

## A Matter of Sovereignty

*Power is a strange thing. Sometimes those who have it can't legally use it. But that never stops really determined men...*

### WADE CURTIS

"We're almost there, Mr. Adams."

Bill Adams woke to the thrum of propellers and the smell of fresh coffee. He stirred lazily and looked up at blue eyes and a heart-shaped face framed in long blonde hair. The girl's soprano voice had a trace of an English accent. She wore a white blouse and a conservative plaid miniskirt that showed off her tanned legs perfectly. It was, Adams decided, one of the better ways to wake up.

"We're almost there, sir," she repeated. "I've brought coffee."

"Thanks, Courtney." Adams stretched elaborately. The aircraft cabin was small. It had a desk and couch and overstuffed chairs, and except for the panel of lights and buttons above Adams's seat it might have been the study at Santa Barbara. Far down below the Pacific flashed blue and calm as it had when he dozed off. Now, though, it was dotted with tiny white rings of surf crashing endlessly on coral reefs.

"Sit with me and tell me what I'm looking at," Adams said.

"All right." Courtney balanced the tray clumsily with one hand as she reached to fold the table down from the cabin wall. Adams hurriedly came fully awake to help her. She sat next to him on the couch and smiled uncertainly.

Courtney wasn't sure who Bill Adams was. She'd seen his name on the Nuclear General Company organization chart, but his title merely said "Assistant to the Chairman," and that might mean anything. Her own title was "Assistant to the Director" of Ta'avu Station, and that didn't mean much at all. She was more than a secretary, but she hadn't much influence over Station operations.

Adams, though, was in charge of the largest airplane in the world, and anyone who could commandeer *Cerebrus* for personal transportation had real power, Courtney suspected that Adams was one of Mr. Lewis's special assistants, the troubleshooters who were said to have no emotions and computers for hearts, but his easy smile made that hard to believe. He was very likable as well as handsome.

Adams sipped coffee and looked out the thick rectangular window. There was more land in sight ahead. They were approaching a series of coral atolls stretched out like jumbled beads on the blue water below. Each was ringed with white, then lighter blues fading quickly into the deeper tones of the Pacific. There was no way to estimate the size of the islands. They might be tiny coral reefs or the tops of the large mountains. One thing was certain. There wasn't much land you could live on down there.

"That's good coffee, Courtney. Thanks."

"You're welcome. I should be thanking you. It would have been three weeks before I could get home if you hadn't given me a lift." The view below was lovely, but Courtney had seen it many times. She was still interested in the airplane. They were the only passengers in the lounge—this smaller one and the big lounge beyond. She knew that Adams had brought others, but they had stayed on the lower decks and she hadn't met them. His own assistant, Mike King, was forward with the pilots.

Aft of the lounges were other offices, laboratories, and several staterooms. Below them was an enormous cargo space. *Cerebrus* was enormous, larger than any other plane in the world, and she shared its luxury accommodations with one man. It was quite an experience. Courtney made good money at Ta'avu, but she wasn't accustomed to posh standards of living.

Adams peered forward to get a better look at the oncoming land, and Courtney remembered why he'd asked her to sit with him. "The first group of atolls is undeveloped so far," she said. "You can just see Ta'avu Station beyond. We'll be over it in a second."

Adams nodded and pushed back sandy hair with an impatient gesture. Except for the short nap, he'd worked at something the entire time he'd been on the plane. He was always impatient, although he didn't always show it. Courtney wondered what he did for relaxation. She noted that he wore no rings. "Before we get there—I've wanted to ask about this plane. How could even Mr. Lewis afford it?"

"He couldn't," Adams answered. "Some African government went broke having it built. Largest flying boat ever constructed. We'd already put in the nuclear engines so we were the principal creditors come foreclosure. Seemed cheaper to finish it for ourselves than scrap it."

"But why propellers?" Courtney asked.

Adams shrugged. He was no engineer. "Something about efficiency. Worked out well. They say it's the props that let *Cerebrus* stay up for weeks at a clip. She's come in handy at that. We can use her to look for ice floes and get our crews aboard first. Competition for good Antarctic ice is stiff, and *Cerebrus* gives us a big edge."

"I'd only seen it once before," Courtney said. "When we were bringing in the whales."

Adams nodded. "Yeah, we'd never have been able to herd the beasts without the plane." He grinned. "Ferrying pretty young managerial assistants home is just a side-line. Is that the Station there?"

"Yes." She leaned across to see better and felt him very close to her. He was handsome and unmarried, in his thirties by his looks, but maybe a bit more. She liked older men. He had grey eyes, and it was hard to tell what he thought because half the time he looked as if something secretly amused him. He would be a very easy man to like. Her last romance had gone badly, and there was certainly no one at the Station—in fact, there was never anyone at the Station. She wondered how long Adams would be there. He hadn't told her why he was flying thousands of miles to the Tonga Islands, and Mr. MacRae would be worried.

"The big atoll in the center of that group of three," she said. "The lagoon is about fifteen miