provide him with a coat?"

"I tried, Captain. He refused to wear it, Captain."

"He refused?"

"Yes, Captain. Those on duty at the guardhouse tell me he refuses to wear any of the clothing offered him, Captain."

Barra broke in. "He likes it that way, Zee. That's the way they picked him up and that way he has remained. I don't think he needs clothing."

"But that's madness. He'll catch pneumonia."

The doctor switched her gaze to the man. "I doubt," she stated, "if he will stay around that long."

"He will stay until I release him," Zee snapped.

Barra didn't reply. She kept her attention on the man.

There was silence.

Finally Zee asked, "Has he eaten?"

"Only some southern fruit, Captain. Nothing else."

"Well, we're making some headway, however small. That indicates, Doctor, that either he is familiar with the fruit and will readily eat it, or that it is entirely foreign to him and he must sample it."

"Obviously," Barra commented. "One or the other."

The captain frowned. What had seemed brilliant logic only a moment ago now sounded hollow. Was the doctor being deliberately deflationary? Well, what *was* she going to do with the fellow? If he remained in the settlement—or anywhere along the coast for that matter, he would have to wear more clothes. And if he refused to do so, she would have to send him back to the mountains. Or keep him continually in the guardhouse.

Doctor Barra, apparently reading her mind, said, "I think he'd make an excellent guide."

She arose from her chair and went to the wall map, taking it down from its peg. The outlander was following her movements. Propping the map up on the desk at an angle and holding it there with one hand, Barra pointed to a small spot

on the map which represented the settlement. She had his attention. With her finger, she indicated the coastal town and then pointed to herself. The man waited.

Then Barra held out an empty hand toward him, inviting him to identify himself with the map.

Unhesitatingly, he stepped closer to the map, placed his palm flatly on the mountain ridge a few hundred miles away, and swept his hand westward across the uncharted spaces. He moved his hand all the way west until it reached the wooden molding at the edge of the map.

"That is news," said Doctor Barra.

"It is, Doctor? We've learned only what we've already suspected. That he lives somewhere over the mountains."

"We've also learned," the doctor pointed out, "that he can read maps. Tell me, Zee, when was the last time you saw a native reading a map?"

Zee turned to study the man. She almost made the identification she had been searching for, almost recognized that peculiar thing it was she had seen in his eyes.

Doctor Barra leaned over the desk to pick up a stylus. With it, and still holding the attention of the stranger, she made a few tentative marks on the map to show him the proper use of the instrument, and then handed it to him. He accepted it between thumb and forefinger, delighting her and inwardly confirming another notion she had been holding.

He paused before the map and then brought the point of the stylus down onto the sea, an inch or so to the eastward of the coastline. Rapidly, he sketched in a new coast, beginning very near the present northern tip of the snow country and running the line southward through the sea to the peninsula. When he reached the peninsula he hesitated only a moment, and then drew in a larger, fatter one than the land that now existed.

"And that is supposed to be what?" the captain asked with slight sarcasm.

Barra shook her head. "I don't know. But I'm willing to wager he does." She pointed to the uncharted area west of the mountains and tapped it to emphasize his attention. And again she indicated him.

He waited a moment, studying the broad, white expanse, and then beginning at the far western edge of the map, midway down the middle, sketched in a large body of water. The water was fairly small where he began but as he guided the stylus southward the shores broadened out to become a large sea which flowed to the bottom of the map and merged with the sea already imprinted there. It lapped the mountains just west of the peninsula.

"A sea? Another sea? Is he trying to tell us we are on an island, Barra?"

"More likely, a continent. Study that, will you? If that sea extends all the way up into the middle interior of the country, it will be our great fortune. Do you realize that, Zee? Our ships can sail around the peninsula, past the mountain range, and northward again into the very interior! A great inland sea!"

The man stepped closer to the map and examined the small star which indicated the settlement. Then he very carefully drew another star on the northern shore of his new sea.

"By the blessed Isles! A city, Barra. A city—out there."

The doctor tapped the new city with a fingernail and then directed it at him, asking a question.

Once more the man spread the flat of his hand on the map, beginning at the mountains and sweeping over the entire western area.

"Call him a traveler for want of a better term," the doctor suggested. "Apparently he just roams around." She thought to glance at his feet professionally. "And he has covered

plenty of ground—barefoot.” She glanced up at the man’s face, found his eyes on hers, and almost smiled at him.

He handed her the stylus and stepped away from the map to fold his arms.

“Cheeky devil,” Captain Zee said. “What’s his name?”

The doctor stared at her. “How would I know?”

“He must have some identification.”

“He’s wearing it—just what you see and no more. But I call him Two-eighty-four.”

“Two . . . Why?”

“Case number. He is the two hundred and eighty-fourth stray the patrol has brought in to me. Twenty some odd years ago I was excited with my first one. That first one had a mouth infection; and I haven’t been excited since. Not until Two-eighty-four came along.”

“I know what you’re going to say next—he’s perfect.”

“Glad you agree with me,” Barra said pleasantly.

The corporal was grinning.

“Take him back!” Zee snapped to the guards.

The guards stepped to either side of the man. Unbidden and as though he had understood the order, he turned about to face the exit. The guards faced about and one of them reached out for the latch. Zee stared at his back, astonished.

“Wait!” she commanded, and stepped closer to him. “Barra, come here. Look at this scar.”

“I’ve looked at it. You’ll find it in my report.”

The captain leaned closer. “Not an arrow, or a spear—Barra, this scar was not made with a blade.”

“I know it.”

“What kind of a weapon *did* cause it?”

“That,” the doctor confessed, “I don’t know.” She glanced again at the scar that had puzzled her since the man first came to her attention. “If I knew what caused that scar, I

could tell you a lot of what lies on the other side of the mountains."

Captain Zee sat behind her desk, rubbing the tips of her fingers across tired eyes. Under the closed eyelids there still persisted the images of the man and guards going out the door—the guards hunched in their coats to protect them from the rain, and the man with the water running down his bronzed back, running across the scar.

"Barra," she said finally, "do you believe that?"

"Believe what?" The pipe was going again.

"That an inland sea exists on the other side of the mountains. And that there is a city there?"

"Yes. . . ." She pulled on the pipe. "Yes, I think I do."

"But what kind of a city? Who built it? Who lives there?"

Barra shrugged. "What was the meaning of the coastline he drew a hundred miles at sea? I don't know. I'd like to find out." She glanced at the map. "Perhaps his people built the city, or his ancestors. After all, this country could be hundreds—Now that is silly. This country could be many *thousands* of years old, Zee. It could have been here since the world began or it could have risen from the sea only a half-million years ago. The one thing we should always keep in mind is that *we* are new here. We've been here only half a century. And what is fifty years to one like him who has been here . . . how long?"

"Why haven't we made contact before this?"

"How do we know that we haven't?" the doctor asked pointedly.

Zee stared at her. "Do you think . . ."

"Again, I don't know. This is the only one we've picked up, but it isn't necessarily the only one who has stood in the hills and watched us."

"I've thought of that angle, at least. And I'm worried about

the scar. About some strange weapon we know nothing of."

"I'll admit that is the problem. A problem that has never confronted us before. History is my weakness—I studied it continually, and in all our exploratory operations on the Big Continent, we've never been bested in weapons. But I suppose you know that, too. Occasionally we find a people with a bow as strong, a knife as true, but we've never found anyone who could outshoot or outfight our troops." She blew a great gust of smoke at the ceiling. "And it infuriates me that I cannot identify the cause of that scar. It's an insult to my profession."

"It will be a greater insult to mine if I allow the unknown to exist," Zee said dryly.

"Good! You are thinking of going?"

"Barra, I can't help myself. As long as we lived in comparative ignorance, I could charge up and down the coast as freely as I wished and be content. The known was known, and under complete control. We were the masters here. But now what has happened—a stray appears, a stray of the type we've never seen before. And he carries a scar made by a weapon we've never dreamed of before. Barra, that poses a problem that cannot go unexplored. For our own safety we have to find what—and who—is out there."

"Two-eighty-four," Barra said for no reason.

Zee stared at the closed door. "He has the strangest eyes . . . I saw something in them . . ."

Barra glanced at her.

"I wish I could say just what it was in his eyes . . ."

"He's a meat eater," the doctor told her. "You're apt to see most anything in his eyes."

"It still startles me that he's so tall."

"Six and two. Measured twice."

"Stubborn, and insolent, too. Did you notice that? He has never lived under authority."

"He travels," Barra repeated. "Just travels around."

"Barra . . ." The captain turned as a new thought struck her. "How old would you say he was?"

Barra removed the pipe from her mouth. "I wish you'd find that report and read it. I don't know."

"No, I mean how old would you estimate? After a thorough physical examination you should be able to estimate his age. What estimate did you make?"

Barra shook her head. "None whatsoever."

"None at all? Surely now—"

"Surely, nothing! Nothing is sure where he is concerned. Zee, for the Queen's sake, find that confounded report and study it. That man threw me for an absolute and total loss. I can't tell you how old he is, I can't estimate how old he is. His physical properties simply defy estimation, and that is all there is to it."

Zee stared at her. "As strange as all that? Barra, tell me . . ." She paused and studied the doctor. "Barra, how old did you *guess* he was?"

"You want me to tell you that?"

Zee nodded. "I know you fairly well, Doctor. I know that behind all the talk about professional pride and ethics there is a method. I know that if you can't do a thing one way, you'll do it another if only to satisfy your vanity. And if you've been unable to arrive at a medically acceptable estimation, you've made a layman's guess to satisfy yourself. I want to know what you guessed."

"You won't like it, I warn you."

"What did you guess? How old do you think he is?"

Barra put her pipe down on the desk. "Somewhere," she said slowly, "between one and two hundred years of age."

Captain Zee stared at her, incredulous, and then pushed back in the chair. "That's fantastic!"

"I said you wouldn't like it."

"Oh, but Barra, that's too incredible . . ."

"Of course it is. Like his height, his build, his ability to read maps. Of course it's fantastic. So place him at about your own age if it will make you happy. But I'll keep my guess. One hundred plus."

"No one lives to be that old."

"No one of our race. Zee, when I examined the man I discovered his arm had been broken some time ago. That was my first clue. The bones were expertly set and nicely healed; what startled me was that the bone had been broken about seventy-five years ago." She retrieved the pipe and tapped ashes on the floor. "You still don't see the fascinating aspect: If he is less than two hundred now, and in ripe manhood, what is old age?"

"But if we accepted that, he could . . . he could . . ."

Barra finished it for her. "He could live to be five hundred. Or a thousand. Who knows?" She stuffed the pipe in a pocket and arose from the chair. "Please find that report and read it thoroughly. I'm going to bed—it's late." She paused near the door to struggle into the still wet coat. The captain was staring thoughtfully at nothing on the wall.

"And in the event," Barra said in high humor, "that a notion or two strikes you later, just remember that he is a man . . . all man." She opened the door and went out.

Zee stared after her blankly.

After a while she stood up to walk around the office. She paused before the map and studied the western sea that had been sketched in, turned her attention to the mysterious coastline that didn't exist, and came back again to the tiny new star signifying a strange city. Abruptly she realized that distances were not evaluated—there was not the slightest indication of how far away that sea and that city might be. It wasn't near: he had left a large blank space just beyond the mountains. But it could be hundreds or thousands of miles beyond them. An expeditionary force would have to tackle it

blindly, not knowing the length of the journey.

It would have to live off the land, it would have to be self sufficient, it would have to carry a minimum of baggage. Not more than a few wagons could be spared. Troops? She studied the map of Western Somerset.

It wouldn't be wise to take them all from the same sector.

A few from the north who were due for a warmer climate, a few from along the coastal villages where the populace would not miss them, and a few from the peninsula . . . those would be the best for they would be used to the heat. The sun shone across the mountains all the time. He had a magnificent tan. Not even at home, in the Isles, did anyone acquire a tan like that. Not many women were taller than she, and no men. There had never been a man who reached her eyes.

Eyes.

Abruptly she pulled her coat down from the peg and threw it around her shoulders. The startled sentry outside the door snapped a hasty salute as she sped past. Running down the company street, Zee belatedly realized what she was doing and slowed her body down to a fast walk. Covering the ground at a rapid pace, she came to the end of the street and the doctor's cabin. Zee absently noted a light in the window and rapped on the door.

Barra called an invitation from within.

Zee pushed the door open, stood there.

"Barra, I've remembered what it was."

"Remembered what?"

"That look in his eyes. I recognize it now."

"Oh—that."

"It's intelligence, Barra. That man possesses real intelligence."

"Zee—*why* don't you read my report? I said that."

F o u r

ZEE rolled over on the bed, sat up in the grey light of another day and thought of the prisoner. And then she wondered why her first thought had been of him?

Once or twice while she breakfasted at the officers' table, set at the far end of the long mess hall, she looked up at the troops in the room. They were keyed up. She noted, too, that certain of the officers at the table with her reflected the same new strangeness. She became aware that many eyes were watching her while her head was averted. Afterwards, on the way along the company street to the office, she suddenly guessed the reason for it all.

The grapevine had already passed along the news. An expedition was going over the mountains.

Zee bit her lip and mentally cursed the corporal on duty in the office—no, it couldn't be the girl. She hadn't been there, and even if she had, she wouldn't have been able to read the captain's thoughts. Doctor Barra then? Had the old fool loosened her tongue? Or had the troops merely guessed it with some semi-reliable sixth sense?

She entered the office to find it scrupulously clean, her papers correctly filed and neatly stacked, with the missing report of the stray placed atop the pile. The suddenly busy corporal was studiously laboring over her reports, reports that had never needed nor received so much attention before. Zee spoke her usual good morning and sat down, half amused. The corporal wanted to scale the mountains, too.

"Avon," she said, "bring me the personnel files. I will need picked troops."

"Yes, Captain." The corporal bounded across the room to the files.

"And send in the supply officer and the transport sergeant.

Oh, yes—if you should see Doctor Barra, ask her to come around when she's not busy."

"Yes, Captain!"

Zee stared at the door as it swung shut behind the fast-moving corporal.

"Two-eighty-four," she mused aloud, "the things you are doing to my command." Absently her eyes swung to the wall map and its new additions. As an afterthought, she added, "And the things you are doing to me."

The transport sergeant leaned back against the wheel of a wagon and grinned.

"Three, only three, she said. D'ya know what that means, you chickens? Only three wagons! We're traveling light, fast and far. We're going to sleep on the ground and knock down our food when we find it. We're taking along just enough to hold us during an emergency, and the rest we have to hunt. We're taking only two tanks of water: when we run dry, we drink out of the river. What d'ya think of that? There'll be no tenderfeet chickens on this trip!"

The sergeant, a hefty middle-aged woman, was obviously enjoying herself.

"Three wagons?" someone repeated in the crowd around her. "What about the engines? How about making charcoal out there in the jungle?"

"Engines—the Queen's grandmother. There'll be no charcoal burners on *this* trip. I told you we was traveling light and fast. We won't have time to stop to make charcoal every night. Three of my best teams, that's what she said, three teams and a fourth for a spare. And besides," the sergeant added contemptuously, "it won't be a jungle out there. It's plain, ordinary ground like you're walking on. I saw it on the map. And there's another big sea over on the other side of it. We're heading for the sea."

"When do we start, Sergeant?"

"*We*? Where do you get that *we* . . . are you carrying one? I'm taking five—me and five more. No more than two hostlers to each wagon, that's the orders. The toughest I've got—women who can nurse a horse all night and fight all day, if we have to. I don't want no chickens!"

The supply officer was openly lacking in enthusiasm. She sat on the edge of her bunk and brushed her hair, looking at it in a small hand mirror. Her roommate watched her.

"I'd just as soon remain right here," the supply officer said again. "I haven't the slightest interest in what may be on the other side of those mountains. Barbarians by the hundreds, I dare say. Dirty people. And can you guess what she expects us to do? Live off the land! You know what that means—cleaning and cooking a wild animal of some sort every day, if the troops are lucky enough to bring one down. Dirty way to live."

"Donnie," her roommate said suddenly, "I don't want you to go."

Donnie smiled at her. "Don't worry about it, chick. I'm not going—not as long as I have my wits about me. The night before we're scheduled to leave you are going to report me to the doctor."

"Oh, Donnie, please don't go!"

"Don't get excited, I'm *not*. You should have been there. She's taking three wagons. Can you imagine that, only three? Food and water in one, bedrolls in the second and weapons in the third. Doesn't that sound revolting? Not a single item of luxury, not a stitch of personal belongings except what can be carried on the back. Dirty way to travel. Expects everyone to sleep on the ground at night. The entire troop will be barbarians in a week's time."

"Donnie, if you don't go, who will?"

The supply officer shrugged. "I don't know, and I'm ready

to admit I don't care. That's her worry and she is welcome to it—imagine any intelligent person believing in some wild story told by a barbarian! A sea and a city, indeed! I'm going to make it a point to stop by and look at the stray. I want to see what it is that can cause the captain to lose her senses. A dirty specimen, like as not. They say he was naked when they arrested him."

"Donnie—please make sure."

The officer arose from the bunk and crossed the room, to kiss the girl tenderly first on the tip of her ear and then her lips. "Stop worrying about it, chick. I'm staying right here with you. There isn't anything over the mountains to lead me away from you."

Doctor Barra was running when she reached the door to the commandant's office. The sentry quickly opened it and the doctor tumbled through.

"Vinegar," she half shouted, "tons of it. All the vinegar in the village!"

Zee looked up from the desk, annoyed.

"What are you talking about? And please be calm."

"I'm talking about vinegar—I want vinegar, all the vinegar within miles of here. Requisition every ounce you can find." Barra shut the door behind her and nodded to the grinning corporal. "Morning. Yes, vinegar. Do you know what I lack in medical supplies? Sunburn ointment. In the name of the Queen, who would ever have dreamed of needing burn ointment out here? I haven't so much as an ounce. So we will need vinegar, all the vinegar we can find. The sun shines hotly out there, all the time, night and day for all I know. Consider the tan *he* has!"

"I didn't think of that," Zee admitted, pushing back her chair. She ran the tips of her fingers across her forehead. "This expedition is causing more difficulties than I thought possible."

I have two hundred troops who all want to go, and a supply officer who doesn't." She studied the doctor, worried. "Will vinegar be sufficient? Will it protect the skin from the sun? On these troops, constant sun would be punishing."

"If we can find enough of it," Barra told her, "forget your worries and leave it to me. It will call for special precautions for several days—keep well covered and smear on lots of vinegar. The tannic acid in the fluid does the job. But after perhaps a week the sun won't bother us." She stopped suddenly, and looked anxiously at Zee. "We will be out as much as a week, don't you think?"

"Yes," Zee told her dryly, "we'll be out a week. And perhaps a month after that."

"Ummm," Barra closed her eyes and sat down in her favorite chair. "My arms first, of course, and then I think my legs. My face and neck will take care of themselves."

The captain looked askance.

"The tan, Zee, the most beautiful tan this side of the Home Isles. And after a while—if I had the nerve—I'd wear nothing more than breeches, like the outlander."

"Barra!"

"I haven't the nerve," the doctor assured her, with a wink across the room at the corporal.

"I should hope not."

"What's this about the supply officer not wanting to go? Lieutenant Donn? Who would be fool enough to turn down an opportunity like this?"

"Yes, Donn." The captain stood up and crossed the room, to pause before the map. "I think . . . I think it is cowardice, Barra. It pains me to put it in words, but there it is. Not that Donn has said anything—she's too fine a soldier for that. She hasn't objected, and she hasn't refused to go—in words. It was in her manner after I outlined the needs for the trip. She guessed at once I was planning to include her in the expedition, and her

attitude changed immediately. For some strong reason she wants to stay behind, and I can only suppose it's cowardice."

Barra looked up to find the corporal's eyes on hers. They studied each other silently, for seconds, and then broke their glances, each convinced the other knew her thoughts.

"I can fix that," Barra said.

"How?"

"Soldiers are all alike—the day before you plan to leave, she'll fall back on the old illness dodge. That puts Lieutenant Donn in my department." The doctor grinned wickedly. "I'll prescribe a long vacation, exercise and plenty of sunshine." Very briefly she locked eyes with the corporal. "It cures them every time."

"I don't know," Zee told her. "It has occurred to me that this trip can be extremely dangerous. I'm taking a wagonload of weapons. And it wouldn't be wise to take along anyone who couldn't be relied upon."

Barra shrugged and changed the subject.

"I looked in on Two-eighty-four this morning. *Man!*"

"Did he eat anything?" Zee asked quickly.

"Some fruit."

The captain shook her head. "We can't move for at least a week. He'll starve before then. Confound it, what's the matter with him?"

"If you think he's pining away in durance vile, forget it; he isn't. He seems perfectly content to wait." She looked up and caught the captain's attention. "That's what he's doing you know—waiting."

"Waiting . . . for . . . ?"

Doctor Barra nodded. "Waiting for us to start westward. I sense it when I study him, and despite that I'm not afraid. I'm just as eager to get moving as he is."

"You said something last night," the captain reminded her, "something like . . ." She hesitated and tried to recall the words.

"Oh! When the security patrol picked him up, you said he acted as though he were waiting for them."

"Ummm. Yes, he was doing that, too."

Captain Zee paced the floor. "Barra, you're not of the military; you haven't been trained to think in the military manner. I have. I think a problem through forward and backward before advancing; I examine the risk and then the probable value of my move. And let me tell you, I lay awake half the night puzzling over this stranger, this Two-eighty-four of yours." She paused before the doctor to stare down at her. "And give him a name, Barra. By the saints, we can't call him by a number forever."

"I'll think up a fine one," the doctor promised.

"The thought uppermost in my mind," Zee continued, "is that this entire episode may be a trap. A stray . . . a man comes in from the outside where we never knew people existed before. We never knew people like him existed. He comes into the settlement, he looks around, he waits. He is picked up and put into protective custody. He continues to wait. He is brought into this office and adds something to a map, a tantalizing something we never knew existed before. And still he continues to wait. He is confident we will go out to examine that something he has added to the map. That is why he is so content to wait, Barra. And that is why I suspect this may be a trap."

"Oh, that," the doctor waved cheerfully. "I've thought of that. But we'll never know until too late, will we?"

"Not if I can help it!" Zee hit the desk top. "We will march in full battle dress and on the offensive. My best scouts will walk point, and the dirtiest infighters I have will protect our flanks and bring up the rear." She paused again beside the doctor's chair. "And one other thing. Your precious Two-eighty-four will be under constant observation. Every trooper will have orders to put a barb through his neck at the first sign of trouble."

"Oh, now, Zee!"

"I mean that, Doctor. I will not have a traitor in my ranks, and if that man guides us into a trap, he is a traitor."

"Zee, you're being too hasty. Give him a chance to prove his mettle, at least. If we should be attacked, wait and see *which* side he fights on before carrying out such an order. After all, Zee, there may be things out there which are his enemies, too."

"He'll have his chance," Zee snapped. "One."

She stopped her pacing beside the corporal's desk, reached down to pick up a list lying there. "What have I left out, Doctor? Axle grease, ammonia, compass, coals—I am taking teams, not the charcoal engines—food ~~and~~ water, medical supplies, map-making supplies, poison vials." She directed another remark to the listening doctor. "I'm going to equip the troops with poisoned arrows—in case."

Barra nodded. "But take along the other kind, too. I don't care to eat meat brought down by poisoned tips." She studied the ceiling thoughtfully. "Salt. And citrus fruit."

"Salt, yes. But I don't know about the fruit? It will be difficult to keep."

"You're putting water tanks in the wagons? We can wash the fruit and store it in the tanks. It'll keep for a while. The water will taste, but I don't mind."

Zee eyed the doctor. "You don't mind. I'm glad of that, Doctor. I haven't yet said you were going."

Barra shot up in her chair.

"Try and stop me—just try it. And the woman you leave in charge here will have to report a desertion in the next mail home." She fished around in a pocket for her pipe. "I'm going out there, Zee. Put it down under the heading of medical research. I want to find out how to live to be a hundred."

A hundred. Zee stood looking out the window onto the company street. The man was a hundred or more if one could place any belief at all in the doctor's opinions. Tall, so astonishingly

tall, with intelligence in his eyes. He roved the countryside out there somewhere in nothing but breeches, he traveled barefoot, he ate meat, he bore a puzzling scar on his back, and he was so admirably tanned. And perhaps he was a hundred or more years old.

"Barra," she said thoughtfully without turning from the window, "do you remember the children's fairy tales? Do you remember the story about the magic fountain of youth?"

Barra nodded her head and said, "Ummm." She had packed the pipe and lit it, the fumes drifting through the room.

"Wouldn't it be . . . funny . . . strange if there were such a fountain on the other side of the mountains?"

"No, it wouldn't. I and my kind would be out of business. But Zee, you've made me think of something else. Back home our exploratory parties have never failed to find traces of previous peoples or civilizations. Remember the buried cities they uncovered along the shores of that inland sea in the Big Continent? It occurs to me that possibly, just possibly something of the same sort might be found out there. We might be prepared for that."

"What are you suggesting?" She turned from the window and wrinkled her nose at the tobacco fumes.

"Well, a few years ago you had a trooper stationed here who was something of an authority on things like that. I recall that we spent many pleasant evenings together. Don't remember her name, though. Missed her calling—she should have been an archeologist."

"Oh, yes, that one." Zee put her fingers to her eyes, thinking. "She was an archeologist, completed her term at Queen's College, I believe, and then changed her mind to join the army. What is her name?"

"Perri," the corporal supplied. "Stationed on North Island now, Captain."

"Perri," the captain nodded. "Good woman, good fighter."

She tried to wipe tobacco smoke out of the air with her hand. "Leave that thing at home, will you? I see no reason why Perri shouldn't be included. Barra—do you think there may be buried cities out there? Do you realize what that would mean?"

"Certainly," Doctor Barra replied matter-of-factly. "Perri and I have discussed it many an evening. It would mean some other civilization, or dozens of them, existed and died when the Home Isles were nothing more than wandering tribes. It could mean, Zee, that my Two-eighty-four is the descendant of some race which vanished centuries before the First Queen took the throne." She chuckled. "We've tagged him as a stray, an outlander. What do you suppose he thinks *we* are?"

Zee was staring at the map.

"There might be some sound reason, after all, for his drawing that coastline a hundred miles at sea."

"Ummm. My guess is that the coastline used to be out there. The land sank, and now we are living on the present coastline. But if it sank out there, it may have raised somewhere else. That might explain the mountains behind us."

"I've a mind," Zee continued absently, "to make a request for divers in my next report. If there was a coastline there and if it sank, there might be cities under the sea. Cities are always built along the seas. But, Barra—if there were traces of civilizations to be found in this land, why haven't we found any along the coast?"

"I don't know—perhaps all this area came up from the sea. No, that wouldn't coincide with the new map. Oh, I don't know. Ask Perri."

She arose from her chair and made ready to leave. "Don't forget the vinegar—we'll need it. I'll drop in again this evening."

"Barra . . ." The captain stopped her as she was reaching for the door latch. "Barra, we can't allow the stra—the man to go hungry. Get him some fresh meat."

Barra nodded, a half smile on her lips. "Your wish is my

command. Fresh meat by the ton!"

"Close the door!" Zee snapped.

"Consider it closed."

Trooper Perri stalked into the barracks and dropped her bag on the floor near the door.

"Hi— what's the excitement? Is the Queen coming over?"

"To this place?" a tall woman from the peninsula asked derisively. "Not on your life! And I was beginning to like it down south—I had those scared little beggars running at the flick of my finger. I blew a whistle, and they dumped a basket of oranges in my lap; blew twice, and they made it bananas. And now look where I am! I didn't get my full time out either—only been there a couple of months."

"Tough, chicken, tough," Perrie told her. "I've come back from North Island, and I'm plenty happy to get back. Two months in that frozen hole is more than enough. But what's going on here? The natives actually stir up a stink?"

Somebody laughed. "These *men*? Don't be silly."

Perri sat down on a bunk, testing it.

"That's mine," the tall woman declared.

Perri measured her. "Big enough to take it away from me, sister?"

"First come," the woman from the peninsula said.

"Trot—get yourself another one. Go blow a whistle. Say . . ."
Perri stopped, surprised. "Maybe we're going home?"

"No such luck. Not a ship in sight."

Somebody shoved a bag under the adjoining bunk. "They pulled me in from the mountains—up there at West Pass. Something big going on, that's sure, because they doubled all the watches just before I left. And I just met a couple of chickens I knew, out in the street. They said they were in from the cotton country."

"Ah, it has to be the Queen. She's coming over for an inspection tour."

Perri glanced up from the bunk, found the tall woman still there.

"Now look, chicken, blow like a good girl before I plant my fist in your belly—down where you'll remember it!"

The supply officer tapped lightly on the office door and pushed it open.

"Captain?"

Zee turned from her study of the wall map.

"Yes? Come in, Lieutenant. I want to talk to you."

"Captain," Lieutenant Donn said quickly, "I've been studying the stray, and it has occurred to me—"

"Yes?" Zee watched her.

"Well, Captain, I would like permission to make room in one of the wagons for trinkets—beads, a few simple tools perhaps. It has occurred to me that if we should find other natives out there—beyond the mountains—a few gifts would help. Judging from this one man, they have nothing."

"Lieutenant, I . . . I *was* planning to leave you in charge of the post after we departed."

Donn straightened. "If you please, Captain, I'm making a request to go with the expedition."

Zee walked over to the window without answering. The company street was beginning to fill with troopers coming in from the outlying sections. Four days, she thought, four days ago the security patrol had picked up a stray and set events in motion. Four days ago she had gone carefully over a list of women who were to make the trip. Four days ago Lieutenant Donn hadn't wanted to be one of those explorers. But sometime during the past four days Lieutenant Donn had discovered the stray, seen the man, possibly even studied him. And now the woman had changed her mind completely.

Two-eighty-four was certainly a potent force.

She made up her mind. "All right, Lieutenant. You will be in charge of the lead wagon, carrying the food and water. I'm handling weapons, in the wagon behind you. Sergeant Prest will bring up the rear with the bedding. See if you can find room for your gifts in the first or the last—nothing but weapons will go in mine."

"Thank you, Captain."

"We are leaving at dawn on the day after tomorrow. Tomorrow night there will be a briefing in the mess hall—everyone making the trip is to be there. See that the troops have full battle gear and ready to march; I think we'll start as soon as the dawn rain ends. I'll check again with you later, but I believe we will put those people from the peninsula up front—they are a bit angry at being called in so soon and are spoiling for a fight. Oh—and Lieutenant . . ."

"Yes, Captain?"

"Pass along these orders: in the event of trouble, the stray is to be shot immediately if he fails to display complete loyalty to us." She said it fiercely, almost angrily.

"Captain!" Donn was startled.

"Orders," Zee repeated. "I will not tolerate a guide who cannot be trusted." She frowned inwardly, wondering at her own vehemence. The corporal had noticed something, too—from the corner of her eye she found the girl watching her.

Donn said again, "Yes, Captain," and went out.

Zee turned her back on the corporal, strode to the window to stare at the retreating back of the lieutenant. So in just four days the woman had completely reversed herself, now wanted to go along. After seeing the man, of course. Very well, the lieutenant would be one of the party. But her orders would stand: the man would be hers or he would be shot.

Mentally startled, she looked at her close reflection in the window glass. Now why was she so suddenly aroused, why had

she phrased that thought in so positive a manner? Zee didn't know. She watched the lieutenant out of sight.

Barra would have known, could have told her. Barra had known men back home, in the Isles. Barra knew the meaning of jealousy.

F i v e

WAGONS and women waited in the cold light of the false dawn, waited under their coverings in the light rain beating down from the eternally grey skies. The three wagons stood in a line outside the door of the captain's office, the teams patiently unmoving in the downpour. The spare horses were tied to the tailgate of the second wagon. Two hostlers sat huddled on the seat of each, the other troops clustered close in vain attempt to find shelter about the wagons.

The settlement natives were absent, still sleeping, or perhaps awake but remaining in the confines of their houses. A few troopers, those remaining behind, lounged in the doorways and windows of the barracks, staring at the wagons. No one had reported in sick the night before. From the far end of the company street four figures appeared, Doctor Barra, two guards, and the stray. He was dressed, as usual, in the knee-length trousers.

Barra went into the commandant's office. The guards paused outside, and the man stayed with them.

After a short wait the door opened again and Barra reappeared, to be followed by the captain and Lieutenant Donn. Zee paused on the steps to make her coat watertight, and found herself face to face with the man. He stood there in the rain, arms folded, calmly watching her.

"Guard dismissed," she said. "Remember your orders."

The pair saluted and joined the waiting ranks about the

wagons and arrayed themselves in two lines on either side, in marching order. A dozen stood in a silent knot in the rear of the last wagon. Zee cast her eyes forward and picked out a half dozen more, widely dispersed, waiting far forward of the lead wagon.

"Ready, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Very well; roll."

The lieutenant blew a whistle and shouted, "Roll 'em!"

The hostler handling the reins in the lead wagon cracked a whip, and the team jerked into motion. Immediately behind, the other two wagons rolled forward, the troops keeping pace. Zee was walking beside Barra, abreast of the horses pulling the lead wagon. The stray walked along a half dozen steps ahead.

"Wish us good luck, Barra."

"Here's to luck and a tan, Zee. May we come back as brown as he is!"

"May we come back," Zee echoed. Her eyes remained on the brown neck and naked back of the man marching before her. "We will be on familiar—and friendly territory until we reach the West Pass. That will be our last water stop. After that we are in his hands, and by the Sainted Queen . . .!" She unconsciously touched the dagger blade hanging at her side. "They had better prove safe hands."

Barra flashed her a side glance but said nothing.

"I'm hoping," Zee continued, "that he knows or can find us a decent route through the mountains. I don't fancy stumbling around over those rocks for days or weeks."

"Fiddle! Where's your pioneer spirit?"

"Pioneers like the easy path when it can be found." She discovered her eyes tracing the scar again. "And by the way, have you given him a name or does he remain a number?"

Barra chuckled. "Two-eighty-four is still Two-eighty-four on my records. But to me he is a wolf."

"Wolf? Isn't that an animal?"

"Yes, but it is also a given name—not a familiar one I'll grant you, but I've known it." Her tone betrayed her, caused Zee to look around.

"You've known someone named Wolf?"

Barra nodded, her eyes on the man's heels. "A long time ago and a long distance away." She smiled faintly. "The name, on him, was funny. His mother had fondly hoped he'd be a strapping man, and she named him after her hopes." Barra shook her head. "How badly she was fooled—but I liked him. It pleased him to be called Wolf, and I suppose I catered to his vanity. But the name certainly didn't fit." She glanced up at the man from across the mountains. "So I named *him* Wolf. Only partly because of sentiment. On him, it fits."

"Yes," Zee agreed, "I suppose it does, though I've never seen a wolf."

The caravan passed along the streets of the settlement to the edge of town. The houses thinned out and became smaller, the spaces between them larger. Small gardens and patches of farm appeared, and here and there a furtive face peered at them briefly from some window. In minutes the troop had left the last of the town behind and were in the open country, traveling in a westerly direction and already encountering a slow, almost imperceptible rising of the ground. Behind them in the distance the morning bell began to ring. The rain lightened and the sky took on a brighter tinge.

The scouts walking point took it easy, knowing the teams could not keep up with them, knowing there was reason for vigilance this early on the march. After they crossed the Pass and entered strange territory, it would be different; there the land would be strange and the things—whatever things there might be—would be unguessable; yes, there it would be different. There the pointers would spread out and walk slowly, carrying weapons at ready, stopping every now and then to

allow the wagons to catch up.

Beyond the Pass the flanks would fan out to protect the wagons from a hidden attack the points had by-passed, and there the rear guard would fall back, expendables, to prevent any surprise action from behind. A wily enemy might allow scouts, troops and wagons to pass on ahead of them and then come in from the rear. But the greatest point of danger was from the front, and the soldiers walking there were hand-picked, eternally ready. Beyond the Pass all eyes would be on the points, watching for a signal.

The wagons crawled along a country road, toward the foothills. Occasionally a farmer or his timid wife would stand in some yard, watching them pass, or horses at pasture might gallop up to the road-line fence to exchange noises with the teams hauling the wagons. Gradually the sky had brightened with day and the rain had stopped, the air became warmer and raincoats were pulled off, rolled up and buckled. Weapons were examined for dampness. Short swords clanked at every knee, a bow and packet of arrows were strapped across every back but those of the officers. Each trooper carried in a breast pocket a small vial of poisonous liquid, a dip for arrow tips if danger should arise. The weapons wagon was loaded with arrows, spare bows, and metal-tipped spears.

Officers and troops of the Home Isles' Crown Colony of Western Somerset were moving westward, for the first time bucking the mountain chain which had barred their path into the interior. For the first time they fully realized there *was* an interior.

The slow realization was indicative of their thinking, of the equally slow rise from savagery of their own forebears. Not too many hundreds of years in their past history the Home Isles had been populated by little more than occasional tribes working small farms, living in small villages, fighting off the wandering bands of warring women who roamed the island.

In slow time the country worked itself out of the dark age, banded itself together and, because of the great preponderance of women over men, placed the First Queen on the throne. Afterwards the rise toward a semblance of civilization had been quicker.

Following the matriarchal government came institutions, organization, and the first faint exploratory steps by sea. The channel was crossed and a vast continent discovered on the other side. A hundred years later, the great, mysterious ocean was crossed and another land discovered, a rather fruitful land lying between the mountains and the sea. The Crown Colony of Western Somerset was established and the natives put to work exporting food and metals to the homeland. The Home Isles prospered by being the center of the known world, and all the known world was the undisputed empire of the Queen.

(Because their growth and thought was slow, the new civilization hadn't yet got around to organized digging into the past, to asking the question, "Before us, what?" Ruins of cities and peoples were uncovered and pieces toted home for casual display in museums; schools taught archeology and the kindred sciences in a listless, haphazard sort of way, and their students, like Trooper Perri, turned to some other trade or profession soon after graduation because a respectable means of livelihood in the scientific fields was lacking, and because an insufficient amount of curiosity and desire had been implanted in those students. The Island people thought of the past but not in a way demanding concerted action. They knew they had emerged from a dark and murderous age because of tales handed down by oldsters and because of simple lessons taught in elementary schools, but as yet there was no incentive to probe the reason for such an age, to find out why it had been a black, disorganized primitive life, to discover what had caused it.

There was nothing to suggest that perhaps there had been something else, before the darkness. An occasional student

speculated, and rarer still someone formulated theories based upon findings. Ruined walls of cities were uncovered, yes. But all thinking stopped with the primitive, dark well from which the tribes and the roaming bands had built a government.

Who put the relics and the cities there was relegated to idle discussion, to an evening's entertainment.

Captain Zee led a troop into uncharted wilderness like many other commanders before her, thinking that perhaps she would find new lands for the Crown, new wealth and materials for the Isles, and just possibly new museum pieces like many other commanders before her. Her troop had but two advantages denied to or lacking in those other commanders.

One of the present number was a former archeology student, now marching along the left flank because archeology failed to pay a living. Secondly, the troop had the services of a guide, a native of the unknown country. He wasn't particularly regarded as much of an advantage, although four of the marching women thought he might prove useful—to them.

"Barra . . ." Zee broke a long and thoughtful silence to glance up at the man and then at the doctor. "It is a strange thing. Has something occurred to you?"

"A lot of things have occurred to me," the doctor told her. She carried a cold pipe in her mouth. "All pleasant, and I'm looking forward to their happening. What's on your mind?"

"Two-eighty—I mean Wolf. We pressed him into service as a guide without so much as asking him. You and I made up our minds *he* would lead our expedition over the mountains—and here we are. Barra, we haven't told him where we are going or what we are after. And yet, there he walks, doing our bidding without being asked—or told."

Barra removed the pipe from her mouth and laughed. "Zee, you still haven't read my report of a week ago."

"What are you suggesting now?"

"If you had read my report, among many other things you'd

have found I included some speculations. And one of the matters I speculated on was his uncanny ability to know the right things to do without being asked—or told. I gave him a thorough physical examination, remember? And I mean thorough! I spent more than two hours going over him from top to toe. Of course, I took my time doing it—it was a pleasure.” She grinned with appreciation of the memory.

“But after a while it dawned on me that something was happening, and I devised little tests for him. Suppose I wanted to examine his feet; I remember wondering if he had webbed toes or something of the sort and decided to look. Very well, I told myself, I’ll examine his feet next. And before I could reach for them, he pushed them out in front of me. Or I would be standing near his feet and suddenly thinking of looking for wax in his ears. Believe me, Zee, he would sit up and cock his head over to one side. And I looked for wax. That sort of thing.”

“He anticipated your moves? Are you suggesting he read your thoughts?”

Barra shrugged. “I don’t know. He knew I didn’t intend to harm him. When the patrol brought him in, I pointed to my operating table, and he stretched out on it. And he stayed there until I was finished.” She began searching in her pockets for tobacco.

“But it is impossible that he could read your thoughts. That is fantastic; it is—”

“Yes, isn’t it?”

The captain’s gaze leaped to the back of the man’s head. “So incredible a thing . . . like black magic . . .” Suddenly and without warning she whipped out the dagger at her waist and leaped for his naked back, raising the blade high to plunge it into his spine.

Barra threw up her hands to stop the woman, trying to cry out but unable to make a sound. The blade flashed down to within an inch of the brown skin and stopped, waiting.

Wolf walked on without turning, without flinching or otherwise displaying any knowledge of her closeness, of the knife poised at his back.

Some of the nearer troops had seen the movement, had stepped in close with barbed spears at readiness. Zee waved them back. She slipped the dagger back into its sheath and waited for the doctor to catch up.

"Zee, what in the Queen's name . . . ?"

Zee smiled at her coldly. "So much for your speculations, Doctor. He didn't read my mind; he didn't know I was there!"

Barra finished tamping the pipe with hands that shook. She struck a light. "You didn't really intend to kill him, did you? You had no intentions of touching him?"

"Of course not. I was only testing him."

Barra nodded. "Ummm. He wouldn't have known it was a test, would he? He wouldn't have read both thoughts?"

Zee stared at her, frowning. And then, without realizing why she did it, she clapped both hands over her ears, as if to shut out a prying mind, to close off her thoughts.

Wolf walked with his eyes on the near mountains.

In midafternoon the wagon train stopped at West Pass for water. A few curious guards stationed at the Pass, converged on the troop, asking questions. The woman who had so recently been called away from the station made a ribald gesture to the troopers she left a week ago, and wagged her thumb westward, toward the mountains.

Beyond the Pass were narrow valleys, rutted streams and seemingly towering mountains, inhabited only by those occasional men who straggled down onto the coastal plain to steal fire and food from the villagers. Beyond the Pass was the unknown land where no soldier of the Queen had set foot. Until now.

Three wagons and a full hundred troops streamed through

the pass and down the gentle slope of the long valley whose end was lost in blue-grey haze and a forest of trees. The wagons creaked loudly in the valley stillness, despite heavy applications of grease. A half-dozen keyed-up troops walked point, on the alert for any living thing; they were already out of sight in the forest ahead. The flanking line was far out, pacing the noisy wagons. And the rear guard waited impatiently in the Pass, standing around the sentry boxes watching until the last wagon had dwindled with distance and was almost lost among the trees.

Someone gave an order and, with weapons ready, they followed.

Three wagons and a hundred troops, four teams, one civilian, one native. The guards remaining at the sentry boxes stood on a crest of ground and watched the last of the caravan out of sight. None, save one, was seen again. The bones of that one were found far up the valley, picked clean by some scavenger. The remains were identified only as some trooper by the inedible hardware left with the body. And after due consideration of those bones, the new military authority of the Crown Colony of Western Somerset closed the Pass.

The troops found themselves on a wide, flat natural roadbed following a slowly twisting stream; a closer approach to the forest revealed the roadbed where no trees grew and the scouts on point followed it as the easiest way. The stream wound peacefully around minor foothills, gradually narrowing as it climbed the watershed. An hour's brisk march brought no more difficult ground although the mountains around them constantly rose more sharply.

The transport sergeant put a detail to hacking away the underbrush along the trail, clearing a path among the wildly growing green scrubs for the teams and wagons. The brush thinned out as they climbed higher.

"Almost like a road, isn't it?" Barra asked.

"Too much like one—even the trees make way for it. It isn't natural for trees to be like that."

"Ummm. Well they are, nevertheless. Might as well accept it."

Zee turned and picked out a familiar face in the line of troops on the left flank. She lifted an arm.

"Perri!"

A woman broke ranks and trotted over to them.

"Yes, Captain?"

"Perri, have you noticed this roadway? Have you given it any particular attention?"

"Yes, Captain. I don't think it's a natural way."

"Artificial? Those trees were deliberately planted to either side?"

"Not that, Captain, not necessarily." She hesitated, searching for the right expression. "But if . . . if there *had* been a road here in the past, say a road made of paving stones, the passage of time would have covered the road but large trees wouldn't grow above the stones. Not until the soil had piled up pretty deep, at least."

Zee looked down at the ground beneath her feet.

"We could dig down and find out, Captain," Perri offered eagerly.

Zee shook her head decisively. "Not here, not now. I can't afford the delay." She glanced at the trooper. "But if we are still on this roadway when we make camp tonight, you may dig if you wish."

"Yes, Captain."

"I'll join you, Perri," the doctor put in. "I want to see, too. Paving stones, do you think?"

"It doesn't have to be stones, Doctor. Old pathways have been found on the continent which were made by nothing more than millions of feet. Grass never grew there again. And I've heard

tell of some other kinds of paths, or narrow roads. They were buried under a foot of topsoil. They seemed to be made of pitch or some hard-packed tarry substance."

Zee measured the spacing between the trees.

"This one seems to be rather wide for that sort of thing. There could be no sensible reason for an artificial road *this* wide."

"I've noticed that, Captain. I can't explain it." Perri swung her hand. "Why, I'll wager that six teams and wagons could march abreast on this roadway."

Doctor Barra spoke up again. "I've been watching the turns—have you? Look at that one up ahead. Now if we were building a road, we'd drive it straight toward that hill and make a sharp turn around it. This thing doesn't do that. Look at the wide, slow curve." She raised a finger to point at the marching troops far ahead. "See those women? If we follow this curve, it'll take us twenty minutes to get to the spot where they are now. But we could cut straight across country and reach them in ten."

"The point is well made, Barra. If this is an artificial roadway, why was so much space wasted?"

"I don't know, Captain."

The barren way continued, winding through the hills and evading the steeper mountains. Gradually the trees were left behind and a grassy, empty land took their place. The visibility was increased.

Once a sudden cry from one of the points brought the entire train to a halt, weapons at alert, but the sighted object was only one of the wild mountain men, easily recognizable by his ragged clothing. He scuttled off among the rocks, frightened by their presence. The troop resumed its march. No animals were seen.

"Not that I expect any," Zee said shortly, commenting on the absence of game. "Those confounded wagons would fright-

en away anything within a day's march. I'm afraid food will become a problem."

The doctor didn't offer an answer. The constant pace was tiring the woman, but she fought to conceal it.

For the hundredth time since they had left the coastal village behind, Zee found herself studying the man. The spectacle she had made of herself clapping her hands over her ears to conceal her thoughts annoyed her, or the mental image did. She imagined the troops had been watching, imagined that they knew what she was doing. Barra knew, but Barra had kept silent with an understanding Zee had come to appreciate in the older woman. It had been a silly, useless gesture. She wasn't quite ready to admit that the doctor was right, that the man *could* know her mind, but still there was always the fantastic possibility. And holding her hands over her ears could not shut off her thoughts from him—if the possibility was true. He must have laughed at her. Laughed inwardly, in his mind, so that it would not show on his face.

She didn't want him to laugh at her.

Why not? After all, he was only a native. The natives were necessary in their place, and one took no real notice of them. To be sure, from time to time there had been stories passed around by the troops, stories to the effect that so-and-so teased one or another of the native men, played with them, but she didn't believe that one of her troops would ever go so far . . . so far as to . . . One didn't cross the barrier to reach a native.

Wolf. She didn't want Wolf to laugh at her, for any reason. She rather hoped she could be friendly with him. Surely there was some other nature to him than a cold, insolent gaze. Beneath that browned skin, somewhere below that towering height, there must be something human about him. She would like to discover it. The march would be a long one—they might as well cover it on friendly terms.

His eyes were attractive. She liked the intelligence she read in them.

Abruptly, Wolf stopped. Zee paused in alarm—was he knowing her thoughts again? The man turned to her and raised one lazy brown arm, pointing ahead. Zee stared that way.

The scouts had stopped. One of them was running back to the captain.

Zee snapped an order. "Alert!"

The troops had anticipated the command when the scout turned about, had their weapons up.

Zee took a position beside the man.

"What is it?" she asked.

He pointed again, beyond the scouts.

The trailway had slowly narrowed about them, to enter a small canyon and curve with its turnings. The stream they had been following was by now no more than a rocky rivulet, often hidden by the brush and nearer hillocks. Far ahead, a quarter of a mile in advance of the points, everything came to an end. Road and valley stopped with a wall of earth.

The scout ran up, out of breath with the effort.

"Canyon blocked, Captain. We can't go forward."

"Blocked? Is there no path around it?"

"No, Captain. It looks like a landslide. We're boxed in."

Zee whirled to the rear to check on the guard. They had stopped and turned about to face the way they had come, alert for any danger behind them. She touched Wolf's arm, looked up the short distance into his eyes.

"Well?"

He said nothing but stepped to the nearer wagon and pried loose one of the spades fastened there. Swinging the spade, he started forward. Zee hesitated only the barest instant and with a quick motion of her hand, ordered others to get spades. She followed the man.

Wolf passed through the forward line of scouts and on up

the canyon, followed by a handful of troopers carrying spades. The scouts kept pace, weapons ready. He paused at the foot of the slide and searched its face.

In the silence of the canyon the tinkling of water was audible, splashing down over some unseen waterfall. For the first time they heard birds singing, somewhere out of sight. On either side of the canyon reared two mountainous peaks, scalable on foot perhaps but certainly out of the question for teams and wagons. At some time in the past one of the peaks had sent a shower of earth and rocks cascading down into the canyon, blocking it completely. The troops stared at the slide, not knowing the next move. Grass cropped out of the soil here and there, indicating its firmness.

Wolf began climbing.

Seven or eight feet above their heads he stopped and dropped swiftly to one knee to examine the ground. Turning to the captain below him, he made a vague warning motion with his arm, waving her aside. Cautiously, she moved away. Wolf then moved around and behind a boulder perched there, threw his weight against it to send it tumbling down to the road. Zee was alert. The moving of the boulder revealed a black hole in the slide. Wolf attacked the opening with his spade, enlarging it.

Zee ordered the others up to help him.

After thirty minutes labor, Zee discovered what was behind the slide. She cast a calculating eye at the sky to realize that not all of the earth could be moved that day, and gave orders to make camp. The wagons were drawn up in triangular formation to form a bulwark, and the teams unhitched and tethered. Sentries were posted, and still the work on the slide continued. Torches were lighted when darkness fell under the slate-grey clouds. For the first time there was no evening rain.

It delighted the doctor. "We're getting there, Zee, we're getting there! No rain in paradise!"

Zee stood on the canyon floor with her feet braced wide apart, hands on hips, watching the diggers in the flickering torchlight. She had taken off her helmet to shake loose her bronze-red hair, letting it fall down to cover the back of her neck. The hair bobbed as she nodded her head.

"We are, Barra, we are. But I'm wondering who was here before us?"

"Ummm. Worrying again?"

"The road, Barra, don't forget the roadway. Suppose Perri is right, suppose that a long time ago there was a road here. It wound through the mountains, and when it came to a mountain it couldn't cross, what would it do?"

"Well . . . well."

"It would go under the mountain, Barra. That road would be built right up to the face of the mountain and then go through and under it. Through a tunnel. Barra, can you deny that is a tunnel they are uncovering?"

The doctor peered at the large opening.

"No—it's a tunnel all right. A handmade tunnel." She had almost said woman-made, by habit, and then mentally switched to man-made. But caution brought it out as "handmade."

S i x

THE full magnificent size and build of the tunnel was revealed in the dry morning light. Undeniably artificial, and still not completely uncovered, the tunnel was fifteen feet or more in height and wide enough to admit two teams and wagons walking abreast. A rough dirty-grey stone formed its interior walls and ceiling, although the adhesive substance used between the chinks had fallen away in places, letting parts of the ceiling crash down in powder and rubble. The tunnel's length vanished in inky blackness.

"Handmade," Zee repeated to Barra, touching the walls. She

pointed to the ceiling. "We have nothing like that."

She waited impatiently at the mouth of the tunnel, watching the darkness inside. After a hasty breakfast she had sent three scouts in to penetrate its length, to find its other end if there was one. They had been gone an hour.

Wolf had worked most of the night, to lay aside his spade a few hours before dawn and fall asleep on the ground beneath one of the wagons. The movement had awakened Zee; she had propped herself upon an elbow to watch him in his sleep. The nearer troops sleeping around the wagons had moved their bedrolls further away from him. Briefly that annoyed her, and then she dismissed it with a mental note to offer him a spare bedroll. He had slept instantly and quietly without moving. She guessed he was used to sleeping on the open ground. Her last hazy memory was of a nightbird calling somewhere off in the darkness.

"Captain!"

Zee whirled to stare into the tunnel. Someone was running.

The scout came up. "The other end is open, Captain. And there's another tunnel after this one. Open."

"Still another? How long is this one?"

"About two miles, Captain."

"Two miles!"

"Yes, Captain. We're waiting at the other end of this one. Shall we go on?"

Zee turned it over in her mind. An incredible tunnel two miles long and still another beyond that was almost beyond her comprehension. Without a doubt it was handmade, but made by whose hands? Those hands had been dead for at least an age—the dust and rubble here attested that.

"Did you find any signs of life at the other end? Were there marks in the dust?"

"No, Captain. Everything was deserted."

Still she hesitated. Up until this moment she had felt that

the expedition could turn back at any time, that she could abandon the undertaking and return to the security of the colony if it appeared that the value to be received was not worth the risk. Once she plunged into the tunnel, however, she must go on. Of course there would be places to turn around and come back, but this was the gateway. If she passed through the gateway, she should not turn around; if she intended to quit and go back, she should not enter the tunnel. She glanced up to find Wolf watching her, waiting.

"Captain?" It was the scout.

"Yes?"

"Captain—the sun was shining at the other end."

"The sun . . . ?" She found herself looking up at the blanket of clouds stretching toward the mountains.

"Bright, Captain. Almost blinding. Blue sky."

Zee gave in. "Very well." She turned to Lieutenant Donn. "Roll, Lieutenant."

"Yes, Captain." She raised the whistle to her lips.

"The rear guard will remain here until we are in the open country at the other end. Send back a runner for them."

"Yes, Captain."

Zee stepped into the tunnel mouth. Someone was beside her with a torch. She looked around to find Wolf. She stumbled once, somewhere along the astonishing length of the tunnel, and would have fallen. He reached out quickly to hold her up, and when she had recovered he thrust the rock aside to clear the path for the wagons following. Continuing the march in the half-light of the torch, she found herself dwelling on the incident, and at the same time wondering why she should think about it. She would have fallen over the unseen rock, and he had prevented it. That was all. And yet there was something more to the gesture than appeared on the surface. Not one of the coastal natives would have touched a soldier, no matter

what the reason. Fear and respect of a sort kept them at a distance.

That brought a wry twist to her lips. Wolf had precious little fear and respect for anything, much less her.

His hand and arm had slid out smoothly and effortlessly, had held her for a second or so while she regained her balance, and then it had been withdrawn. There had been a tremendous strength in that arm. With a shock she realized that he could have lifted and carried her if he had chosen. What was it Barra had said, that night a week ago when the patrol had brought him in? Something about "... he can handle any five of your troopers."

She didn't want any man her equal, much less her master. Zee pushed back her shoulders and stepped ahead of him. A dim light was growing in the distance.

The sun was blinding.

As they came from the darkness of the tunnel, its effect was overpowering. Zee's troops stood on the roadway outside the tunnel mouth, hands to their eyes. She opened her mouth to shout an order and then she too stepped forward into the sun and instinctively closed her eyelids. The alarm leaped into her mind that it was dangerous, that they could be struck down from above or the sides while they stood there unseeing, and she fought to open her eyes against the glare. The first thing she saw was Wolf, waiting with folded arms, watching her. Behind him was the green slope of another mountain.

It annoyed her. Why was he always watching her?

"Forward!" she ordered.

The scouts led off slowly, reluctant to leave the sun for the darkness of another tunnel.

"Move!" she snapped sharply.

The troop passed through the second and still a third tunnel that day, to camp finally for the night outside the maw of a

fourth. The tunnels had been of varying lengths, some as short as a half mile, the longest the two-mile trek of the first one. Between each had always been the sun, waiting for them. Some of the troops had taken off their helmets and bared their arms. Doctor Barra walked gaily along, her sleeves rolled almost to her shoulders. That night she passed around the vinegar but few used it.

The tunnels continued for another two days, and then the height of the mountains dropped away and once again a roadway commenced winding through the valleys and over the smaller hills. By the end of the first week, every skin was burned red save that of the man's, and most were peeling. The vinegar was used freely and a few of the troops claimed to be finding a faint brownness on their arms and necks. And by the end of the first week, Zee knew that Lieutenant Donn wanted the man, knew that a clash of wills was coming, for in some unidentified manner she realized that she also wanted him.

She was unable to state how it was that she wanted him, to name the desire that she felt, for in her eyes he was still a native, and no one ever crossed the barrier to touch a native. Still, she felt a fierce, possessive instinct, and that instinct made her want to keep Wolf near her—always. He marched with her, he worked with her when work was needed to clear the path or explore a stream, and she now had little doubt but what he would fight with her if necessary. He was hers. That ended the matter.

But in a week's time, Lieutenant Donn had shown by her attitude that it didn't end the matter.

Barra observed it all and said nothing. Barra saw what was happening, recognized it, thought she knew how it might end. And she said nothing because she thought it might be a fitting end. One can't eat, sleep and digest the military way all one's life.

During that week Captain Zee found that four of her com-

mand were interested in the man. She had already known that two of them were interested—the doctor and herself. But then the doctor was to be excused; it was her profession. Barra was interested in Wolf as a laboratory specimen, the occasional remarks which also revealed her as a female could be laid to her liberal and open-minded trade. There wasn't anything about the man that failed to interest Barra, and she didn't hesitate to say so if it suited her mood.

With some surprise the captain discovered that Trooper Perri had also taken an interest in Wolf, but after a moment's thought she decided it was the archeologist in the woman, not the female. Nevertheless, Zee kept her under observation.

And lastly there was Donn, who hadn't wanted to come at all until she first saw the man.

Four of them. She was briefly thankful the entire troop didn't entertain similar thoughts. She would have an uncontrollable mutiny on her hands if one hundred women suddenly decided Wolf was their property! No—four were enough.

The end of that first week found them on the edge of open prairie.

The fruit was gone, and the water tanks had been refilled twice from near-by streams. They had been cautious at first about drinking from the streams, but after the man had unhesitatingly dropped to the ground and dipped his face into swiftly running water, the tanks were refilled.

Once a scout had surprised an animal resembling a pig and brought the wild beast down with one quick arrow. A wild and tart variety of grape was discovered and picked. Someone had trapped a few large birds and attempted to prepare a meal, but the taste quickly changed their minds, and thereafter the birds were let alone. By the end of that week the meat supply was running low and Zee received her next great shock. Wolf, as usual, provided it.

Late in the afternoon a scout came back to report that a

pack of animals had been spotted, about twenty in number and resembling horses although the animals were much smaller than those horses pulling the wagons. Zee went forward, accompanied as always by the man.

They dropped to the ground, hidden from the animals by the tall grass, and watched. The scout loosed an arrow from her pack and fitted it into the bow. Surprisingly, Wolf put out a hand to stop her. She drew back.

Zee whispered, and the scout subsided.

Wolf got to his feet and by pressing his hand into the small of her back signaled her not to follow. He moved away from the group to circle around the animals. Crouching low and running around to their rear, he kept himself so well hidden that it was difficult to follow him with the eye. Zee watched him, wondering.

Suddenly Wolf leaped up from the grass and uttered a shrill yell. She jumped.

The grazing ponies jerked their heads high, startled, saw him and started to run for the group hidden in the grass. An excited trooper jumped to her feet and made ready with an arrow. Others followed.

The frightened pack swerved at the unexpected appearance of this new enemy and thundered away across the open prairie after their leader. An arrow flew after them, to fall far short. Another followed, but they were already out of range. Zee saw a sudden flash of bronzed skin and shouted an order. The weapons were dropped, forgotten, the order not needed.

Wolf was running across the field after the ponies.

A scout stood open-mouthed. "I'll be the mother of a bastard!"

The man ran with the incredible speed of a racing horse, faster than Zee had ever seen a human run before, so swiftly that in seconds he began to overtake the hindmost animals. He sped over the ground in great leaps as effortlessly as a graceful

bird soaring on an updraft, as quickly as an arrow fired by an angry archer. In less than ten breaths he had overtaken the flying pack, was running swiftly alongside them, to lunge suddenly at the nearest pony. She saw him throw his body upon the neck of the beast, wrap his long legs about it and somehow hurl it to the ground.

The pack thundered off into the distance and were lost. The tall grass thrashed briefly where man and pony had fallen. Zee forced herself from her trance and ran toward the spot.

She came upon them and stopped suddenly.

Wolf was sitting on the ground, chest heaving with the exertion. The pony lay beside him, neck broken.

Beside her, Lieutenant Donn broke the silence.

"I wish he'd teach me to do that!"

Zee turned on her, unaccountably angry. "Summon the cook. This solves the meat problem."

The lieutenant turned away, failing to hide a grin. "Yes, Captain."

The flank steak taken from the pony was tough and the flavor not all that could be desired, but it was food. Zee and the doctor sat with their backs to a wagon wheel some feet from the fire, sawing away at the meat. Corporal Avon was near by.

"I've never eaten this sort of thing before," Zee complained. She cut off a piece of meat and put it into her mouth. The chewing was difficult. "And I'm not sure I like the idea—we will all be barbarians in no time."

"You might eat worse than this before we're home again," Barra retorted. She pointed with her fork. "Look yonder—we're already barbarians."

Wolf squatted beside the fire, holding his steak in his fingers. He gingerly sprinkled salt on the meat with the fingers of his other hand, and bit into it. Several of the troops

watched him, pausing in their own struggles to cut the meat. He tore off a piece with his teeth and chewed it.

Perri laid down her utensils. "I can do it if he can!" She bit off a mouthful.

"See what I mean?" Barra asked.

"I don't approve of it, Barra. I've noticed other things, little things. The troops are imitating some of his habits and mannerisms. If it goes too far, it can lead to a serious breakdown in morale and discipline."

"Like what?" the doctor wanted to know.

"Such as the way he drinks. Have you noticed that the troops fall to the ground and drink out of the steams now? They've watched him do it."

"Bosh. I do that myself."

"When he came to the fire tonight they made room for him. They didn't pull away from him such as they used to when he approached—they simply made room for him and stayed where they were. They're beginning to accept him."

"What's wrong with that? After that episode this afternoon anyone would accept him."

"Yes . . ." Zee stared at his body against the fire. "Barra . . . as a doctor . . . what can't that man do? Isn't there any limit?" She whirled on the doctor. "And don't tell me *that* was in your report!"

"No, nothing like that." Barra picked up a piece of meat and attempted to bite it off. "I was afraid of that. My teeth won't stand the strain." She continued sawing it. "He fits Crane's Theory."

"And what in the Queen's name is Crane's Theory?"

"A branch of the medical profession—there isn't a better name for it yet. Several years back, Doctor Crane — you wouldn't know her—published a paper on the shape of things, of life, a theory on the difference between the species. I know, I know," Barra cut Zee off quickly, "that isn't making sense

to you. Bear with me; I'm not up on the fine points of the Theory. Who *could* be stuck off in the wilderness thousands of miles from the Home Isles?"

"But what is Crane's Theory?"

"It's a paper several hundred pages long, that's what it is. I read it once, all of it. And what I remember of it can be put down on two pages." She popped another bit of meat in her mouth. "You've been around on the continent, and up and down this coast, and you know that everywhere you travel, people are different. Some black, some white, some with dark hair, some with light, some red like yours. Blue eyes, brown eyes, gray eyes . . . what have you. I've seen people with six fingers on each hand, seen others who fall sick everytime the wind changes and some who live through plagues. That's Cranes' Theory: people, how and why they differ, and when.

"Crane thinks the differences are in the bloodstream and the physical properties of the body, that the peculiarities of the parents are passed along to the child—sometimes."

"Sometimes?"

"Sometimes — not always with certain peculiarities, and again always with other properties. Those six-fingered people, for instance. The entire tribe possess six fingers, all the children and all the adults. Now here's the meat of the Theory: that tribe will always have six fingers until someone with five fingers marries into it. The five-fingered woman's child will have either five or six fingers, all depending on which parent has the strongest peculiarities to pass along. If the bloodstream and bodily make-up of the woman is the most powerful, the child will be born with five fingers. On the other hand, if the father is internally dominant, the child will have six fingers no matter what."

"But why didn't it spread to other tribes?"

"That's what I'm coming to; that's where Wolf fits in. Crane says that barriers prohibit interchanging. Those six-

fingered people live in a remote and highly inaccessible part of the continent—they are difficult to reach. The barrier there is the great distance. That brings us to the seacoast natives. They aren't at all like the people at home—the ocean is a tremendous barrier, and the natives have developed their own bodies without outside interference. In fact, they are between two barriers, and there is no interchanging.

"They are different from us, the mountain men are different from them, and people living here on the plains—like Wolf—are far different from the first two. It so happens, because of the favorable weather conditions and mode of life, that Wolf is the superior of all the types. Zee, you may not like this, but he is as superior to our people, as we are to the coastal natives."

"I don't—"

"You don't believe it yet, no, despite what you've seen. But you will, Zee, you will."

"But he's only a native!" she disclaimed, staring at the meat he held in his fingers.

"Ummm. What is a native? Give me a definition."

"Barra, that's simple. A native is a person you find living in a new land."

Barra nodded, a sly twisted grin on her lips. "That'll do. Now, look at it from Wolf's viewpoint: *this* is his land. So what are our people who live across the sea—in a new land to him?"

"Well . . . natives, I suppose."

"That's right; we're each native to our own country. Which brings us right back to Crane. Which is superior, the native of the plains here, or the natives of the Isles?"

"We are. Barra, this is foolishness."

"We are in one sense: we're educated." She picked out a piece of gristle and cast it away. "But what can *he* do that we can't?"

"A few things, I suppose."

The doctor grunted. "A few things, you suppose. Like being able to stay alive without clothing, like running as fast as a horse, like knowing your unspoken thoughts, like living to be one or two hundred years of age. Zee, sometimes you're so blind you disappoint me!"

The captain didn't answer. She was studying Wolf, watching the troops around him. A dozen or more were now eating their meat with their fingers. It revolted her, but she felt it was the last straw when she discovered Lieutenant Donn doing the same. She averted her head from the scene around the fire, looked upward at the stars.

Finally, thoughtfully, she broke the small silence.

"Barra . . . what would happen if—if one of our women mated with a man such as Wolf?" Her face was without emotion, held that way with some effort. "Would their children be able to outrun a horse, or—"

"No. No such luck. Not even if his blood was the dominant of the two, and I strongly suspect it is." She glanced at the captain. "Let's suppose that one of those troopers had a child by the man." She saw Zee wince. "Crane would say that the child would be tall because both parents were, would have blue eyes *if* the woman had them, because his certainly are. But that is only the external physical angle like the six-fingered people.

"But the child would not live to be two hundred, or run as fast as a horse, or know others' thoughts. Those things aren't inherited that quickly—it requires several generations. Given favorable conditions, and by that I mean simply that child would mate with a similar child, it's quite possible that their grandchildren, or their great-grandchildren would be the equal of Wolf today." She spread her hands. "Or at least, according to Crane's Theory they would."

Zee thought about it. "If we accept that, then there *could* be other kinds of life out here."

Barra slapped her on the back. "By the Queen's tooth, Zee, you're not as blind as I thought. I wondered if that would occur to you. Crane's Theory doesn't apply to woman alone. It also includes birds, beasts, insects and, for all I know, snakes. Listen to the birds calling, Zee." She paused. "Ever heard calls like that before? No, you haven't." She held aloft a piece of meat. "Before today had you ever seen a horse as small as this one? No. Or that piglike creature somebody shot several days ago? No."

"Nor a man like Wolf," Zee supplied.

Barra grinned in the darkness, but her voice carried no trace of it. "No. The ocean was the first great barrier, and those mountains back there the second. Zee, if we can put any faith at all in Crane, be prepared for anything out here. Anything at all! The people and animals living here have probably been doing so for thousands of years, undisturbed. For all we know, Zee, tens or hundreds of thousands of years. We don't know how they came here, how long they've been here, and above all, we don't know the pressures and forces that've been put on them here. So be prepared for anything."

"You sound," Zee said hesitantly, "as though you expected others. Other people."

"Come now, Zee. Wolf just didn't spring from the ground fully grown. He had to have a father and mother."

"Well, yes."

"And the scar on his back was put there by some enemy other than a father or a mother. So there must be others."

"Yes."

"Then be prepared for them, Zee."

Absently, Zee swung her eyes to check on the sentries. They were invisible in the darkness of the night.

Wolf stood up from the fire, and Zee's eyes came back to him. He turned, putting his back to the fire, and looked at her briefly. She dropped her gaze.

He picked his way through the group sitting around the fire and disappeared into the night.

"He does that every night," Zee said.

"Does what?"

"Checks my sentries. I followed him one night to see what he was doing. He made a complete round of the sentry posts, stopped near each one of them and stood staring out across the prairie. And then he would pass on to the next one. He does that half the night—he never sleeps until just a few hours before sunrise."

"Best lookout you've got, I'd say."

Zee nodded agreement. "He is. But I wonder what it is he looks for out there?"

Barra shrugged. "His wife, maybe."

"Barra! Do you think he had a—" She stopped suddenly.

The doctor picked bits of meat from her teeth and neglected to answer.

Zee started to address a remark to the corporal but found her gone. She leaned against the wagon wheel and fell to watching the lieutenant at the fire.

"Fine night," Barra said, and got up to walk away in it.

Zee's train of thought drifted. It was a wonderful, pleasant night, comparable to some of the evenings she had spent in the Home Isles. Certainly there had been nothing like it in the Colony. There had been no rain since before the first tunnel; the days had been bright and hot to a point where the heat had been almost uncomfortable, and all the nights had been pleasantly warm like this one, warm and lazy and serene. It might just possibly touch on the barbaric, but it *was* keen living to spend nights in the open as they had been doing. The troops liked it—there had been no grumbling this side of the tunnels.

The food wasn't always as plentiful as at home, and to-

night's meat not all that it could be, still there was a zest to the night, to the journey.

That had been a remarkable thing Wolf had done—to leap up from the grass and shout, to stampede the little horses, to—. She sat up straight, startled. He had leaped up and shouted. Shouted. But Wolf had no voice—at least he had never used it. That was ridiculous, he must have a voice, everyone had a voice. But until this afternoon he had never made use of it.

She jumped to her feet.

He was gone somewhere, probably checking sentries.

“Barra!”

“Over here.”

Zee hurried that way.

“Barra, when you examined the man, did he have the physical ability to talk? I mean, his throat . . .?”

“What? Oh! Well, yes, there was nothing wrong with his throat.”

“And yet you reported he was unable to talk.”

The doctor corrected her. “I reported that he didn’t understand the mother tongue; he couldn’t or wouldn’t use his voice; he never tried to speak to me. What else was I to think? It was a natural supposition. What’s troubling you?”

“Barra, he used his voice this afternoon. When he routed the little horses—he yelled at them.”

“By the saints, he did at that!” Barra moved her hand to her throat to massage the muscles there. “He did.”

“He made fools of us, Barra. Deliberately tricked us.” She whirled to the group at the fire, called an angry, “Corporal!”

“Now don’t be hasty, Zee. I wouldn’t say he has tricked anybody. After all, why should he use his voice?”

“Why *should* he? Barra, what do you think a . . .” She stopped, staring at the doctor.

“That’s right,” Barra filled in for her. “A voice is for communication when there is no other way. Wolf has another way.”

"Oh, that again! Corporal!"

"Yes, that again."

Someone shouted, "Not here, Captain."

Barra offered, "I saw her a little while ago. She went back that way, after she finished eating."

"Never mind," Zee declared. "I'll find Wolf myself. I want an explanation of this matter." She pushed angrily off into the darkness toward the nearest sentry post. The doctor stood looking after her.

Captain Zee made a complete round of the sentry posts to learn from each of them that the man had not been there since darkness fell, that none of them had seen him. She returned to the fire, organized a squad and made a thorough search of the camp. Wolf was not there, not in camp, not in the defense perimeter defined by the outlying sentry posts. He was gone.

The search turned up a by-product. Corporal Avon was likewise absent.

Doctor Barra rubbed her nose and tried to recall previous evenings. She found nothing to support her suspicions, and filed the matter away under the heading of mild curiosity.

Captain Zee was another matter.

She doubled the watches, with strict orders that the missing pair were to be brought to her under arrest as soon as they could be found. And then she spread her bedroll under a wagon near the fire, to await them. She was still waiting when she fell asleep, still waiting when the next morning's sun roused the camp to activity.

Wolf and the corporal were gone.

Seven

ZEE broke camp and marched westward, furious.

"I'll hang them, Barra," she said savagely to the doctor. "Hanging is the punishment for deserters!"

"You may hang the girl," Barra replied mildly, "but you'll never touch the man."

"Oh, won't I!"

"No, I have an idea you won't. He probably won't be in sympathy with the idea."

"Barra, I command this troop."

"Granted. But you don't command him. Haven't you learned that yet?"

Zee said nothing. She paused once on the brow of a hill to search the terrain behind them, to look one last time for a trace of the missing pair. There was nothing but trampled grass, nothing but the ashes of the fire. A strong wind blew across the plain. She continued down the opposite slope of the hill and last night's camp site was lost to her.

"The troops are talking, Barra," she said after a while. "Ugly talk."

"If you're suggesting a possible liaison between Wolf and the girl—yes, they're talking about that. But I'm afraid no one agrees with your definition of it. To them it's a ribald joke—to me, it's a matter of professional speculation. Frankly, I see nothing ugly about it."

"But, Barra . . . one of my troops. And a native!"

"The sooner you stop thinking of him as a native and began to think of him as a man, the sooner you'll find a bit of peace of mind, Zee. Military training has made a hidebound reactionary of you. He's a man. And as I pointed out, the likes of which we've never seen before. I don't blame the girl for being overwhelmed."

"Barra, you aren't condoning desertion?"

"No, I'm not." She stumbled in the tall grass and mumbled a phrase under her breath. "I'm not talking about desertion—that's another matter. But I don't blame the corporal for being caught by his personality. I am myself." She turned her eyes on the captain. "And so are you."

"I am not!"

"Oh, fiddle."

They marched in silence, hearing only the sound of the rising wind through the trees and grass, the creaking of the wagons. The rear guard topped the rise in ground and the campsite was behind the troop. Like the captain before her, one of the guard glanced back and saw nothing. Someone else made a suggestion, and the guard laughed. They marched down the hill.

By the time the overhead sun brought the troop to a stop for the noonday meal, the wind had climbed to a terrific intensity. Sudden gusts of it lashed at the troop, tore at the canvas coverings on the wagons and threatened to tear them to ribbons. In the far distance a huge bird beat against the wind, struggling for some unseen sanctuary. Zee watched the horizon anxiously, looking for the ominous cloud gatherings that preceded storms, storms she had not experienced since leaving the Home Isles. There had been no great storms along the coast, and years of living in the dull, grey peaceful climate had softened her, weakened her resistance to the terror of them.

In midafternoon the sky began to darken too early, and she realized what was coming.

They were on the open prairie without shelter of any kind except the few occasional trees. She urged the troop on, pushing them faster into the waning western light, hoping to find some haven from the brewing storm. The horses exhibited a nervousness she had not seen in them before.

"We are in for it, Barra."

Barra unbuckled her raincoat. "We are. I almost hate to put this thing on again." She looked toward the horizon, pointed. "Zee, see those big birds? We might go that way. There's bound to be shelter of some sort there."

"There's merit in the suggestion, Barra." She shouted an order, and someone ran forward to turn the points. The entire column slowly pivoted south toward the birds. "They look big from here, don't they? Surely they have adequate shelter of some sort from these storms."

Zee pushed them rapidly south, but premature darkness and the first stinging drops of rain caught them still in the open, while the wind whirled in a mad uproar around them. Coats were buckled on, and the deluge began. The points were forced to wait until the wagons caught up and the rear guard came in closer, afraid of losing contact altogether in the lowered visibility. Zee ordered the extra hostlers to walk beside their teams, half leading them, for the booming thunder and glaring flashes of lightning made the animals skittish and hard to manage. She was afraid they might bolt.

"Even the saints have deserted us, Barra. This is terrible."

The doctor didn't answer. She fought against the storm with her face lowered, bracing herself to the gusts of wind that threatened to hurl her off her feet. Finally she gave up walking in the open and found a place behind the first wagon, holding on to the tailgate for safety.

Zee ranged the outer boundaries of the troop, first with the flanks and then at point, searching continually for anything that offered shelter. The rain soaked through her clothing, wetting her to the skin. Stumbling through the grass she suddenly collided with a trooper.

"Keep out of the way, chicken," the trooper shouted. "I got to find the captain."

"I'm the captain."

The trooper stiffened. "Yes, Captain. There's something

ahead, Captain. Trees or buildings or something."

Zee followed her forward.

The black and undefined outlines of some shapeless mass rose up from the prairie ahead, only half seen in the beating rain and the darkened sky. Zee unsheathed her sword and pushed on. In an hour they had reached the mass and crowded into the miserable shelter it offered.

The outlines so barely discernible had resolved themselves into building walls, buildings which were not whole and walls which sagged and in many places had fallen in upon themselves, but they offered a barrier against the weather. The hostlers turned the wagons about and backed them against the doorways of the first few outlying buildings, to unhitch the teams and lead them inside. Troopers crowded in after them and spread to a half dozen near-by buildings.

"Lieutenant!"

"Yes, Captain?"

"Send a patrol into the town—see if you can determine the size of it and if anything lives here."

"Yes, Captain."

Zee posted guards at the windows, doors, and the gaping holes in the walls; others were already spreading their bedrolls in the inner rooms.

"What do you make of it, Barra?"

"I don't know, don't know. It doesn't look much like a house. Who would build a house this big?"

"The roadway was large," the captain reminded her. "Those tunnels were oversize."

"Ummm. Well, maybe the builders of the road had a good reason for driving six teams abreast, but that hardly applies here. I can't imagine humans so tall they'd *need* rooms this size."

"Perhaps you had better ask your friend Crane."

Barra studied the woman. "Perhaps you'd better get some

rest; you're pushing yourself to exhaustion. Although," she added humorously with a glance at the ceiling, "we might be able to show Crane a thing or two."

"I hope not," Zee retorted nervously.

She made another tour of the building and then dashed next door to check on the troops there. The patrol reported in while she was poking through the rooms of the third building taken over by the troops.

"Find anything?" she asked quickly.

"No, Captain. Nothing but those birds—didn't see them, just heard them fluttering around. We went in about a half mile. There's nothing but these old buildings. They get bigger, farther in, Captain."

"Did you make an estimate of the size of the town?"

"No, Captain. We never reached the end—I don't think we even reached the middle. The town just spreads out in all directions. All in ruins, too, Captain."

"No other living thing?"

"Nothing but those birds, Captain. They were roosting up in the tall buildings down that way—" The trooper pointed a laconic finger. "But—"

"But what?" Zee snapped.

"Well, Captain, something looked queer about those buildings . . . they weren't exactly falling apart from old age if you know what I mean."

"I don't know what you mean!" She frowned.

"Captain—it's just, well . . . Well take this place for instance. You can see why it's a mess, there just isn't anyone around to keep it in repair. The weather did all this, sort of. But some of these big buildings inside are different. It didn't look like the weather wrecked them."

"What did it look like?"

"I don't know, Captain." The trooper groped helplessly for words. "I can't describe it. But look—if I could pick up a stone

as big as a horse and throw it through a wall . . . well, that's what it was like, Captain."

"Are you suggesting a bombardment of some sort?"

"Yes, Captain. But I don't know of any weapon big enough to wreck a wall, or knock down the top of a building."

Zee stared at the trooper. She didn't know either.

The rain and the wind were dead by dawn. Zee tramped out into the mud of the street and stared at the town. She found the doctor there ahead of her.

Barra was staring, transfixed, at some point about a quarter of a mile away.

"How does it look, Barra?"

The doctor turned a whitened face toward the captain. "You're in for another jolt, Zee."

"What!" She whirled to stare down the street.

"Look up," Barra urged her, "up on that rooftop."

Zee looked, seemed to stagger backward and rubbed her eyes. Unconsciously her hand slid toward her weapon. She remained in that position, frozen by shock.

The winged creature stood quietly on a roof ledge, watching them,

"The birds . . . the birds we saw last night?"

Barra nodded. "It must be. Remember how large they were?"

"But Barra, such a thing as that can't be . . . can't be . . ."

"It is. Or should I say, *he* is." She pursed her lips. "Zee, unless you and I are both crazy, there stands a man with wings. Mother of saints, what wings!"

"A man *can't* have wings!" Zee made a motion with her hand as if to deny the sight. "It just can't be."

"It *is*. I saw him fly there. I was looking down toward the town and he came flying over the rooftops. He is a man with wings, Zee. Accept it."

The captain refused to accept it. She saw him, knew he was there, but refused to accept the idea. Her hand stayed on the hilt of her weapon. Nothing she had found on the journey thus far had prepared her for the startling sight, even though the discoveries of that first week in the wilderness had shaken her time and again from her complacency.

"Barra . . . how can a thing like that live?"

"I don't know," Barra answered, not taking her eyes from the creature. "And I mean it in a different sense. A man would need a backbone like a horse to support wings such as those, he would need muscles . . . oh, I don't know. I wish I had him on my operating table!"

Someone ran up behind them, breathless. "Captain, there's a—" The trooper suddenly stopped. "Oh, there's another one of them."

"There are more?" Zee demanded, half turning.

"Three of them, Captain. Sitting back there watching us. Queer-looking things, Captain."

Barra turned to her, struggling to control her emotions. "They exist all right," she said dryly. "We can't all be crazy." She motioned to the trooper. "Lead on, girl." And followed the trooper around the corner of the building. Three more of the men with wings were gathered on a rooftop, watching the activity below them.

There was no real activity. The troops were rooted to the ground, motionless, watching the trio on the roof. A hostler led one of the teams through the doorway into the street, and the rooftop exploded into violent motion. The hostler froze with the astonished stillness of her companions at what she saw, but the men on the roof danced with strange excitement at the horses. Without warning one of them launched himself into the air with a gigantic beat of his wings, and floated silently toward them.

"Steady!" Barra warned the group. "Don't mob him, he's friendly."

No one moved. The man came to rest lightly on the ground a hundred feet distant and folded his wings. Barra stared at them, noted the lower tips reached to his heels and seemed to fold around his body without dragging. They were a pale, cream color. After a few moments one of the men who had remained on the rooftop leaped into the air, flying away toward the center of town. The third remained where he was, watchful.

Lieutenant Donn spoke up. **"The horses—he wants to see the horses!"**

"Lead the team out to him," Barra suggested.

Donn looked at the captain for confirmation but found her superior officer was oblivious to all but the man on the ground. She took the reins from the unresisting fingers of the hostler and started forward.

"Slowly now," Barra whispered. "Don't scare him."

Donn covered the ground between them in a slow walk. The man watched her approach warily, glancing from her to the team. When there was but a scant five feet between them, she stopped and moved aside.

The winged man hesitated, watching the lieutenant and her hands, darting glances at the weapon hanging at her side. And then he reached out for the reins. Impulsively, Donn handed them to him. He backed away, pulling the team, until he had put another dozen feet between him and the girl. He stopped then, and stepped in close to the team, to run his hands over their chests and forelegs, examining their strength. He was openly pleased at what he found.

Raising his head, he looked briefly at his companion on the roof, and that one spread his wings to float down beside the team. The two of them began a minute examination of the horses.

When they appeared to have finished, Donn said, "Satisfied?"

They stared at her, surprised and curious.

"You like the horses?"

There was no answer.

"Can't you talk?"

The bolder of the two slowly approached her and stared at her lips.

"I said," Donn repeated, "can't you talk?"

He glanced from her lips to her eyes, delighted.

"No, I suppose you can't. But you like the sound of it, don't you?"

He appeared fascinated by the movement of her lips and the sounds they made. Briefly he moved his own in a poor imitation, but nothing came forth.

"You evidently don't have the right equipment, man. You and our late friend, Wolf."

He looked away from her lips and darted a glance over her shoulder, to back quickly away. Donn looked around to find Barra coming up behind her. "They can't talk, doctor."

"No vocal chords," Barra explained. "Or if they have them, they've never used them." She opened her arms wide in what she hoped was a peaceful gesture. "I'm not going to hurt you. Come back."

He came back slowly, noting the absence of weapons on the doctor.

"Can you imagine this!" the lieutenant exclaimed. "My grandmother told me some fancy stories, but she never told me anything like this."

"They're something new on the face of the earth—or at least new to us." Barra tried to peer around him at his wings. "We're apt to find anything this side of the mountains, Donn. I tried to make Zee understand that, but I don't think I succeeded. Those little horses yesterday were only the beginning;

different races and different species have evolved here. We would call them freaks at home because they only happen once in fifty years, but this is different."

"I'll say they're different."

"What I'm trying to say," Barra replied, "is that life follows different patterns under different conditions. And sometimes forces you can't foresee and often can't understand turn life into altogether new channels. Here—suppose the Home Isles were suddenly flooded, dropped a foot or so under water. Do you know what might happen?"

"We'd drown—fast."

"No, not everyone, not the entire population. The stronger would survive. Suppose the continent wasn't reachable, and the survivors had to stay there, living in a foot of water. They'd take to boats, build rafts, begin swimming. And perhaps—just perhaps, you understand—after a few hundred years the descendants of those survivors might have webbed feet or fins like fish, to enable them to live in the water. If life survives at all, it adapts itself to its surroundings or is adapted by those surroundings."

She pointed to the stranger. "I'm not saying these people grew wings to stay alive, not at all. But away back in their past something could have happened to change their bodies. They may have been as normal as you and I, and a catastrophe of some unimaginable sort may have altered their body patterns. Children can be born with one eye or none at all, or with four arms instead of two. If that sort of thing continues over a period of years, eventually the entire race would be molded in the same pattern."

Donn jerked her eyes to the sky. "These did. Look at what's coming!"

Hundreds of the winged men were descending upon them, filling the air with the queer rustling of their wings. Faces on the ground followed their flight. They came in large groups

from somewhere in the town to hover over the roadway above the troops and horses, and finally to settle to the ground a safe distance away. All eyes were on the team.

"We don't excite them half as much as the horses."

"I don't understand that," Barra admitted, studying them.

"I should think our *lack* of wings would cause talk."

"Perhaps people without wings aren't so strange to them."

"You could be right . . . Oh, so right!"

The newcomers held their distance, staring at the team. One of the two men beside the horses picked up the reins and led them out to the group. His companions waited near them, still watching in fascination the movement of their mouths.

"Do you know," Barra said thoughtfully, "if they've seen people without wings before us, those others certainly couldn't talk." She advanced a few slow steps. "Friend, I want to feel those wings." She put out a hand.

He glanced down at it expectantly, flicked an inquisitive look at her face and after a moment extended his own. Barra touched hands with his, gripped his fingers and moved closer. He held his ground, cautious and watchful. Very slowly the doctor reached around his bare arm to put a tentative finger on the nearer wing. He made no objection. Boldly then she stepped to his side and placed the full weight of her hand on the appendage. He only turned his head so as to watch both her and the lieutenant at the same time. Barra smiled at him and lost herself in an examination of the wing and supporting muscles.

After a few moments he spread the wings away from his body, partly extending them into the air. The amazed doctor watched the ripple running under the skin of his back.

"In the name of the First Queen, Donn! Those wing muscles extend all the way down into his legs. I wish I could determine his weight—his body has to be light!"

The man jumped in alarm. Barra looked up, peering past him. The lieutenant was approaching.

"Put down your weapons first," Barra suggested. "He doesn't quite trust you."

The lieutenant carefully unbuckled the sword and placed it on the ground; then, with hands outstretched she came up to him to put a finger on his wing.

Barra chuckled. "The entire company will be up here before you know it. They can't stand there like stone forever."

"Not all at once, I hope. It wouldn't do to have the troop without their weapons."

The next move required hours to convey, but by noon Captain Zee understood what was wanted, examined the risks of the transaction as compared to the probable value, and gave in. The winged people wanted the team. In exchange they offered and delivered more green vegetables than the three wagons could possibly transport. They piled the stuff in a huge pile in the middle of the street, while one of their number clung possessively to the reins of the horses.

"Why in the world do they want horses?" Zee asked in wonder. "We can use the food, but what use would they have for horses?"

Barra examined the vegetables. "I'll make a guess. If they can afford to offer all this, they have a sizable field of vegetables somewhere. And with a team they can plow a still larger field."

"Perhaps so. But still, men with wings wanting horses. It sounds ridiculous."

"Ridiculous or not, I'd make the swap if I were you."

The captain did. She also included in the exchange a request to explore the town. She would have sent a party into town in any event, but her military training and caution told her that it would be wisest to do so under official approval. Taking

Perri, the doctor and a sizable guard, she penetrated to a point she believed to be the center of the place.

The buildings were as the trooper had attempted to explain the previous night. Some of them were quite high, so high that they surprised her because she could think of no reasonable explanation for the height. But the more startling fact about them was that many had been partially knocked down as if by bombardment.

The buildings were old, incredibly old, and many were falling apart under their own weight. A few seemed newer and in better condition, and it was in these that the winged natives lived, high off the ground. Climbing vines and greenery covered them all, growing in the crevices where the walls had tumbled down, growing right through the huge holes that had been knocked in others. Thick green moss blanketed the northerly walls. Nowhere did she see signs of reconstruction or even minor repairs, and concluded that the winged dwellers lacked the knowledge. No other signs of life were evident, no scavengers or rodents. The streets were rubble-strewn and empty of movement.

Perri made the discovery. Her eyes were trained for such finds.

"Look, Captain!" and she excitedly pointed out a half-buried cornerstone. "An inscription." She ran her hand over the stone to clear away the vegetation.

Zee bent to read it, without success.

"Can you read it?" she demanded of the archeologist.

"No, Captain." Perri was on her knees, tracing the strange lettering with a finger. "I've never seen lettering such as this before."

"Those are numbers there—undoubtedly a date of some kind: 1937. Does that mean anything?"

"I don't know, Captain. Numbers such as these have been

found on the continent, too, but no one knows what they mean."

"They have, really?" Barra interposed. "Perri, do you mean that these people and the continental people spoke the same language?"

"Not necessarily, doctor. This lettering is not like any I've seen in other places. Only the numbers."

"But wouldn't identical numbering systems indicate a common source?"

"Yes—something like that. But as close to the Big Continent as the Home Isles are, we've never used this system."

"Ummm." Barra stooped closer. "What could this 1937 mean, do you think?"

"It is probably the month or the year—" Perri broke off to study the solidness of the building—"the year this structure was built. Judging by the few finds on the Big Continent, authorities believe the ancient builders put dates on these stones for that purpose." She traced the numerals with a finger. "But as to just what these four figures mean—I don't know. It might have been one of the years of the reign of the First Queen . . . or it might have been a hundred years earlier. I don't know."

Zee stepped back to stare up at the building, noting the obvious age of it.

"This 1937 year must have been a long time ago," she softly commented.

Perri nodded in agreement, sensing her mood. "A very long time ago, Captain. If we knew some reliable method of measuring the age of stone under weather, we could make a close guess. Notice though that the structures made of stone are in better condition than those of brick."

"Stronger?"

"Or more recent," Perri explained. "Perhaps both, of course. I think the brick structures belonged to an earlier race or an

inferior race—natives or perhaps slaves. Either a later race or a superior race built their dwellings of stone. I'm certain, however, that both types existed together."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because both types died together, Captain. I mean, both brick and stone went through the same destruction at the same time. Whatever the destruction was that came to them. Both types of buildings were standing side by side, both took identical blows, and the stone was the stronger survivor."

Barra shook her head with a vague sense of unease. "I wouldn't want to be here, wouldn't want to see it. What kind of a thing—what imaginable kind of a weapon can cause destruction like this?"

Perri shrugged. "I don't know, Doctor. I wish I did. I wish *we* had it."

The doctor glanced at her, frowning.

Zee spoke up. "That strange scar on Wolf's back . . . Could there be any connection with this bombardment?"

There was no answer.

E i g h t

THE troop moved westward shortly after sunrise.

Zee counted the previous day as lost. She held but the vaguest of notions where they were going, had nothing more than a shimmering image of their goal, had no concrete plan of action or single direction of movement beyond *movement*, but still the idleness of the previous day annoyed her.

The wagons moved out loaded with green vegetables, and the spare team remained behind, while a silent horde of swift flying men kept them company overhead. In all her life Zee had never known the strange sensation of first seeing those creatures, of finding a silent, deserted city lying dead under the sun—but yet she counted the day lost. In the arranged

orderliness of her mind a schedule was something to be kept, even though that schedule was a tentative thing which existed only in her imagination.

In the wealth of pleasant and shocking sensations she had accumulated as she grew older, she remembered particularly her first days in military service, the first days on shipboard staring at the vast expanse of the western ocean, the first glimpse of the Colony and the quick exploration of it, and even the dull realization after a while that it was something less desirable than she had first thought. The newer sensations were the discovery of the stray and his intelligence; yes, even the tunnels. But now the winged men and the vanquished city topped all others, held her imagination enthralled. Still, it was a day lost.

She pushed the troops deeper into the west. •

And she cursed the absence of Wolf and the corporal.

Several days after leaving the city behind, the scouts reached a wide river and halted. Zee put her military mind to work on a new problem, a problem which she had never before encountered but one which had been taught in the Isles.

The troopers cut down trees, stripped them of branches and lashed the denuded poles to the wagons. Then, after the scouts had swum the river and taken up their vigil on the opposite bank, the hostlers urged the horses into the water and floated the wagons across. It was a slow, careful operation because the current was strong, and it would have been a minor disaster to lose a wagon. The first landed on the other bank a half-mile downstream, and the team was unhitched and brought back upstream in case it should be needed to assist the following wagon.

In midafternoon the operation had been completed, and Zee called a halt for camp, utilizing several hours of hot sunlight for the troops to strip and dry their clothing.

Barra stepped out of her garments and spread them on the grass to dry.

"Zee," she questioned with a straight face, "what would we do if Wolf were here?"

"Barra!"

"Well—what would we do,"

Lieutenant Donn laughed. "I know what I'd do."

"Lieutenant—have you checked the sentries?" Sharply.

"Like *this*, Captain?"

Zee turned her back without answering, to stare across the plain behind them.

Donn caught the doctor's eye and winked. She lazily stretched her arms, offering her bare stomach to the sun. "I like the feel of this."

Barra grinned at her. "All we need now is one of those winged men to come flying over."

The lieutenant shrugged. "They were naked."

"And thought nothing of it," the doctor supplemented. "It all depends on how you were brought up. We cover ourselves with clothing and force the coastal natives to do likewise. And after fifty years of that, they would feel shame if they weren't covered. But their grandfathers didn't mind."

"They were savages," Zee retorted.

"Wolf isn't." And she added hastily, "I know, I know, he wore breeches at least."

The captain replied with one low word.

"I wish he had stayed around, nevertheless. I wanted to learn more about that man. Say—I'll wager he could have told us something about that city."

"Do you know," the lieutenant offered, "I've been giving that place a lot of thought. The particular kind of destruction there puzzles me, but still I'm interested in it. Why couldn't a great battering ram of some sort have tumbled those walls?"

"The holes were high up," Barra reminded her.

"Yes, there's that. A battering ram wouldn't reach. But . . . but, Doctor, suppose it was something other than a battering ram? Suppose it were possible to construct an instrument which would hurl stones . . . hurl weights over a long distance? The weapon could be mounted in a field outside of town and bombard the inner buildings with stones or weights."

"What kind of a weapon would do that?"

"I don't know of course. A giant bow wouldn't do it, but there might be something on the same principle. If my arm can hurl a spear, why could not a weapon hurl a stone?"

"I wouldn't want to see it," the doctor said.

"No?" Donn paused in thought. "It would be a dirty business, I'll grant you. And frightfully demoralizing."

"Too much so," Barra said quietly. "Consider the present condition of that city."

"Yes . . . Quite dead."

"Perri believes the winged people simply found it and moved in. They didn't build it."

"No?"

"No. If you could fly, you would have no use for streets or stairways."

"That's so. I wonder why the rooms were so large and the buildings so unreasonably high?"

"The original inhabitants could tell you."

"But where are they?"

"Dead," Barra said unemotionally. "Or carried away. Perhaps the winged men are their descendants."

"How or why did they get wings?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. But I marvel at the bodies which support those wings. They are an outgrowth of the shoulder, did you notice? There is tremendous strength in the backbone and a network of muscles reaching well down toward the knee. I suspect they utilize chest and abdominal

muscles as well, but I had no opportunity to find out. Their bodies are completely designed to support and lift the wings, and there might be a weakness elsewhere. In the arms, perhaps. Your strength is in your arm for fighting; theirs could be in the wings alone."

At sundown, Zee put on her uniform and made the rounds of the sentries.

She spread her bedroll beside a wagon wheel and lay on her back counting the stars. The fire had been banked for the night and most of the troops were asleep, their still forms spread out on the ground around the camp. A great copper moon was rising in the sky as she dropped off to sleep.

A sudden hand on her shoulder brought her to her feet with sword in hand.

"Please, Captain—quietly!"

"What is it?" She stared into the trooper's face.

"Something moving, Captain. Out on the plain."

"Where?"

"There, to the west."

They stole across the camp toward the west, quietly working their way forward toward the sentries. A small group of women waited there in the grass, weapons ready.

"What is it?" Zee whispered.

"I can't tell, Captain. We saw several things moving, small things—there! There they are, Captain!" The girl pointed.

Zee narrowed her eyes to see better in the bright moonlight. Presently she saw the movement. The figures were small and they seemed to be five or six individuals, but at that distance she was unable to see whether they were men or animals. They looked white beneath the moon, and as she stared hard, she fancied they walked upright on two legs. But they were small, too small even when considering the distance, if they were men.

"How long have they been there?"

"I don't know, Captain. We discovered them only a space ago. Just before I awakened you."

Zee peered at the prancing figures. "I count five. Are there any others?"

"No, Captain. I passed the word along to the other sentries. We should have their reports quickly."

Zee turned her head to look back at the camp, to see only the glowing coals and the white broadside of the canvas coverings.

"Our fire has attracted them. Have it put out."

"Yes, Captain." The girl turned.

"Wait . . ." Zee put out a hand to stop her. "Awaken half the troops and put them on guard. Let the rest sleep."

"Yes, Captain." She faded away behind.

Zee watched the moonlit plain in silence. Around her new troopers crept into place and stared out into the distance. From behind came the faint muffled sounds of dirt being shoveled on the fire. Swords clinked as they were withdrawn from their sheaths. A battery of archers moved into a forward position just ahead of the sentry post.

A messenger came up. "Sentries report no movement, Captain. Each post has been reinforced."

Zee nodded, forgetful that it could not be seen. "They seem to be running about a good deal but I don't think they've moved in on us."

"No, Captain. They were at that same distance when we first spotted them."

Lieutenant Donn moved up beside the watching captain.

"All quiet on the flanks and in the rear. What is it?"

"Out there," Zee pointed. "Running figures. Small."

Donn stared. "By the saints, little men!"

"Men?" Zee strained her eyes.

"Yes, Captain. Naked little men. The size of children." She looked steadily. "Five of them."

"You are sure?"

"Yes, Captain. I see them quite clearly."

Abruptly then there was a flash of light from the plain and, before they could catch their breath, a booming noise. The figures had paused around something, and while the troops watched they quickly took flight, running away into the distant night.

"What was that?" Zee demanded.

Donn shook her head in wonderment.

The thunder from the plain had awakened the entire camp, and armed troopers were running up. Zee waited patiently for the reappearance of the figures, but they were gone. She grew stiff from the crouching position in the grass and stood up to stretch, measuring the distance the moon had moved through the sky.

"It isn't likely they'll come back." She spoke to the lieutenant. "Half the troops will remain on guard. The rest will turn in."

"Yes, Captain."

Thoughtfully, Zee returned to her bedroll and stretched out. She did not sleep.

Nor did she eat breakfast the next morning. She was unable to eat at all. She had almost stepped on the body in the tall grass.

In the faint early light of the coming day, before the still-hidden sun had broken the horizon, she and Lieutenant Donn went out to inspect the scene of the night's visitors. They came upon the body quite unexpectedly, frightening off tiny scavenging creatures intent upon a meal. Zee jumped back in alarm, instantly ill at ease. Her next step would have planted a foot on the thing's face. It lay on its back, dead and bleeding, in the grass.

The body was of a pasty-white male about four feet in height and hairless. The skin was remarkably devoid of any coloration, having a uniform paleness the color of unbaked dough. It was naked and had no hair whatsoever, no eyebrows or fuzz on the cheeks. Zee peered down into the glassy, open eyes and felt her stomach rebel. The man's ears and nose had bled momentarily, but his death was undoubtedly caused by a gaping, raw wound in his chest.

"Donn . . . what . . . what . . . ?"

The lieutenant only shook her head grimly. "That noise—the noise and the flash of light last night. That caused this. But what was it?"

"I do not know, Captain. It was a dirty thing, whatever it was."

"Barra should see this." She forced her gaze away from the body and looked back at the camp.

Donn concealed the contemptuous thought from her face and offered patronizingly, "I'll stay with the body, Captain."

Zee half turned, and then cut off a tart reply hanging on the tip of her tongue. In that half-circling motion her eyes had again sought and found the body at her feet. Without answering she put her back to the scene and stalked across the prairie to the camp.

The doctor trotted up minutes later.

"Morning, Lieutenant. Zee tells me you've made a find."

The lieutenant grinned derisively. "The captain wishes she had not found it, Doctor." She motioned downward.

"Zee has a soft—Mother of saints!" Barra grew round-eyed.

"I put it a little more strongly than that," Don supplied. "I surprised myself with what I said. Horrible-looking creature, isn't he?"

"May I use your knife?" The doctor dropped to her knees beside the body, to probe the wound with the blade Lieutenant Donn offered. "Missed the heart by a hair's breadth—no blade

nor barb did this. It must have been caused by the light and the noise last night."

Donn nodded in agreement. "Another one of our unknown weapons . . . something that discharges with light and thunder."

"I'm puzzled by the skin burns here—all around the wound. The weapon drives something into the body, and at the same time burns the skin area around it. Now, why?"

"I can't guess, Doctor."

Reluctantly she moved away from the wound to examine the head, nose and ears. "Pierced," she said presently. "He wore rings or ornaments in his ears and nostrils. A jolly pack of friends he had—they robbed the body while it was still alive." She continued her exploration of the corpse. "This fellow can't be very old, and yet he seems old. His body is mature, and yet I think he was comparatively young." She stopped and got to her feet, after carefully wiping the blade on the grass.

"Hold that in the fire when we return to camp."

"Yes, Doctor. He has a dirty color, eh?"

"The unhealthiest specimen I've ever seen! And I fail to understand the lack of coloration out here in this country. Apparently he went naked all the time and yet his skin . . . oh, well. Maybe he slept all day and worked at night."

Thoughtfully she picked up a short stick and held it to Donn's breast.

"Suppose this is a weapon. It gives off a flash of light and a crack of thunder. Now — your body has a large hole in it, and the skin area around the hole is burned—by the flash I suppose. What could cause that?"

The lieutenant didn't bother to answer.

"Oh, well," the doctor said again. "Let's go back." She cast a backward glance at the pale body.

Zee received her report in noncommittal silence, the uneasy

feeling still in possession of her stomach. She nodded and continued the job of breaking camp.

Midday found them more than the usual distance from the night's camp. Zee believed, not unreasonably, that the strange visitors would return on the following night, and she wanted to be as far from the site as possible.

She took off her jacket to expose her shoulders to the warming rays of the sun, and noted with a small shock that most of the troops had done likewise. Inspecting the skins of the nearest troops more closely, she came to the surprised conclusion that they must have been half dressed for several days. All wore dark tans of various shades. Zee opened her lips and then hesitated, turning the matter over. What harm did it do? And why raise the issue now? They had been out of uniform for many days, and she hadn't noticed it until now. And besides, the sun was hot. Oh, let it go.

"Zee," the doctor said suddenly.

"Yes?"

"Remember the scar on Wolf's back?"

"Am I likely to forget it?"

"It might have been caused by last night's weapon. A near miss."

Zee turned her head to the doctor. She too, Zee noted absently, was only partially dressed. The doctor was wearing less clothing than any of the troops.

"Is it possible?"

Barra nodded. "Why not? They might be his enemies. He dodged in time, and the flash of light singed his back." She amended it. "Or rather, whatever is pushed into the body by the weapon grazed his back."

"It wasn't caused by an arrow? A spear or a knife?"

"Definitely not. The wound was too large, too irregular. And whatever it was that entered the body is still there; the nature of the organs and the skin about the wound told me

that nothing had been withdrawn."

"But you didn't find anything in the body?"

"Nothing whatsoever. The death missile, of whatever nature, vanished within the body."

Zee could think of no comment.

"Speaking of Wolf," the doctor continued after a while, "I wonder where he and the corporal are now?"

"Dead for all I care!"

"Oh, now, Zee, you don't mean that." Barra waited, but the captain said nothing. "Because they vanished together, we've assumed they are together. I wonder if we can be wrong? Would either of them return to the Colony?"

"They'd be hanged!"

"For what? They could concoct a fine tale, something to the effect that we were all dead and they the sole survivors. But no"—she shook her head in puzzlement—"I can't understand his going back when he went to so much trouble to get us out here. For that matter, neither of them had reason to leave camp, but they . . ." She let it hang there, surprised.

"But they what?" the captain picked it up.

Barra swung around to put a hand on Zee's shoulder. "Do you *remember* what we were discussing the night they deserted? That night around the fire?"

Zee searched her memory. "No," she said finally.

"We were talking about Crane's Theory. Remember? The corporal was near us, eating on those tough little horse steaks and listening. Now let's see . . . I was telling you about the six-fingered tribe and—Oh."

Zee repeated, "Oh?"

"We were examining the possibilities of the man mating with one of your troops."

Zee said in astonishment, "Barra!"

"Yes," Barra nodded. "The corporal was listening."

"But Barra, not the corporal, not Avon! I've known her

for years. She is . . . is fastidious. She wouldn't think of such a thing."

"Zee," the doctor reproved sadly, "what you don't know about your own troops would fill a report." Very briefly she glanced at Lieutenant Donn walking with the troops on flank, and dropped her eyes. "You can't know."

"Oh, but surely, not that—that stray!"

Barra rubbed her chin. "No—I don't think so. At least, she was not placed in an embarrassing position because of him. We had known him only two weeks at that time, remember? And we had been on the march but one. That isn't the answer. But the corporal has been in the Colony for many years, Zee. And she undoubtedly picked up something from our conversation which put her to flight."

Zee held a stunned silence.

"I suppose," Barra continued after a while, "that she *has* returned to the Colony. Perhaps Wolf went along with her, and then again perhaps he didn't. We expect to be out here for some months, you know. That, coupled with the inability to face you."

"But if your suspicions are true she will be shipped back to the Isles." Zee was angry. "Stripped of rank."

"True. And quite possibly she has thought of that, weighed the consequences. What if she had remained with the troop? It would be rather difficult to care for her out here, Zee. It would be a handicap."

"I find it disgusting!"

"I find it a process of life," Barra flatly contradicted. "Wait until it happens to you. And Zee . . . your manner doesn't invite friendliness from the troops. If the case is as we believe, the corporal would rather face deportation than you."

Zee called a halt just before sundown and made camp in a grove. She had the wagons driven far in so that the trees might

hide the canvases, and ordered an early meal so that the fire could be extinguished before dark. Dividing the troops into equal commands under the lieutenant and herself, she arranged to mount a full guard all night, on and off in four-hour shifts. Finally, she dispatched two women over the back trail, to take a stand about a mile in the rear.

Perri was standing guard duty when the two went past her, and she recognized one as the tall, dark-haired woman from the peninsula.

"Keep your eyes open, chicken," Perri advised mockingly. "If you spot a little man, blow your whistle when you're all done with him."

"I'll save him for you," the tall girl cracked. "You don't seem to mind playing second."

"Keep up out of the grass," Perri retorted.

The pair moved off up the trail.

With the coming of darkness, activity ceased in the grove, beyond the quiet movement of the periodic changing of the guard. Again a great coppery moon rose in the eastern sky, illuminating the plains. Zee stood guard, in her turn, staring out through the half-darkness until her eyes ached. There had been no signal from the lookouts posted a mile behind them.

There would be none.

The two women lay face down on the ground, skulls cracked, their possessions and clothes stripped from their bodies. They hadn't lived to see the moon rise.

Perri saw a sudden movement, fifty feet from where she waited, and screamed a warning into the night at the same moment she loosed an arrow. The small white body, glowing sickly pale under the moon, leapt straight into the air with the arrow through its neck, to die before it reached the ground again. She reached for a second arrow to fit into the bow and was cut short by something that smashed her face. She neither

saw nor heard the flash of light or crack of sharp explosion. A white, charging wave swept over her body to the grove.

N i n e

THEY rushed the trees, a howling, disorganized mob of naked savages with but one fixed thought. The outer line of bowmen rose up from the grass and fired a volley point-blank, quickly to drop their bows and pull steel as the first of the charging horde overran their positions. Small dark weapons clutched in the undersize hands spouted fire, the grove reverberated with the burst of crackling thunder.

Zee emptied her vial of poisonous fluid in the face of an attacker and leaped aside in time to avoid his fire. In the next breath she found herself back to a tree, fighting two of them. Her short sword cut deeply into the neck of one, and the other fired, missing her head by inches. The flash half blinded her, and she struck out wildly, finding something solid beneath the blade. When she could see again, she found a man before her priming his weapon. Without pausing to think, she jabbed out and cut his hand from his body. The weapon fell to the ground. Another stroke, and the body tumbled after.

She stepped away from the tree, and a small white form slid around it to raise a weapon at her back. An arrow sang through his throat, felling him, and the weapon he had held struck Zee's legs. She snatched it up with a hasty examination, found a worked butt that was obviously meant to fit into the palm of the hand, and a long protruding piece that could only be the lethal end. The weapon had a small metal tip.

Pointing the long end at the nearest howling face she jiggled the tip and was jolted when the thing boomed and spat fire. The face dissolved in a hideous mass. She pulled the tip again, without result, and after another futile try hurled it away in favor of the blade.

She saw the white flash of the body coming down on her from the tree, and brought up the sword to catch his belly on the point. The attacker impaled himself and fired his hand weapon at the ground. She hurled his body over her shoulder.

The mob retired as suddenly as it had come, fleeing back into the safety of the night. Arrows flew after them, taking steady toll until they were beyond reach.

When they were gone she wiped the sweat from her eyes and looked around.

Lieutenant Donn was on the ground, the flesh around her ribs blown away. Barra was already working over her.

"Is she all right?"

"I think so, but then I know nothing of these weapons."

"Were you touched?"

"No. I had some bad moments, but I'm all right."

"Those fire weapons—they're murderous. I exploded one. It jolted my entire arm."

"I can tell you something about that," Barra said, working on the wound. "They only fire once and then have to be reloaded. I saw them doing that."

"I guessed as much. It explains the withdrawal. They've fallen back to reload—they'll come again. But if that is their weakness, we'll take advantage of it."

A shrill whistle cut the night.

"Here they come!" Zee shouted. "Archers!"

The second charge was no sneak attack but a full-scale open assault. With complete disregard of the arrows falling among them, the mob swept across the ground toward the grove. They held their fire until the foremost were but fifty feet from the waiting blades, then emptied the charges at the women. Those immediately behind leaped over the falling bodies to reach the line of defense.

Zee found herself astraddle the bodies of Donn and the doctor, fighting off the howling men.

The second charge was of shorter duration, although as fierce as the first. With half a mind, Zee listened for a decrease in the thunder, and when it seemed to her that it had fallen off, indicating the attackers had spent their ammunition, she shifted to the offensive, confident that she was in no danger as long as she didn't give them time to reload their weapons again.

When the attacking line broke and began a second retreat into the distance, Zee followed them, taking as many troopers as she could muster. They pursued the fleeing horde for a hundred yards, slashing savagely and with deadly aim. Not a single flash of defensive fire was directed at them. At a hundred yards Zee ordered the archers into action, and fell back to the grove.

"Barra?"

"Still here, still among the living."

"We've found their weakness. It's a matter now of outlasting them."

"Hold off until sunrise, Zee. They'll crawl back in their holes at daylight. I think that explains the whiteness of their skin. They must live underground and emerge only at night. It seems to—listen!" She quickly rose to her knees, staring across the open prairie. "Did you hear it?"

"I heard nothing. What is—Yes!"

They listened to a far away roll of muted thunder.

"That can't be a storm."

"No," Zee snapped, "and it isn't the noise made by their weapons. It sounds more like—like—"

"Captain!" Lieutenant Donn lifted her head from the ground. "Down here—you can hear it coming."

Zee dropped beside her, placed her head to the soil. The rumbling thunder was clearly audible through the earth.

"Horses, Barra! It sounds like horses running!"

"A stampede, Zee. We'd better get to the trees."

"Captain!" A trooper rose up out of the defense line. "Horses—hundreds of them, coming this way!"

"Fall back," Zee shouted. She swiftly stooped to pick up the lieutenant in her arms. "Take the wounded with you. Fall back under the trees!"

The fast moving mass of hurtling horses appeared far out on the prairie, little more than a shapeless blob of shifting lines. As they swept closer the outlines became more clear, became a frightened pack of running animals flying over the ground, running from some unseen terror behind.

Abruptly, just ahead of them, the grass erupted a frenzied horde of bodies, child-sized men leaping from their hiding places to streak for the safety of the grove.

Zee put a whistle to her lips for a piercing blast. "Archers! Take them!" She unsheathed her sword. "The dogs think to find shelter *here!*"

A scant two dozen or more managed to reach the trees ahead of the stampede, to be cut down instantly. The rest fell beneath the hoofs of the pack of ponies and were trampled. The flying horses swept past the grove and were lost in the night, the thunder of their passing receding in the distance.

Zee leaned against a tree. "That was a narrow one! How many have we lost?" She wiped an arm across her eyes.

"Seven dead, Captain. Sixteen wounded."

Barra spoke up suddenly. "And one gained."

"Gained, Barra?"

The doctor reminded her mockingly, "You don't think those horses just happened along, do you?" She paced to the edge of the grove where she could see the empty prairie, making no attempt to disguise her expectant eagerness. "We've seen that trick before, Captain."

Zee moved to her side instantly. "Where is he!"

"Here." The man spoke behind them.

The Captain didn't hang him.

Neither did she give him the upbraiding she thought he so richly deserved, she didn't loosen the angry flood of invective dammed up within her, she didn't humiliate him nor strip him, for desertion, of the rank he never possessed. Zee found herself unable to utter a word, while her emotions and carefully rehearsed verbal lashings churned unspent and unsaid. She reached him in four quick steps and froze there, her lips refusing to form sounds. Zee thought of all the things she wanted to say, the accusations she wanted to hurl at him, the prompt, curt finish of his life she intended to order. And nothing came out.

He waited patiently, waited for her to put into words what he saw was on her mind, and kept his silence. She was unable to translate the simplest of her thoughts into words. In a final gesture of defeat, Zee threw out her hand as if to push away an invisible force surrounding her, and her stiff military shoulders seemed to sag.

She said finally, with a dullness, "You are back."

He nodded, watching her face, sensing the resignation in her mind. "Back."

"Where is my corporal?" She asked the question as if she didn't really care, as if nothing mattered to her now.

He pointed to the east. "Returned."

Zee closed her eyes wearily, beaten, not at all surprised to find them aching and heavy. She made a sweeping gesture with her hand to encompass the tableau. "I suppose I must thank you."

Wolf said nothing.

She turned and walked away from him, left the group of watching troopers to walk away through the darkness and the engulfing trees. He watched her go thoughtfully, unaware that someone was tugging at his arm.

"Man, man," Barra cried, "are we glad to see you! Am I glad to see you again!"

He brought his attention down to the doctor. "Say again?"

"What? Oh—I said we were happy to see you back." She thumped his chest. "Where have you been?"

"Returned . . . corporal," he told her slowly, pausing to think of each word before he used it. His voice was harsh from disuse, and he had difficulty selecting the sounds which were needed to express what he wanted to say. "Back there . . . tunnel."

"She returned to the Colony?" Barra nodded slowly. "And you went with her as far as the tunnels, I suppose? Yes, I should have thought of that." She peered up at him. "It's not easy to talk, is it? You're having trouble with words?"

"Have not . . . used . . . used . . . ?"

"Not used your voice," Barra prompted.

"Not used my voice since . . . since then."

"When is *then*? How long ago?"

"Child."

"You haven't spoken since you were a child?" Another quick thought pushed into her mind. "Wolf—how long ago were you a child? How old are you?"

The man struggled with that one, knowing that the terms *months* and *years* were on the surface of her mind, there for the plucking, but still the terms meant nothing to him. The doctor used a language entirely foreign to him, and although he could carry on a limited conversation with her by seeking and mouthing words he found in her vocabulary, the words did not always have any meaning to him. She was thinking now in terms of years, he saw that in her mind, but *years* was something he couldn't identify.

"You don't sense," he told her abruptly. "What is years?"

"A year?" Barra was momentarily startled. "Well . . . a year is a full round of seasons, a year is the length of time it takes

the sun to go through summer, fall, winter and spring. From one cold period to the next."

Wolf considered it.

And again he shook his head. "Don't sense. No cold here, not once, not more."

"No winter season? I can hardly believe that. Don't you have snow?" She closed her eyes and formed a mental picture of falling snow, of white-covered ground.

He said, "No."

"By the Queen—what kind of a country is this? Look, friend," she returned to the earlier problem, "I'm trying to determine your approximate age." She indicated the grove of trees. "These trees are one or two hundred years old, I suppose. Were they here when you were a child?"

Wolf studied them. "No."

"Well! We're getting somewhere. Now, we passed a dead town back there on the plains, a town where winged people lived. Was that town there when you were a child?"

"Yes."

"Was it dead?"

"Yes."

"Were the flying men there?"

"Yes."

"Well, maybe we aren't getting somewhere. All I've discovered is that if the grove is two hundred years old, you are older. Pass it by for the moment. I'm happy at least in proving one of my speculations. You don't need a voice."

He smiled at her. "No . . . Doctor."

"I knew I was right," she told him happily. "Zee wouldn't believe me, she thought it too fantastic."

Wolf glanced over the doctor's head toward the far side of the grove where the captain had disappeared. "She is . . . is" He stopped helplessly, unable to select a word.

"She is a mighty unhappy woman at this moment," Barra

said it for him. "You've saved her and her command, and your reappearance is something of a shock. That, coupled with Zee's secret emotions for the past few weeks, was too much to handle comfortably. She'll come out of it."

"Sick," the man said.

Barra grinned at him, and lowered her voice. "She's in love. And don't bother to search for the meaning of the word—you probably don't understand it."

"Love?"

"Never mind. I have work to do. We've lost seven women here, and if I don't get busy we might lose sixteen more."

Barra returned to her work with the wounded. A burial detail was digging a deep trench just outside the circle of trees. Wolf watched them for a moment and picked up a spade to help. When the trench was completed and he saw its purpose, he picked up a large square of canvas and struck out across the prairie to where the bodies of the two sentries lay. Five bodies had been placed in the ditch when he returned, and the squad waited near by with spades. He lowered the rolled canvas into the ground and watched the troopers fill the ditch. A fire had been rekindled.

Zee struck camp before dawn and hurried westward, anxious to put a sizable distance between them and the grove before another nightfall. A few of the troops who had not suffered serious wounds walked beside the wagons, while the others were carried inside. Wolf deliberately slowed the caravan when it came to another stream, a more shallow one.

"They will not cross water," he said to Zee.

She stared at him without answering.

Barra took it up. "Who won't cross the stream? Those naked little savages? We'll be safe on the other side?"

"Yes."

Lieutenant Donn had climbed from the nearest wagon and joined the group. When Zee stood indecisively on the bank of

the river, looking across at the far shore, Wolf turned to the lieutenant and seized her in his arms. Donn opened her mouth with surprise, to protest the action, and changed her mind. The man forded the stream in waist-high water to carry the girl to the other bank. Then he came back to Zee.

"Why did you do that?" Barra wanted to know. "She can walk."

Wolf pointed to the bandages about another of the wounded troopers. "Keep dry. Water unclean." And picked up the second girl to make another trip across.

Zee ran the wagons across without having to cut timber.

They continued west at a slower pace after Zee had dispatched a half-dozen troops to guard the rear. The points had assumed their usual place, and the flanks swung far out in habitual marching order. . . . There was no other incident for weeks.

Zee and the doctor marched together in their usual place near the weapons wagon, with the girl always careful to keep the older woman between herself and the man. Wolf and the doctor carried on an animated though sketchy conversation. Zee listened intently but took no part in it. It was the doctor's habit to seize each new thing they found, a larger, older group of trees or a few tumbled buildings, and ask the man if they existed when he was a child. And without exception the answers were the same. The ruined buildings had been there before him, the trees had not. Doctor Barra mentally pegged his age at three hundred years and felt satisfied.

The old buildings excited her curiosity, but he could not explain them. They were there, they had always been there, he did not know who had built them or inhabited them. She marveled that they had stood so long—or rather, that their remains had lasted so long, and could not help but come to the conclusion that the builders had known a special kind of magic when working with brick and stone.

She missed the archeologist, Perri; regretted her death keenly. The girl's knowledge was as great a loss as her life.

Barra was surprised one day to realize that they had been away from the Colony a full month.

"Notice the change in the troops, Zee. And in us." She extended a bare arm in obvious satisfaction. "Look how brown. The sun makes me feel wonderful, content with life. I haven't felt this well since I was a girl in the Home Isles."

Zee answered absently, "Yes."

"I like this life—I could take it forever. Believe me, it will be hard to return to the Colony." She shuddered. "Rain—rain. How I've come to hate it!" She indicated the man walking beside her with a friendly finger. "When I'm as brown as he is, I'll be ready to retire on my pension."

Zee glanced at the troops. "I anticipate trouble, Barra, when the time comes to return. You aren't the only one who likes this country, this climate."

"Umm. Maybe. But, Zee, now that we've opened the country, won't it be necessary to keep patrols out here? You surely will have to move those guards at the Pass farther west?"

"Yes. Yes, I've considered that. The guard should be posted at the mouth of the first tunnel, at least. And perhaps even farther. We know now what those hideous weapons are, know what they can do." Her eyes swung to the scar on Wolf's back without realizing it. "And we certainly can't allow *that* near the Colony. Not until we find a way to combat the weapon."

Barra grunted. "Is there a way to combat fire and thunder?"

Zee didn't attempt an answer.

"Lieutenant Donn and I were discussing those weapons the other night; she's a sharp one, that girl. Her mind is as keen as her eyesight. But I can't say I always approve the direction in which her mind moves."

Zee said yes once more, rather dryly.

Barra blinked at her. "Donn is still puzzling over the de-

struction of that town. That's a trooper for you—I'd give half the remaining years of my life to know the secret of those winged people, and she's interested in destruction. However . . . She thinks the fire weapons might be responsible, larger ones of course. That whatever unseen charge it is which enters a body can also fell a wall."

"I've thought of the matter constantly," Zee retorted in heated defense. "I am not blind to my duties! Donn may have a keen mind, but her tongue is loose."

"Indeed?" Barra said mildly.

"Indeed. Trooper Perri, may the First Queen bless her spirit, planted the seed of an idea. If you remember, Barra, we wondered at first if it were possible to hurl rocks or weights at those buildings. If a device could be set up in a field outside the town and cause its destruction from there. I've carried the measure further. I'm wondering if the destruction we saw might not be a combination of the two weapons?"

Barra struggled to form a picture, and failed.

"First," Zee outlined, "imagine a device for throwing a heavy weight over a great distance. And then imagine that device so arranged that the flash of fire and clap of thunder occurs at the same time . . . no . . ." She hesitated, seeking a more workable idea. "Barra, I have it! The fire and noise is in the charge, in the weight hurled against the building. It doesn't explode until it strikes the wall! That must be the answer, Barra. The weight flies apart with a great noise when it strikes a wall, tearing a hole in the wall."

Barra's mind still tried to follow the picture.

Zee said, "Ask him the name of that weapon."

"Ask him yourself—he's right here."

"Ask him!" she snapped.

Barra had no chance.

"Gun," Wolf supplied quietly.

"Gun," Zee repeated, turning the strange word over in her

mind. "It is a *gun*. Ask him how it works."

Again the man spoke before Barra could ask.

"Not know."

Zee flashed him a quick, piercing glance. She had an instant realization that he was lying, deliberately lying.

The three of them walked along in silence.

The country grew more hilly and the terrain rougher. Now and then it was necessary for troops to put their strength to the wheels, helping the teams hoist the wagons across soggy ground. Zee noted that the guide had pulled the caravan around to a northwesterly direction, and consulting the image of the office wall-map which she carried in her mind, supposed that they were nearing the city he had marked on the edge of the new inland sea. She also noted, with sharp curiosity, that Wolf had adopted the habit of watching the far northern horizon. Zee posted extra guards on that flank accordingly, and began watching it herself.

She continued to hold to the belief that he had lied to her about the gun, but gave up any attempt to conceal her thoughts from him. A conversation between Barra and the man had wiped from her mind any last doubts she may have held concerning his ability to know what she was thinking.

They had been marching, as usual, three abreast and there was a lull in the conversation between the doctor and the tall native.

She suddenly noticed Barra looking up at Wolf, with a wide grin on her lips.

Wolf turned his head to her and said, "Yes," as though he were answering a question. Barra had said nothing aloud.

"But why not?" Barra said then.

"You not have it. You never have it."

"But you can hear . . . that is, see . . . well, you know what I mean. Why can't I?"

"Not born with it," Wolf told her. "Never have it."

"What's all this?" Zee cut in.

"I'm amusing myself, Zee. I put a question to him in my mind, but I didn't frame it in words. He answered me."

"I don't find that amusing."

"You wouldn't, Zee, you wouldn't. You're too conservative; you don't see the vast field this opens up to me. I asked him why it was that he could see what I was thinking, but that the reverse didn't apply? Why couldn't I know his thoughts? And he told me very simply what I should have known—after all, I've lectured you long enough. I wasn't born with the gift, I'll never have it."

"Gift!" the captain repeated angrily.

"Gift," Barra declared. "After all, what possible deception could I withhold from you if you saw through me?"

"I don't like it," Zee maintained. And she clung to the idea that although he might read her thoughts, those thoughts she formed into words for speaking purposes, he did not and could not know her secret emotions she held locked deep within her. Those were her own, and only hers. "It robs one of privacy."

The doctor summoned up an argument on the pros and cons of mental privacy, but left it unsaid when Wolf reached out gently and tapped her arm.

He walked with his eyes to the north.

Zee alternately watched him and the horizon.

"Wolf," Barra broke the silence once, "those winged people back there in the town. They didn't speak either. Can they—?"

"Yes."

"And those naked little beasts who attacked us?"

"No." He shook his head.

"Umm. They lack the gift? Then it was our fire that brought them."

"No," he said again. He halted in his stride and faced her, groping for the right descriptive word to use. Finding none that was familiar, he put a finger to her nose. "With that."

"My nose? Oh! They caught our scent?"

"Scent?" He studied the term. "Yes." Wolf put his hand on the doctor's arm, touched the skin of her face and placed his fingers in her hair. "Scent." And then he looked briefly at Zee, and said again, "Yes."

"This place where you are taking us, this city . . . Can the people there read us?"

"Yes."

Barra laughed at the captain. "May as well make up your mind to liking it, Zee."

Zee tightened the security of the camp that night, instructing the sentries on the north to be especially watchful and seeing that the strength of those posts was doubled. She prowled up and down the defense perimeter most of the night, aware that Wolf was there as usual, checking her sentries and keeping a close eye on the dark horizon. Nothing happened, and she fell asleep some hours before dawn after finding him wrapped in a bedroll under a wagon. It was the first time she had seen him cover himself in sleep.

The watchful waiting continued for another two days while the troops moved steadily into the northwest.

He was always watching the northern reaches.

The man's face itself revealed nothing to Zee although she scanned it constantly for some clue to the inner excitement she knew to be growing behind his eyes. Something of that unseen, unknown excitement communicated itself to her, made its presence known upon her senses until she, too, was watching the north with impatient curiosity. She found nothing on his face but the outward calm composure, the always amused cast to his lips when he was looking at her or thinking of her, the unreadable semialoofness with which he held himself. But she knew beyond doubt he was eagerly anticipating something from the north. And she waited.

Two days.

It came late on the afternoon of the second day. Wolf stopped suddenly, and Zee pulled to an abrupt halt behind him, staring over his shoulder.

They watched the fleet, running figure approach the camp.

The troops on flank had seen the stranger and wheeled to the north, weapons ready. The forward points had stopped, looked back, were waiting for some signal or action. Zee had a quickening of the pulse when she recognized something in the manner of the newcomer, something in the approach. The figure was running with the speed that Wolf had run, the day he brought down the little horse for meat.

Lieutenant Donn was the first to grasp the situation, she of the sharp eye. She saw the stranger with clarity.

"Captain..." she began in astonishment, "Captain..."

"Quick!" Zee demanded.

Donn made no further attempt at words, knowing they were useless. The newcomer had reached the flanking troops and dodged nimbly between them, leaping over the sagging points of the weapons they had unconsciously lowered in astounded consternation and surprise. The runner sped across the empty space toward them, toward the man. She was smiling.

Their visitor from the horizon was a lithe, bronzed woman as tall as Wolf, as clean-limbed and tanned, and almost as naked. She and the man were nearly identical in build, in feature, in race. She bounded toward him. Wolf caught her in his outstretched arms.

BOOK TWO

THE passage of years, more years than a Methuselah might count if he were there to count them, always brings change. Men make the political changes, contribute to the biological changes. The forces in the earth, forces sometimes called Mother Nature, make the geographical changes and contribute more directly to the biological. Methuselah, if he were as wise as Solomon, might chart the changes and trace them directly back to still other changes.

Mother Nature is a chain reaction in herself.

A prolonged warmish period of centuries duration may melt the polar ices and raise the level of the seas fifty or a hundred feet. A sea raised a hundred feet would wash inshore toward the mountains, obliterating coastal cities in its path. The constant pounding of storm and wave would accomplish quickly what weather required centuries to do: reduce to rubble those cities already partially immersed. A continent having lowlands facing the sea would invite it inward, creating a new inland sea, and a river that formerly flowed through the lowlands might find itself nothing more than a channel at the bottom of a new ocean.

Weather follows the waters.

Warm waters from a tropical zone would bring higher temperatures for the new coasts, the new interiors. Life would adapt itself accordingly.

O n e

CAPTAIN ZEE faced the northwest with a complaint. The troops had camped for the night on the open plain, five weeks and seven hundred miles from base of operations. The weeks had passed unnoticed and unmarked by all but a few, and the Colony behind them was but a vague, unpleasant place seldom thought of by the troops. Their number was lessened by eight fighters and a team. The native contingent had increased by one.

Zee complained bitterly to herself, and with what she believed to be justification. She repeated some of the complaints to the unalarmed doctor, the bitterness hand in hand with barely contained anger.

"Am I no longer master of my troops, Barra? Have I nothing to say as to where we are going, as to who enters and leaves my lines?" She rattled the eating utensils in her hand. "Am I only a figurehead here, following the whim of a stray—a native picked up and jailed by my patrol? Have I lost my command?"

"My sympathies say no," Barra answered her, "but my common sense says yes."

"He walks away when he pleases, he goes wherever he pleases, he returns when he pleases, and by the reverend saints he brings his tribe if he pleases!" Zee cast an angry glance across the fire at the "tribe." "My lines mean nothing, my security doesn't exist, and my troops are fast losing discipline."

"Come now, Zee, it isn't as bad as all that." She followed the captain's glance across the camp to where Wolf sat with the strange woman, eating. The doctor was beginning to entertain a humorous suspicion about the woman. "You're imagining things worse than they are."

"Am I? Barra, the troops are throwing away their clothing, a bit at a time. You will find it scattered along our back trail if you look. What does that mean?"

"It means they no longer need it. Look at me. Look at yourself—you aren't in full uniform."

"If they discard so much as one piece of their equipment, by the blessing of the Queen I'll hang them, Barra! Already they have reverted to barbarians." She watched the troops about the fire eating with their fingers, using the utensils only when necessary. "They eat as he does, drink as he does, and in their unguarded moment I suspect they think as he does. I won't have it."

Barra punched the captain in the arm. "You've overlooked your own point, Zee. They may imitate his thinking in their unguarded moments, but it doesn't carry over! They fought as well as ever, you can't deny that. Fought better, for what the sun and the climate have done to them. Can't you appreciate that? The troops are healthy, Zee, they have a mental and physical health they never knew on the coast." She motioned at the nearest. "Accept the judgment of your eyes. That girl is lean and hard and in fighting trim. She's happy here."

"Barra, the point of command is shifting."

"Nonsense."

"It is! I can sense it in the troops, and that is fatal to any commander. No one can hope to maintain order and respect if responsibility and leadership is shifted to a subordinate. Oh, they obey my orders, yes, they are too well trained not to. But they are looking less to me for confidence, and more and more to him—a mere native."

"We've discussed that *mere native* question before," Barra reminded her dryly.

Zee turned on her suddenly with a new line of attack. "Where are we going?" she demanded.

"What? Well—to the city."

"And for what purpose, Barra?"

"Well! You wanted to see it, didn't you?"

"I honestly don't know. Now."

Barra peered at her. "That's a strange answer."

"And the best one I can give you. I'm not at all sure I *can* answer in any other manner. *Did* I want to see the city, back there in the Colony?"

"You said you did."

"Yes, I said I did. But *did* I want to see it, or was the desire planted in me the way a native plants his seeds in the soil?"

"Well, now . . ." The doctor rested her eyes on Wolf.

"Barra, think back to that night in my office, to the night my patrol picked him up and you turned in the report. Do you recall suggesting this expedition, urging it on me? Do you remember pointing out the white spaces on the wall map and telling me *this* was the opportunity to see what—or who—lived on the far side of the mountains? Do you remember convincing me?"

The doctor nodded slowly. "Yes."

"Well, then," Zee demanded triumphantly, "*who* convinced you?"

Barra stopped eating, turned her face from the fire to regard the captain. "I knew you were working up to that. Are you suggesting he planted the seed in me?"

"I am suggesting just that."

Barra chewed her food thoughtfully. Around them in the night the troops were finishing their meal, were stretching out on the ground or getting up to wander off. The great moon that had illuminated the plain for so many nights was now only a shell of its former self, ridged with a faint circle of the body it had been. Far out in the darkness the night birds were crying to each other and their prey, crying new songs the doctor had never heard before.

"Do you know," Barra answered absently, "you may be right, at that."

"I am right," Zee asserted.

The doctor continued as though she hadn't spoken.

"Yes, Captain, you may be right.. After I examined him, examined that wonderful body and the mysterious things it hinted, I was fired with a sudden desire to see more, know more. Part of the desire was natural with me and part of it was not. I wanted to see the sun because his body told me there was a sun, I wanted to see this great plain because his health told me there was a plain. But above all, I wanted to see the other side of the mountains—and I don't recall having such a burning desire for that before." She looked around at Zee. "And I wasn't slow in communicating the fire to you."

Zee smashed a hard fist into her open palm.

"Of course! Barra, do you recall when he placed that new city on the map? That was enough to excite me, considering my profession. I thought at the time *that* was the beginning of my desire. Now I know better. That was the climax, the decision to move. You were the beginning, you and your glowing report, your wild speculations. The seed was planted in you, Barra, and you carried it to me like the wind."

"Umm. Skillful planting, you must admit." She put down her utensils. "Planted in you before you saw him."

"I'm faced with one unrelenting fact, Barra. We did *not* impress him into our service as a guide."

"No?"

"No. We were deliberately *led* here."

The doctor nodded, smiling. "I've been thinking that for some time."

"My security patrol did not just happen to find him and bring him in, he walked in where the patrol had to find him. He was not brought to your operating table and checked for disease; he offered himself to you; you said as much. He allowed himself to be locked up for a week because he was waiting. And while he was waiting, he knew the seed was growing." She swung her hand to indicate the camp, the troops, the plains beyond. "He did this, all this is his."

"Why don't you turn and go back?" Barra asked sharply.

"Could I, Barra? Could I really? Would the troops obey me?"

"I think they would. They would grumble, but they would turn." And she repeated her question. "Why don't you turn?"

"I don't . . ." She hesitated, and after a silence, said, "I can't, Barra."

"Umm. I thought not. And someday I may tell you the reason."

"But he is leading us on and on!"

Barra faced her. "For what purpose?"

"I wish I knew. I wish I knew!"

"Trust him, Zee. I do. After all, if he had some black purpose in mind he could have killed us as easily back there, as here, or there tomorrow. Trust him."

"Oh, Barra, Barra, the eternal optimist, the incurable romancer. Of course he could have killed us all, he could have caught us in the tunnels, could have crept up on us while we slept; he could have remained away until the men like children had finished their evil work. It isn't that which worries me. The troops can handle him and his woman, too, if it should become necessary. But, Barra . . ."

"What else?"

"Hasn't it occurred to you at all that he doesn't wish us dead, that he wants us alive—very much alive? His every action is for our continued safety. And when we find his purpose for wanting us alive—what then, Barra?"

The doctor stared at her. "You sound like a schoolgirl."

"I knew you wouldn't understand me!"

"I do understand," Barra retorted quickly. "I understand you very well. And you still sound like a schoolgirl. Arrange your thoughts like a grown woman who has knocked about the world for many years."

Wolf and the woman arose from the fire and walked off into the darkness. Barra followed the pair with her eyes.

"Zee," she said, "he isn't going to kill you or torture you or eat you. He isn't going to feed you to the little men or the wild animals. He's taking the best care of you and the troops that he possibly can. He went all the way back to the tunnels with Corporal Avon to protect her. He regrets as keenly as we do the death of those seven women. Now what could he possibly want of us?"

"You know!" Zee whispered.

The doctor hid an impulse to grin. Zee had gone back to being a woman.

"Yes," Barra said calmly, "I know. Or at least, I can guess. And I'm ready. Are you?"

Doctor Barra picked her path away from the fire with care, stepping over sleeping bodies. The sentries of the second watch had already replaced the first, and somewhere along the perimeter Zee was prowling the night. She walked around the tethered horses and away from the flickering firelight.

"Wolf," she said once into the night air, and waited patiently. He came to her presently, walking with the woman.

"Talk?" Barra asked.

"Talk," the man agreed. Barra looked at the woman.

Wolf grinned happily. "Mother," he said.

Barra laughed outright. "I suspected as much. Did you guess that?" She faced the woman with friendliness. "You have signs of age that Wolf does not. Your skin, for one thing, and the darkness of your eyes. If Zee wasn't so blind with jealousy she might have noticed the differences."

"Jealousy?" Wolf questioned.

"Never mind, you wouldn't know that either. Will your mother talk?"

"Not talk. Listen . . ."

"Listen to what?"

"Listen," he cautioned again.

Barra listened.

"I would be pleased to talk with you. About what?"

The doctor stared at her, astonished for all her pose of worldliness, of expecting the unusual. "You didn't move your lips! You didn't speak at all."

"Listen," Wolf said again.

"I do not speak with the lips," the woman said. "I am speaking with the mind. I would be pleased to talk with you."

"But how do you do it?" Barra demanded aloud.

"It is natural. Has not my son explained it?"

"He told me I could never know his thoughts. That I . . . that it was a one-way process."

"That much is true. He may know you, although you may never know him. But you may know me if I wish it so."

"Umm. You have an ability beyond him?"

"That is also true. There is no need for you and me to speak aloud; I know your thoughts and can make you know mine. Sadly, my son cannot do likewise. It is but one of his defects. You may speak to me with your mind, and I will answer in kind. You may speak to him with your mind, but he must answer you with the tongue."

"Why is that?" Barra asked, forgetting herself and speaking aloud.

"He is . . ." she hesitated, searching the doctor's mentality and vocabulary for the right expression. "He is what you term an idiot."

"What!" Barra fell back, staring at the man. "I don't believe it! Why, he's a better specimen than anything I've seen in all the years of my profession. Nonsense!"

"I must contradict you, for what I say is true. We are not of the same race as you must realize. You may look up to him as a better physical specimen and even perhaps a mental superior; still, he is an idiot." The unspoken words formed in the doctor's consciousness without tone or accent, without force or

emphasis, formed and made themselves known to her. "What may be the median to your race is not the median to ours; and what may be regarded as perfect by you is not necessarily perfect by our standards. My son is not perfect, not median. Unhappily for me, my son is of low mentality and possesses certain other defects. For those reasons he is an outcast."

"I find it hard to believe," Barra persisted doggedly. "I look up to him as I look to a mountain I could never reach." She paused. "Outcast? Wolf?"

"He may not enter the city. He lacks the ability to read or to write, to continue the chain of instruction, to educate those who may come after him. He is not able to both receive and communicate ideas . . . this speech which you use, or mine. It is feared that he may mate with a woman of the city and thus produce other children who will likewise be deficient. That would be fatal to the city. Therefore the city is barred to him; he understands this and accepts it."

"I *thought* he was a wanderer," Barra answered absently, "I said as much to Zee." She stopped, to struggle with the broader implications. "But look here, I don't understand all this other, this reading and instruction. What . . ."

The beginning was already buried in the past.

But in the beginning there had been a great population, a mass of people who covered the plains, the mountains, who lived everywhere between the shores of two opposite seas. It was the nation of some race, a nation of many people, many things, many ideas. Just what that nation once was, was no longer known. Only fragments remained. Those fragments were the property of the city.

"I can visualize that," the doctor interrupted. "I've seen the ruins on the Big Continent. People gone."

The fragments were collected in an underground room. The city thought those fragments had been gathered from far and wide when the nation was dying, when it was undergoing some

fierce, unknown torture by fire and death; the fragments were collected and stored in the underground room safe from harm. Some elderly persons, and children, who could read and write and interpret the fragments, waited there with them while the fire and destruction rained around them. And that was the beginning of the city, of Wolf's people.

"Your ancestors, yes," Barra nodded. "And you?"

That was the beginning, and it was already buried in the past and lost, thousands of years lost. The oldsters and the children survived the death that came to the nation, and the treasures buried there remained intact. The children emerged and resumed their lives, cared for the fragments. And when they began to crumble to dust with the passage of time they were copied, and the copies recopied when they, too, fell away. The children of the children found a better way to preserve the words when their turn came, they committed them to memory. The original fragments had vanished as completely as the population which once was, and the copies of the fragments were fast following. Memory was more durable. Thereafter as time passed and new generations arose in the city, the entire knowledge of what had once been was passed along from mind to mind, from child to child, and trained memory kept it intact; intelligence communicated it to the newer generations. Today in the city, she and her contemporaries were teaching the fragments to their children.

"Except Wolf," Barra commented, "who lacks the gift."

Except her son, who was an idiot. She had many children and only this one was deficient; his brothers and sisters lived in the city, memorizing millions upon millions of words, to pass along to their children.

"But why?" Barra asked aloud. "For what end reason?"

Because in the foreseeable future some people would want knowledge again, would want to know about the past and the present, would want to know the unknown things locked in

the ground around them. Some small race now building up between the mountains and the far western sea would seek knowledge, and they would have it ready for them. All the knowledge which had once belonged to the vanished dead.

"Such as those winged people?" the doctor suggested. "We gave them a team . . . for plowing, I suppose."

The flying ones had been to the city many times seeking knowledge. They had wanted to know how to till the soil, how to make it more productive, and once they sought information on stopping a plague. They might well be the race which would repopulate the plains.

Barra glanced at Wolf and then at his mother. "Which brings us up to the present," she said. "Why this . . ." and swept her hand in an arc indicating the camp.

The woman hesitated.

"Look," the doctor invited, touching her forehead. "I am your friend. I do not fear what you might say."

Again it began in the past.

Not always had the city of knowledge been on the shore of a great sea, it had once been far inland, two days' march from a mighty river wending southward. But in the day of her parents, her son's grandparents, a strange thing had occurred to the south and the sea came in to obliterate the river and the plains, to wash at the very foundation of their homes. It remained there, and they found themselves living on a new coast. Even that had been long ago. But a short while ago, only years as the doctor counted the passing time, a disaster had struck in the form of a huge tidal wave. The wave had come racing up from the greater sea far to the south and smashed itself on the helpless city, causing destruction, causing death.

It carried with it the seeds of a greater catastrophe, the threat of extinction.

"Extinction!" Barra repeated in astonishment. "In the

Queen's good name, how few of you were there?"

Before the sea struck there had been three hundred and ten adults and children. The entire population of the city.

Barra peered closely at the woman, attempting to read on her face the loss she sensed in her thoughts.

"And after the sea struck?"

"We number one hundred and forty, now."

"Is that all! Only a handful, and you've carried on for centuries with a population as small as that? From three hundred and ten you've dropped to a hundred and forty? By the blessed saints." She ran her hand across her forehead, staggered with the realization of the loss. A new thought struck her. "In what proportion?" she asked quickly. "What is the present balance between male and female?"

"Forty are females."

"I see. I see and understand. And I must admit that I sympathize with you." The doctor paused. "But these winged people—they also have your mental powers. Are they not superior to us?"

"The flying ones could not help, although they wished to. Already their males far outnumber the females, and they could spare none. And too, to the west across our inland sea there lives another peaceful people, but they could not help. By some means their balance is and always was even, a male for a female. They feared to upset the balance."

"Umm." The doctor nodded, grinning dryly and with sly amusement. "And so there we were in the Colony, half a thousand brood mares waiting." She flicked a glance at Wolf.

There on the coastal strip of the eastern sea, across the mountains from the plain, perched the Crown Colony of Western Somerset, a finger of the empire of the Home Isles, having in addition to its native population several hundred stalwart women with nothing more to do than police a population which never caused trouble. Several hundred women could, if

they would, serve the greater cause of saving a city and a knowledge from extinction.

"If they *would*?" Barra repeated again. "They have a choice?"

"They have a choice. Although my son led them here without direct knowledge, as he had been instructed to do, we will not violate your privacy without your consent. If you do not choose to remain with us, in the city, my son will lead you home again."

"Well! This is a startling turn."

"I will not deceive you; we desperately need you."

"Speaking for myself," Barra said, "I'm with you. I stay. And I know of my own knowledge that certain others will. But as for the entire troop—well, that's another matter."

"I thank you, Doctor. You will be most welcome."

"Don't misunderstand me, now. I'm electing to stay for purely selfish reasons. I want your knowledge—I want to know those things about my profession which I do not know, but that you surely do." She added anxiously, "Do you?"

For the first time a warmth formed in the doctor's mind with the words, a warmth that might have been a smile.

"I would be pleased to assist you, Doctor. I have been trained for such a purpose all my life. As part of the knowledge given me by my parents, I can quote to you from treatises of your calling. Although I do not fully understand the terms and meanings, doubtless you will recognize enough to fit it into your own knowledge. I have committed parts of such subjects as biopsy, biology and biochemistry, viruses, vaccines and vasectomy, and two subjects my ancestors called ecology and encephalia. I do not know this last."

"I'll stay," Barra said happily, closing her eyes. "I'll stay. Don't ever doubt it." And then suddenly she opened them again. "How old are you?"

"In terms of years, as you measure time?"

"Yes."

The woman was quiet, thinking about it. "I would estimate four hundred."

"And Wolf?"

"About two hundred and fifty. Each generation among us has a longer life span than the parent. My son's lifetime will be longer than mine."

"Man!" Barra said in wonder. "Man! But here now . . . ! Won't our troops . . . ah, these women defeat your purpose? We both admit my race is inferior to yours. We cannot communicate with the mind, we cannot live as long, we cannot run as swiftly. And as we go along we will find a dozen other ways in which we do not measure up. What will *that* do to your next generation?"

"It will be poorer, true, but not as poor as you may think. We have among us one who is versed in a science the ancients termed genetics, a science dealing with the parent and the child. We have studied the problem most seriously, and we are prepared to suffer the loss. We have no other choice. We must either accept a less intelligent new generation, perhaps, or run the risk of extinction. Your women are fine physical specimens; they are intelligent of their race. Their children will perhaps lose the ability to know one another's minds, to race as swiftly, to live as long. For a time, therefore, we must face the possibility of a lower standard, and we are already examining the problem of committing our knowledge to paper again, in anticipation of those future generations."

"You've thought of everything," Barra marveled. "Well, almost everything. How do you plan to tell the troops?"

"You, Doctor."

"I?"

"You. They respect you, your intelligence. They will believe you. You shall tell them. Tell them quickly, early, so that they

may have the remainder of the journey to decide. And please make clear to them that when we reach the city, my son will give them safe conduct home again if they do not wish to stay. But tell them now, that they may think about it."

"Umm. Merit in the suggestion. All right, I'll break the news in the morning." She glanced again at Wolf. "I still can't believe that you consider him mentally retarded."

"I am sorry, but it is so. Perhaps my choice of the term *idiot* is not quite correct, but I could find no other descriptive word in your vocabulary with which to describe him. Unhappily, my son is not as we are, he is sufficiently below us that we dare not run the risk of his siring children. A mentally deficient strain would ruin our work, our future." She placed an arm fondly about Wolf's shoulders. "He is less now than those children would be tomorrow, the children of our men and your troops."

"But," the doctor persisted doggedly, "if he is less than you in intelligence and ability, and *we* are still less than him . . . what are we?"

"It is not my wish to offend you, Doctor."

"Bosh—tell me. What are we in comparison?"

"Infants, Doctor. Uneducated and impaired infants."

"Umm." She nodded, considering. "Under other circumstances I'd hate to be told I was less than an idiot. However . . . You will be running a risk with our women."

"We have no other choice. And your women, however inferior they may be, are not mentally deficient."

Barra raised her face to the sky to examine the stars. She liked what she saw. Behind her the campfire had died to a small glow and only the captain and the sentries were awake, pacing their lines. The sky was near and the stars almost within reaching distance.

"All right," she said again slowly, her eyes on the sky, "I'll

tell them in the morning, before we break camp. But there are two things I will not tell them."

"Yes . . . I can sense that. I can sense the one."

"Two," Barra insisted. "I'm going to omit all mention of Wolf's fitness—or lack of it, fitness according to your standards. Let them think what they will, let them form their own reasons as to why he lives outside the city. I will not mention his shortcomings . . . there are one or two women in camp who wouldn't appreciate it."

"I sense your meaning."

"There are one or two women among us who especially think of him as a saint on earth, physically speaking. Let them continue to think so. It may be necessary to them."

"Yes. And the other?"

Barra laughed softly. "I am not going to tell my captain yet that you are Wolf's mother. Later perhaps, but not yet. My captain is waking up to the woman within her—I think she needs to be fully awake."

T w o

CAPTAIN ZEE faced the northwest with consternation.

She marched far ahead of the wagons, in a lonely position just behind the points. She wanted to be alone, to think, without having the voices and the sight of Doctor Barra and the two natives always impinging on her thoughts. She wanted desperately to straighten out what the doctor had told her and the troops that morning, to come to some decision as to what she would do on the day the caravan reached the city. She had to reach a decision.

She knew without questioning that her command would be split, would split itself as those who wished to stay, stayed, and those who did not, turned about for the reverse journey. And what would she do about those who chose to stay? Barra had

declared outright she was not going back. Who else would follow the doctor's example? And what could she do about it? How could she stave off mass desertion, and after the certain desertion was a fact, how could she cope with the problem?

She felt certain there would be no punishment for the deserters, however she might feel about the matter. It would be taken from her hands. If the people of the city were all that Barra had implied—and Zee had no thought to doubt her—they would offer her troops sanctuary, would see to it that she did not inflict punishment on the deserters. How then could she hope to maintain discipline among the remainder? How could she hope to maintain command of those who wanted to return, over the many weeks required to reach the Colony?

The Colony.

And how would she face her superiors in the Home Isles, with a part of her command gone, her discipline crumbling?

Zee put a quick hand to her eyes and discovered tears there, tears she had not known since childhood.

"Now take me," the hostler said low-voiced to the cook, "I know what's good for me. I'm staying."

"I don't know, I don't know." The cook was dubious. "I want to wait and see."

"Don't be a chicken! You know what's good for you, don't you? You like this sunshine out here, don't you? You want a bellyful of rain all your life? Wise up, chicken. You'll never get another chance at it. Think of the fun—"

"I am thinking of it. And I don't know . . ."

"Be human, you chicken, be human. You like the men as much as I do."

"I want to wait and see," the cook insisted.

There was talking along the flanks; there had always been talk on one subject or another, but this morning all the talk centered on a common subject.

"Made up your mind, little one?"

"Not yet, not yet. Sounds nice, doesn't it?"

"Depends on what you call *nice*."

"Always thinking about your belly."

"No—there's other things. I like it out here. But the pay is back there. You have more freedom out here. But you eat better back there. Except it rains, of course."

"It rains—yes. I haven't seen my family for six or seven years, do you know that? Mother and two sisters in the Isles—I wonder if I want to see them again?"

"There's no coming back, if you stay here."

"I know that. I'm wondering if I want to see the Isles again. Do I?"

"How should I know? I don't. And I don't want to see the Colony again, either. What a pesthole!"

"I still owe some of my next pay, back there."

"You sure won't have to pay it now, if you don't want to."

"You staying?"

"Me? You can gamble your last arrow on it!"

"The captain'll blow air."

"The captain'll be carrying one if she doesn't stop messing around that man Wolf."

"I like the idea of it, I applaud the idea. Did you ever imagine there could be people somewhere, anywhere, who knew more than we've ever dreamed of knowing?"

"Listen to the teacher!"

"I'm serious about this. They know things that I don't, that I want to know. This is my opportunity."

"Stop blowing air."

"Say what you please. I'm going to investigate."

"What you going to do, chick?"

"I've half decided to stay."

"You have? Well . . . count me in. We've knocked around together for a long time, so I might as well stay, too."

"What d'ya think the captain'll do, I ask you?"

A laugh. "You ask me! Open your eyes, open your eyes. She'll never leave that naked baby."

"Ya' think so?"

"I think so. And I'll tell you something more—the lieutenant has got him marked, too. What a scrap that'll be!"

"I'd put up odds on the lieutenant."

"Not a chance! But I'll pay to see the two of them fighting over a man—especially *him*."

"Just keep your eyes open, that's all I say, keep your eyes open, and you won't miss it."

"If they stay, we all can, can't we?"

"You heard what the doctor said. And I'm thinking you can stay whether the captain does or not."

"No lash?"

"No lash."

The troop made a wide, purposeful detour around the ruins of a monstrous city, ruins that stretched for uncounted miles as far as the eye could see. Wolf took pains to caution the lieutenant against approaching it, went forward past Zee to steer the points away. The nearer flank was instructed to avoid it at all costs. All eyes swung that way, examining the blasted towers of stone as they passed in the distance.

"What is it, Wolf?" Barra stopped to stare.

"Die," he said, and then amended, "death."

"There is death in the city? Men or animals?"

"Not men, not animals. Death, not seen, not felt."

"A death you cannot see or feel? More magic of these ancients of yours?" She directed a thought at the older woman walking beside Wolf. "What causes it?"

"I do not know the answer. It was not in those fragments left behind, not in the memories left me by my parents. I know only that it causes a fast, invisible death if you so much as walk through the streets. The hair on the body falls away and

the skin turns color, the organs of the body bleed. You become violently ill and sometimes the skin sloughs off in large pieces, the eyes may drop from their sockets. And after a few days you will die."

"From nothing more than walking through the streets?"

"That is truth."

"Would it be caused by those *guns* Wolf mentioned?"

"No, it is not by guns."

Barra walked with her eyes on the ground. "I've been meaning to bring that up," she said without speaking aloud. "Both of our officers have exhibited a curiosity concerning those *guns* . . . I'd like to suggest that you don't reveal the secret of them."

For the second time she seemed to feel a warmth in her mind, an approval or a sense of agreement. "No one of you will know of them. Nor any who ask."

"Thank you." And then as an afterthought, added, "I hope you have some effective means of defending yourselves, your city?"

"We have. It does not involve guns or any weapon you might imagine, but it is effective. My son could have saved you the loss of those seven lives if he were able to master it."

"Oh . . . Another indication of his inferior abilities?" The doctor delicately avoided using descriptive terms.

"That is true."

"I'm not going to pry," Barra replied. "Let it go no further than this: judging by what you have said, your defenses do not rely on hand or even physical weapons."

"No."

The mute remains of the city slowly swung behind them, an everlasting monument to the genius of ancient man. He knew his magic well and applied it accordingly.

Because of Wolf's urging, the points described a half-circle around the ruins and on the opposite side picked up a broad, flat expanse of ground like a roadway running into the west.

Like that earlier, too-wide pathway through the forests leading to the tunnels, this ribbon of bare ground seemed to hint of artificiality. Zee noted it and said nothing, following her scouts wherever the man led them, quite convinced that the tribes and peoples who formerly lived on this land were beyond explanation.

She hadn't stopped fighting her problem.

Without consciously realizing it, she had allowed a part of it to become resolved in her mind, but she went on wrestling with the remainder. She had stopped thinking of the troops who might stay behind, stopped thinking of punishment that should, according to military dictates, be meted out. Without directly realizing that she had given up that portion of her problem and had already abandoned those troops who elected to remain behind, she worried over the more urgent one of getting the balance of her command back across the plain to the post. And the reception that would be awaiting her there.

Zee didn't quite know how she had come upon the figure, but presently she found herself thinking in terms of *half*. If half stayed behind in the city, how could she safely get the remaining half back to the Colony? She would take the teams and wagons, of course; they were needed; and, too, she couldn't abandon the Queen's property. Knowing the country, they would find it somewhat easier to recross, faster to cover the return journey. But still, a new way would have to be found over certain lengths of the back trail, certain parts of the wild country. She simply could not withstand another attack from the white little savages and their *guns*, not with half her command missing. None of them would live to see the Colony.

It would be wise, too, to avoid that city where the winged ones lived; they might want another team, perhaps all of them this time, and without horses she would have to leave the wagons behind. Wolf would guide them back, perhaps he and his

woman. They surely could find a safer route over the plains to the tunnel.

His woman . . .

| The woman must have been waiting for him.

Somewhere over there on the far side of the ruined city, she must have patiently waited for his return, while Zee had held him in the Colony, had outfitted her train and started westward. Had waited for him all those weeks while the troops crawled westward, while Wolf conducted the corporal back to the tunnels. She had waited a long time for the man.

Even Lieutenant Donn seemed to have changed her mind; she stayed away from the pair.

Corporal Avon had gone back, by this time had spread around the post the story of the sun-drenched plains. Avon, of course, would be stripped of rank and sent home in disgrace, but those in the Colony would learn what it was like, here.

The officer she had left in charge of the post during her absence was not an overly imaginative woman, but she might think to extend the patrols, might push the sentries at the West Pass a bit deeper into the valleys beyond. There was a possibility she would send exploratory patrols through the valley to the tunnels. They wouldn't venture beyond those, not until Zee returned.

Until Zee returned.

That would be a bitter day. The commandant returned, with only half her troops. And where were the rest? They had chosen to stay behind, stay in a city far out on the plains. Who among her superiors would accept that excuse? None. And Captain Zee? The captain would be broken of rank and relieved of her command, shipped home on the same boat with Corporal Avon and her child.

Eventually a larger force would be sent through the tunnels to the prairie, a force that would have to stumble across the plain as best it could without the help of a native guide—

but then, that shouldn't be too difficult. Her own caravan had left a broad trail of waste in its wake, clothing, refuse, signs of passage. With the aid of those troops who had made the first journey, a larger force would not take too long to find the city again. And then the deserters would answer to their decision. But unfortunately, she would not be there to participate. She would be in the Home Isles.

Zee thought briefly of anticipating the new command, of reorganizing her troops and again starting westward as soon as she had returned to the Colony. Of adding teams and wagons, restocking supplies and striking back at once, without waiting the tedious months for the ship to sail to the Isles and return with reinforcements. Strike before those troops remaining in the city could plan on her arrival. But after a moment's thoughtful consideration of the plan she discarded it. The risk was too great.

Doctor Barra had said that morning there were a hundred and forty people now living in the city.

With the addition of half her deserting troops, there would be nearer two hundred. Zee would need half a dozen teams and three hundred fighting women to cross the plains again and storm that city. And three hundred troops, in addition to those already absent, could not be spared from the Colony. No.

The problem of retaliation was in the lap of her successor.

While she, meanwhile, would be under detention in the Isles with Corporal Avon. Poor little Avon . . . why hadn't she taken more care?,

But what of those troops who did remain behind, who did stay with the strangers in the city? What would become of them? Doctor Barra had stated rather plainly what would be expected of them. How many of those troops in her command would prefer a family life to a fighting one? Well, to be more precise, how many of them would prefer a family life here to police duties in the Colony?

Zee reached around to take off her jacket and allow the sun to warm her bare shoulders and back. The Colony weather was no happy thing. Barra's point was well taken—the troops were certainly healthier, far more satisfied here than on the coast.

She only hoped those who remained behind weren't choosing slavery.

It never occurred to Zee to shift a part of the blame for her problem on the doctor for urging this on her, or to coming over the mountains, or to condemn the man for causing it. That he had been primarily responsible for their present position she realized and freely admitted, but she alone had made the decision to move, regardless of the outside pressures brought to bear. Wolf had held a prize dangling before her eyes, Barra had made it easier for her, but she had snatched at it. None would have left the Colony had not she decided they should. The blame was therefore wholly hers.

She liked Wolf.

And she looked forward with a quickening interest to making the long journey back to the Colony with him at her side. If only his woman stayed behind. Perhaps the woman's place was there in the city, perhaps it would be necessary for her to stay. Then she and Wolf could make the return trip together, alone. Possibly she had been too harsh with him.

Would Lieutenant Donn go back? Or stay?

Donn was pondering the identical question.

Donn marched along at the rear, far behind the wagons but just ahead of the rear guard, where she might be alone. She saw the bare, bobbing shoulders of the captain in the distance and guessed at her thoughts. Donn had no illusions as to the captain's intentions, did not need to guess as to her coming decision. The troops were talking, speculating, and many of them would desert. They fully believed there would be no punishment of any kind, now or in the future. They liked it here,

and they would stay. It was as simple as that.

But Zee, like the stiff rulebook soldier that she was, would turn her back on the city and march back to the coast. That is—she would now. For a time, Donn had been in doubt. But with the coming of the running woman, the doubt vanished. Zee would go back, even though it meant the end of her career.

Where then, did that leave the lieutenant?

If she went back with the captain, doubtless she would be elevated to command of the Colony when the captain was sent home. And in that position she would be instructed to march out here once more to take the city, recapture the deserters. Not a happy future. On the other hand if she remained, she would be obliged to defend the city against a new commandant when *that* woman came with troops. A likewise unhappy choice.

One way or the other, at some date in the future she would be engaged in fighting over the city and the choice she made. Unless—and although it was a wishful solution, it was still possible—a second attempt to take the city by force would never be made. The Queen would not decide to march more troops across the plains, or those intending to return to the Colony would never reach there to tell the tale. A *part* of their present force would be hard put to reach there alive. If no one returned, not one of the fighting force, the Colony authorities just might close the Pass and write off the expedition as lost. The corporal's early return would not be counted, of course. But if a year or more passed and the Captain and her troops failed to come back, that might be the end of it. In which case, she could stay behind with impunity.

Wolf would be hers.

That is—after the problem of this other woman was taken care of. That, however, was another egg to be cracked when the time came to fry it. There was a certain girl behind in the Colony who would miss her, but she could find someone else. There must have been someone else before the lieutenant came

along, and doubtless there would be others.

Wolf was more interesting.

Donn didn't realize she was lagging until she found the rear guard almost walking on her heels. Without referring to anything in particular, she said,

"Quite a problem, isn't it?"

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"I've been studying the matter."

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"I think," she said slowly, to emphasize the thoughts behind her words, "that the force which returns to the Colony will not be up to full strength."

"No, Lieutenant."

"It will be difficult to fend off an attack."

One of the guards glanced at her. "Yes, Lieutenant."

Donn nodded again slowly as though she were studying the seriousness of the problem, and then trotted away to catch up with the creaking wagons forward. The troopers watched until she was safely out of hearing.

"What'd I tell you?"

"Wounded or not, some of the chicks are laying it on the line for her. They think she can take the captain."

"Not a chance! Captain's got an arm."

"I want to watch it, that's all, I want to watch it."

"You'll get your chance, chicken. That lieutenant is going to stay here. And when the captain orders her to turn around and start back—you'll get your chance."

"What if the captain doesn't go back?"

"Just keep your sights on that Wolf, he's the boy."

"What if she insists on going back?"

"What if he picks her up and carries her off?"

"Me, I don't like the idea of slugging it out with them naked little bastards and their fist-fire again."

"You know what to do about that, don't you, chicken?"

Captain Zee kept her eyes firmly trained on the far horizon, eagerly searching for that first glint of water that would be the sun shining on the inland sea. She felt they were very near the goal.

Somewhere before her in the reasonably near distance was the sea, and on the edge of that sea was a symbol, a small star sketched onto a map, a map which had held a large blank white space until a sea and a symbol were added. She wanted very much to find the symbol and complete her purpose, the only part of her purpose that could be completed now. She would, of course, make the expected report when she returned to the post, but it would be a hollow victory, not at all the kind of victory she had dreamed of when she outfitted the expedition.

With her command almost visibly falling apart, she had to reach that city to satisfy herself, to finish a project in a way that would be in keeping with her training.

"Captain?"

She turned, startled, to find Wolf beside her. She had not heard him approach.

"Yes?"

"We must turn—there." He pointed off the path, again to a more northwesterly direction.

Without hesitation she called an order to the points, and the caravan slowly swung into the indicated direction. The scouts were not as alert as they had been in the past, marching now with an absent reliance on the man to warn them in time of any approaching danger. They sensed the march was nearing its end.

"Where is your city?" Zee asked.

He waved an arm. "Soon."

They walked along together, conscious of each other.

She searched the horizon again, only half expecting to see

anything. "Will we reach it tomorrow?"

"No."

"Perhaps the day after?"

"I think yes."

A silence fell between them. Zee was thinking of the end. She studied the ground, kicked at tufts of grass. She said finally, "I don't plan to stay long. Rest the teams and the troops, only long enough to restock our food and water supplies. Can you let us have supplies?"

"Yes," he answered again. "I want you—"

"You what?" she demanded, and realized too late that she had cut him off before he could finish. "Yes?"

"I want you to stay, wish."

"Thank you," she said stiffly. "I can't stay." They continued along in silence. The points topped a rise and were lost to them. After a few moments' walk they crossed the hill to find the points already climbing and disappearing over another. For a space as they descended the first slope they were cut off from sight, the scouts already gone beyond and the caravan hidden behind.

"I wish," the man told her again.

"Why?" she asked sharply.

"Like you," he said.

Zee repeated, "Thank you," but the stiffness had dropped from her voice. "What is your city like?"

He looked at her curiously. "Not know."

"You don't know? But why not?"

"I stay outside."

"But surely you remember it as a child? You must have lived in it sometime."

"Not know now."

"Don't you remember anything about it?"

"No, can't," he answered. "It . . . changes."

"Changes? What do you mean by that?"

"Not know. Changes. My mother explain you."

"Thanks," Zee tried to be flippant. "I'll ask her someday. She . . . *who?*"

"Mother." He was watching her again.

Zee stopped him, reached out a hand to grasp his arm. She half turned to watch the caravan come over the hill, saw the flanking troops pacing the wagons along the slopes, saw Lieutenant Donn pulling away from the rearmost guards, saw Doctor Barra and the tall, tanned woman striding along together just behind the wagons.

"Is she your mother?" Zee demanded. "*That* woman?"

He grinned at her. "Yes."

Shocked out of her placid senses, she could only stare up at him, not fully understanding what he had said.

"But why didn't you tell me?"

"Not ask."

Zee looked again at the woman walking with Barra, and faced forward to resume the march. Unable to untangle her chaotic thoughts or even understand a queer new emotion now playing havoc with her mental stability, she was woodenly plodding alongside the man a space later when she happened to glance down and discover she was still holding his arm.

Zee hooked the fingers of both hands in her belt.

The stars that night were larger than she had ever remembered them, and there were countless thousands more than she had seen before.

She walked away from the fire and the wagons to spread her bedroll on the slope of a hillock, to a distance where the firelight conversation was no more than an indistinct jumble of words and tones. Far away on her left she made out the moving silhouette of the sentry against the stars. Zee lay on her back to clasp fingers behind her head.

The stars were brilliant, the air was crisp and clean. The

day which had begun so wretchedly was ending with a smooth serenity.

And after another day, Wolf's city.

T h r e e

ZEE faced the sweep of water in open disappointment.

The day before she had stepped up the pace of march, pushing the teams as fast as she thought they should go until the doctor had forcibly slowed them down, concerned with the well-being of those few wounded who still rode inside. Zee habitually ranged far ahead of the troop, searching for a glimpse of the sea and never finding it, standing impatiently until the caravan could catch her again. She had camped that night with an eager intensity, knowing it to be the last on the plains as far as the outward trip was concerned. And she had been unable to find sleep early, turning again and again to speculation of the end of the journey.

She was up again before the sun, to break camp early. Seeking out Wolf and his mother, she asked him if they would reach the city today. Wolf nodded his head and agreed, while the older woman merely examined her in silent curiosity. Away from them, Zee cautioned the troops to alertness and ordered that they should approach the city like any other strange and perhaps hostile habitation.

And then she pushed forward relentlessly.

Zee discovered the sheet of water in the early forenoon and raced toward it while the scouts labored to keep up. She raced downhill across sparse ground to come to a running stop on the sandy shore of the sea, an immense sea oddly without wave or motion. Her feet planted in the sand, she looked for a city that was not there.

Her disappointment was great, verging on anger.

Far behind her the wagons creaked loudly as the teams tugged at them, and the troops walking flank quickened their pace to pull ahead and fan out in a semicircle defense perimeter, each tip of the line standing at the water's edge while the middle bowed out to receive the wagons and close together again after they had passed. The rear guard took up solitary stations on a ridge above the water, watching both it and the plains behind them.

Barra peered at the sea and said nothing.

"Well?" Zee demanded of Wolf, taking an aggressive stance before him.

He seemed amused. "Here," he said.

"Where? Under the sea? Out there on an island?"

"Here," he repeated, and pointed a finger to his feet.

She looked at the ground and then into his face.

"Where is it?"

The man looked around at his mother and seemed to receive some unspoken assurance. He reached out to take Zee's hand, and led her a few steps into the water.

"Here," he said again. "Look down."

She glanced down impatiently to see her feet on the bottom, the sea swirling around her ankles. Before she could open her mouth to protest again, Wolf swiftly bent down to scoop up a handful of water and dash it on her uniform. She stepped back from him with a shout of annoyance and tried to brush the water from her clothing. It was dry under her hand. Startled, she stared at the clothing and the water, and then dipped her hand in it. She removed her hand to stare at the dryness of it.

"Wolf—What is this?"

"Feel," he instructed her. "Feel the bottom."

Zee bent over to put both hands on the sea bottom.

"Close your eyes," he said next.

She obediently closed them, wondering.

"What you feel?" he asked.

"Why, mud of course . . ."

"What you feel?" he asked again.

She hesitated, moved her fingers, shoved her hands into it and wriggled her fingers again.

"By the saints!" she exclaimed. "Dust!"

Barra pushed out into the water beside her.

"Dust?"

"Dust, Barra, dust as dry as dust! Put your hands into the water and close your eyes. Rely on the fingers alone."

"It is dust," Barra echoed. "What magic is this?"

"Street," Wolf told her.

"This is a—We're standing on a street?"

"Street." He swept an arm around in a wide arc. "City here."

"But what is this water?" the doctor persisted. "Or what seems to be water?"

"Not water," he told her, and stopped, not knowing the words to describe it.

Barra turned to his mother. "This," she said aloud for Zee's benefit, "is what you meant when you said you had adequate defenses for the city?"

"That is truth, or part of the truth." The woman's reply was heard by both Zee and the doctor, although she did not use her voice. "What you think you see here is but one of the weapons at our disposal. This is not water although it seems to be to all who approach; this is not the sea, although it is skillfully blended into the real sea a few miles away. What you are standing in could be fire if we so wish it, or sand or mud or a mountain. This is but one of our methods of hiding the city from those who should not discover us." As she finished she was looking at Zee.

Zee was watching her, curiously intent.

"An illusion?" Barra suggested.

"That is truth. You are standing in an illusion, not water, although you will believe it to be water until you are made to

realize otherwise, as my son has just done. You are actually standing in one of the city streets."

"Umm. It's all around us?"

The tall woman smiled briefly and glanced beyond her, apparently at the empty sea.

"There is a man standing watch scarcely twenty feet behind you; it is he who is creating this illusion. Behind him are a small group of people watching us, and still beyond them are others on the roofs of buildings, looking our way. We have waited long to welcome you and nearly half our populace is watching."

Zee and the doctor had whirled about, searching.

"Skillful," Barra said in pleased wonder, "skillful indeed."

Zee was nervous, coldly aware she and her troops could do nothing to protect themselves against an adversary they could not see. Wolf reached out for her.

"Come here."

Holding her hand, he led her forward. The water seemed to swirl about her legs and climb higher on her body, until it almost reached her belt. Her skin remained dry. When they had gone about twenty feet into the sea, Wolf stopped and raised her arm into the air. Someone unseen gently took her hand, held it for a moment and slowly pulled forward.

"What is this!" Zee demanded.

"Sentry," Wolf said, and stepped back. "Go in."

Zee fought off a sense of appearing foolish, and let herself be led forward. Abruptly she vanished from sight.

"What . . . ?" Barra cried.

"She is past the sentry, and we can no longer see her. But she can see the city now, and she is turning to look back at us. She is startled to see the truth of what I have said. The captain is staring at us, marveling that we cannot see her, although we are but a short distance apart. Now she has turned about to look at my people and the city. She does not trust us completely."

The woman broke off to glance at the doctor. "Would you like to go in?"

"In the Queen's name, yes!"

Wolf led the doctor out into the water and held her hand in the air. It was taken by the invisible sentry and Barra was gently pulled across the unseen threshold.

Lieutenant Donn waited with the troops on the beach. Donn was as alert, as watchful as the captain had been before her, concerned with the same security and aware of the same helplessness, but she was not nervous nor afraid. Donn had put more faith in Wolf and his woman than had the captain.

Zee reappeared just as suddenly, standing waist deep in water. She held onto an unseen something for orientation. Wolf waited a few feet away.

"I would like to take troops inside."

Wolf said, "Yes."

"How many?"

Wolf turned to his mother standing on the shore.

"As few or as many as you like. Above all things we strive to convince you of our honesty, our sincere purpose, our truthfulness. You may take as many troops as you like, you may go anywhere in the city you choose, you may stay or leave when you are ready. No hand will stop you."

Zee locked glances with the lithe woman, aware of the peculiar relationship growing between them. She was convinced Wolf's mother knew her intentions far better than Wolf knew or guessed; she was also convinced the other woman knew something beyond them, something which she and Wolf did not yet know. It was in the mother's attitude, it slightly colored the thoughts and words she directed into Zee's receptive mind.

Zee looked away. "Lieutenant!"

"Yes, Captain?"

"Divide the troops. I will take half and search the city im-

mediately while you post the remainder on guard. When I return, you will lead in the second half. Barra will be our liaison."

"Yes, Captain."

Zee stood where she was, holding onto the invisible object by her side, while the specified number of troops marched past her into the sea and vanished beyond the barrier. When the last had gone, Zee turned to follow.

Wolf and his mother retreated from the water and sat down to await their return. She told Wolf that they should wait there for the quieting effect it had on the troops who remained behind. The lieutenant, she said, was planning to hold them as hostage if the captain failed to return, and they should give every indication of peaceful waiting.

Because Zee did not fully trust the potentiality of a hostile city—and by training, any community not under the protection or occupation of the Queen's troops was regarded as hostile—she bivouacked the entire troop outside the city for the night, not allowing any to remain within the barrier. In turn, all had explored the city, seen for themselves how small a population it held, discovered there were no obvious physical weapons for waging war, and retired to the hillside. She caused them to camp along the supposed shore of the illusionary sea and up the sloping hill of the approaches. As in previous times of danger, Zee doubled the guards and faced them not only to the way they had come, but also to the unseen city.

And then she stalked away by herself to mull her problem.

Wolf camped there with them, and before darkness fell his mother emerged from nothingness to join the troop.

Doctor Barra moved aside to make room for her.

"Pretty out there, isn't it," she pointed to where the newly rising moon marked a sparkling path on the "waters."

Wolf followed her finger, grinning.

"Sister," he said, as if that explained everything.

"What about your sister?"

He glanced at his mother, and she took it up.

"My daughter is on watch now, there where the other sentry stood today. The illusion you see is maintained constantly and, of course, it is necessary to add to it those other things which might betray it as only an illusion. The moonpath, as you know. Sometimes a school of fish. Occasionally an unfriendly person approaches us from the plains, and although we are able to detect him at a distance, still it is not in us to harm him. We use his eyes to deceive him and turn him away."

Barra was instantly curious. "You detect him at a distance? How?"

"By means of our mental training. As you will learn if you study what we have to offer, those ancient ancestors of ours had developed a mechanical device for discovering the approach of objects, while those objects were still some distance away. Lacking mechanical devices and material to copy them, we substituted a far more efficient means, mental alertness. They had theorized and experimented with various mental powers, believing such were possible, but were not able to use them. They gave such manifestations names like telekinesis, telenergy, telepathy and so forth."

"Did it—does it work?"

"It did not work well or perhaps at all for them. But as you can see it works very well for us. The ancients simply lacked the mentality and strength of mind to operate it."

"A moment now—how do you know anyone is approaching?"

"We can sense him, and shortly thereafter, see him."

"You knew we were coming?"

"That is truth. We sensed you while you were yet a week distant. So large a body of people could not fail to attract our attention. I set out to find you immediately."

Barra shook her head. "By the Sainted Queen, I never

dreamed of anything like this! It's wonderful. You can do anything with your mind!"

"Anything."

"Good!" Barra cried in triumph. "I maneuvered you into that."

"I am aware."

"I expected you would be. Now: you and your people have planned this entire expedition, you sent Wolf to the coast to bring us and he skillfully planted the desire in us. Very well, we are here. You've also outlined what is desired of us, and *some* of us will stay, for one reason or another, all selfish." She grinned at the other woman. "Count me among the latter. But there is likely to be some trouble tomorrow, do you know that?"

"It has been anticipated."

"Zee will get fidgety and start mapping plans to return to the Colony. The teams aren't rested, and the wagons still need restocking, but you know my captain. Training has been drummed into her until she hardly remembers to act like a woman. The troops are different; some of them are women, some are troopers. Some have a fierce loyalty to the Queen, and others don't care; they're in the army for various small reasons. In the morning Zee will cast her eyes backward and things will start happening. Desertion means a terrible thing to troops."

"You speak in truth, and that too has been anticipated. Some of your troops think to remain with us only for personal and physical reasons, some seek the knowledge we have to offer, some would as soon stay as not for no good reason. While those others you speak of believe they must return because of a term they call *duty*. Duty has been instilled in them by training. Training, by necessity, robs them of individualism and the ability to think for themselves. Their training is for living in a warlike state and we have no warlike state."

"Granted. So . . . ?"

"It is not desirable to have among us women who desire only

physical gratification, or women who would stay because they have nothing better to do. The seekers of knowledge we welcome, those who understand our plight and are willing to help us keep the knowledge alive, we thrice welcome. Therefore, when these troops awake with the dawn, they will be individuals able to think out and choose their own destiny, and they will be able to do it solely upon merit, not personal or baser reasons."

"What? You mean to say you'll tinker with their minds?"

"No, good doctor, no. We would no more harm their minds than we would harm their bodies. But that they may see and understand our problems with clear reality, they will be given the mental power to understand what is needed, what is expected, and what the future will bring for their decision. There will be no fear in their minds of retaliation for making a decision, there will be no binding sense of duty or training. For perhaps the first time in their adult lives they will be in the position of free agents, able to choose without any outside interference whichever future they desire."

"Ummm. And those who don't want to stay?"

"They will have restored to them everything that was temporarily removed from their minds, their sense of duty and training, their obedience and loyalty, so that they may return to their homeland the same person they left."

"A free agent? I like that phrase. In a sense then, you intend to strike off their shackles?"

"We intend to give them for a moment complete individuality that they may see and decide for themselves, each alone and without restraint of any nature, what must be accomplished here if this continent is to prosper and grow again." She faced the doctor with an intense seriousness. "We intend to remove mental blocks and ties and fears so that each may stand on her two feet, physically and mentally, and decide her future for herself."

"That'll be a good trick if you can do it," Barra commented.

"In truth, we can do it, Doctor. You haven't begun to guess at our accomplishments."

"No, but in the next few years I intend to find out about them." She hesitated, watching the advancing moonpath. "I'm wondering, though, just how many troopers will want to go back to the Colony?"

Wolf grinned at her.

His mother said without speaking. "You will be very surprised in the morning."

"Now don't tell me you can see into the future?"

"In a limited sense, yes, but not in the way you imply. Having so vast a knowledge at hand and in daily use, it is not difficult to foresee the morrow."

"I sort of like surprises," Barra said after a while.

Captain Zee was awakened by a short, sharp blast of a whistle.

She rolled quickly from her bedding and leaped to her feet, astonished to find the entire body of troops had preceded her and were lining up in three long rows, facing Lieutenant Donn and the sea that didn't really exist. Even the sentries had been pulled down on the beach, leaving the ridges unguarded. Cooking fires had not yet been lit, and there was no evidence that the morning meal was in preparation.

She sped down the gentle slope toward the troops at a fast trot, angry and annoyed with her junior officer. Halfway down she consciously checked herself, slowed to a walk and found her anger trickling away to merge with the dawning realization of what the early morning parade actually meant.

Barra had warned her it was coming.

Today—this morning—in a short space of time she would know the voluntary loss of troops, would see a part of her proud command desert her authority and cast their lot with Wolf's people. The turning point was upon her. Here—now, was the inglorious end of a military career and the real beginning of a

long and lonely journey back to the Home Isles. She was finished, finished in a manner not dreamed of when she had so optimistically outfitted an expedition and plunged over the mountains on the Colony's western border.

Zee walked slowly around the ends of the triple line and approached the waiting lieutenant.

Donn saluted her, for what she guessed was the last time.

"All present, Captain."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," she answered dryly. "Carry on."

"I, Captain?" Donn studied her facial mask.

"You, Lieutenant. Find out what we both want to know."

"Yes, Captain."

Wolf and his mother were standing a small distance away, watching the procedure. Quietly and unexpectedly, Barra appeared from the invisible doorway of the city and joined them. Zee walked away from the lieutenant and crossed over to them, saying nothing, turning about to watch the troops. She felt the doctor move to her side.

Lieutenant Donn spoke with a crisp, carrying voice.

"Attention!" She hesitated only a moment. "By now, each of you fully understands the choice to be made here. Each of you has had time to decide." Her eyes swept the rigid lines. "Those of you who choose to remain here, in the city, will stay in line. And those of you who have chosen to return to the Colony will form a new line behind the captain." Again she hesitated. "March!"

The lieutenant stepped back and waited, watching.

Zee momentarily closed her eyes. Here it was—here—now—here—now. It had happened. She opened them to look.

Four troopers moved from the ranks and walked quickly to where Zee stood, grouped themselves behind her. Four.

They were equally as startled as Zee, when they turned to count their own number, when they saw the great body of women remaining in the lines. Uneasily, they stood behind the

captain and stared at one another.

Those four frightened Zee, frightened and shocked her in the knowledge that she had so little command left. She had expected about half or even in her darkest suspicions, perhaps less than half. But four! She strove to hide the fright on her face when she turned to Wolf and his mother.

"You win," she said dully.

"Wait," the older woman cautioned. "The end isn't yet."

"What more could there be?" Zee asked lifelessly. She glanced to where the lieutenant stood apart, joining neither the solid ranks on the beach nor the uneasy group behind her.

"Wait."

The four troopers at her back were whispering among themselves, gesticulating, and suddenly appeared to reach a nervous decision. A spokesman was appointed among them by the simple expedient of three shoving the fourth forward. The girl flung a worried look at the body of troops and approached Zee with a halfhearted salute.

"Captain?"

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry, Captain . . . we want to change our minds. We don't think there is a chance of only five of us getting back alive. We'd . . . like to stay here with the others."

"Very well." Zee held her voice to a flat monotone. And there went the remainder of her command; pitiful remainder that it was. Not even these four wanted to go back with her. She was left alone, with nothing, to return to the Colony by herself. And that was akin to uselessness, returning alone. She brought her head up and answered the girl's salute. "Go back to the ranks."

"Thank you, Captain."

The four eagerly moved back across the separating space to rejoin the lines. Zee moved a pace away from the doctor, threw another glance at her junior officer.

"Well, lieutenant, have *you* decided?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Do you intend to remain in the city?"

"No, Captain!"

Amazed, Zee didn't try to conceal her surprise. She thought she had known the lieutenant's decision for days. Here was but another example of underestimating her troops.

With open incredulity she asked, "You are returning to the Colony?"

"No, Captain!"

"You . . ." Zee halted, puzzled at the answer, and from the corner of her eye caught the shifting attention of the troop. There was a subtle turning of heads, a quiet watchfulness, and mounting expectation. Sharply then, she cried, "What *are* you going to do?"

Lieutenant Donn threw back her shoulders as if shrugging off her uniform, dropped the pretense of military formality and grinned insolently at Zee. She pointed a quick finger at Wolf.

"I'm choosing him."

"You're *what*?" It was another jolt for Zee, a jolt of a different and more personal nature. She recalled the day she had watched the lieutenant from the office window, the day her junior officer had suddenly experienced a change of mind and decided to accompany the expeditionary force. And she remembered the fierce, possessive emotion that had grown in her mind. "You are doing what?"

She stalked across the beach.

"He's the choice I've made," the Lieutenant stubbornly repeated, warily watching the captain's approach. "Wherever he goes, I go!"

Zee planted her feet wide apart and leaned forward.

"He is mine," she said clearly, forcefully.

"Not a chance!" Donn snapped.

Zee unbuckled her weapons belt and let it fall.

"*Mine*," she said again, and swung a balled fist.

Wolf raced across the sand and reached them before a half-dozen blows had been delivered by either combatant. He held them in the grip of his strong hands, at opposite arms' length. "Stop," he commanded, and shook them roughly.

"I've made my choice," the lieutenant declared.

Zee only glared at her in silence.

"Stop," Wolf said again. "Stop now, or I . . . I . . ." He looked helplessly at the doctor for assistance.

"Or you'll knock their heads together," the delighted Barra supplied.

"Or I knock heads together," he echoed.

The troopers held only a ragged semblance of their former lines as they watched the struggle with frank interest. Some few were disappointed that it had been interrupted so soon.

Donn tried to wriggle out from under the man's grasp.

"But I chose you!" she protested.

"And I'm staying," Zee retorted with sudden fire in her voice. "I'm not returning to the Colony without a command, and I'm not remaining in the city if he can't enter. I'm staying with him."

Barra laughed at the three of them. "Man," she advised, "you have a problem."

"I decide," Wolf answered her, and shook the girls again, one held in either hand. "Not they choose. I decide."

Three wagons and a hundred picked troops, four teams, one civilian doctor, one native, all streamed westward through the Pass and down into the grey-green valley beyond. The guards standing perpetual watch in the sentry boxes saw them go, watched the last of the caravan out of sight.

None, save one, was seen again.

The whitened bones of that one were found far up the valley, picked clean by some scavenger. The remains were identified only as some trooper by the incredible hardware left with the

body. And after due consideration of those bones, the new military authority of the Crown Colony of Western Somerset closed the Pass.

The expedition was written off as lost.

F o u r

WOLF waited alone on the shore of the illusionary sea. Before him a flock of white birds dipped gracefully above the imaginary water, searching for fish that were not there. Briefly he cast an amused glance at the inner sentry who lounged twenty or thirty feet away, maintaining the illusion, and they both returned to watching the birds.

The sun was high and warm on his naked chest, and he waited contentedly for the reappearance of someone from the city.

He had gone about the troop's campsite carefully erasing all signs of their occupancy and passage, obliterating the marks of wagon wheels and deepset hoofs, where that trail had rolled across the sand and vanished into the sea. The trampled paths of many feet in the sand had been swept away, the remains of a fire carefully buried. The shore held nothing now but the marks of his own feet, the vague trail of his coming and going from the water's edge, the impression in the sand where he was sitting.

And after they left, that too would be erased.

The back trail would require longer to disappear.

It was unguessable when another rock slide might cover the tunnel mouth. Only successive months of the wind and the weather would eliminate the trail, blow away the rubbish and the discarded clothing, wash clear the ruts made by wheels in the soil. In perhaps a year or so, grass would again grow over those bare spots which now held the ashes of cooking fires, and stray bits of lost metal and buttons would rust and turn brown

under the sun. The first heavy rains would eliminate the marks of feet and wagons on river banks and crossings.

It would be many years before the common grave beneath the grove of trees vanished. Many years before the mound of earth would sink to a level with the surrounding surface, before grass would again take firm root and hide the physical outlines of the grave. But in the remainder of his own lifetime the burial site would slowly become lost and only the grove would remain to mark the general whereabouts of the seven troopers.

Conversely, one part of their back trail would never be hidden, would instead expand itself as an unexpected monument to their passing. They had left a team of horses in the city of the winged people.

Wolf leaped to his feet as the lieutenant appeared from the sea.

"Go?" he asked.

"I'm ready." Donn smiled at him and stretched her bare body to the sun. "The doctor wants to say good-bye."

Donn had cast aside most of her uniform as useless, and now she wore nothing more than a brief skirt which reached half-way to her knee, a loose-fitting jacket about her shoulders, and a pair of sandals for feet that had not yet toughened for naked travel. "Should have thrown the rest away weeks ago," Barra had commented in approval. "The less you wear, the healthier. No rain here." The lieutenant clung to her short sword, a bow and a sheath of arrows slung across her back. She stood on the beach beside Wolf, pleased with herself. The sun warmed her skin.

The doctor walked out of the city with that sudden illusion of appearing from nowhere into the here.

"Wolf," she said with tender humor, "you're my pride and joy. Don't forget I saw you first—well, almost first. And don't forget to come back to me."

He returned her smile, thumping her shoulder. "Will come."

"Where are you going, do you know? For how long?"

He pointed a lazy finger along the northwest rim of the sea.
"Around, far."

"Around the sea and deeper into the west? I'd like to do that, I'd like to go with you if there wasn't a greater attraction here. What will you find out there?"

"Plains, mountains, same. Bigger. Mountains you not climb. People who sleep . . . sleep all time, but not dead."

"What's that?"

"Not dead. Just sleep in caves."

"You mean there are people out there sleeping in caves, who appear to be dead but aren't? They've been there a long while?"

"Yes. Since I was child. Always there."

Barra turned on the lieutenant. "Donn, you've got to investigate that! Find out about it for me, will you? Find out everything you can and come back and tell me." She whirled on the man. "How long will you be gone?"

He gave her a blank look.

"Six months?" Barra demanded. "A year? Two years? Oh, by the Queen, why don't you live with a calendar!" She turned her attention to the lieutenant once more. "Make him come back in a year's time, Donn. I've got to know about those sleepers."

Donn grinned assent. "A year it is."

"Fine. And Donn—take care of yourself. You know what I mean. Either way you prefer it, girl, it's all right with me. And if you need help, don't hesitate to come back."

The lieutenant's grin crackled into a laugh.

"I'll have fun, doctor."

"I don't doubt it," Barra replied, "I don't doubt it." She cocked an eye at the girl. "One word of advice—you'd better behave yourself from this moment onward. No more scrapping or he'll do more than knock your heads together, something you wouldn't like. I don't think you want to lose him."

"I don't," Donn said, and held out her hand. "I'll take care, Dector."

Zee appeared from the portals of the city.

She had left the badges and trappings of office behind her, had discarded most of her clothing and was as briefly clad as the lieutenant. Self-consciously she tugged at the shortness of the skirt and looked to see if the man were staring at her body.

"Go?" Wolf asked her, with an eagerness.

Zee nodded and glanced curiously at the lieutenant.

Barra put a hand on her shoulder, shook it. "No more speeches, Zee. I've already told you all I had to say. Just keep it in mind, and come back."

"We'll be back, Barra."

"Well—good-bye."

She stood there a long time and watched the three of them walking away from her. The trio followed the gentle curving slope of the shore until it stretched artfully around the hidden city to meet the shore of the real sea. Barra followed them with straining eyes until they were almost lost in the hazy distance of sky and water. Zee turned, and waved to her. Barra stepped into the mirage, seeking the street.

THE END

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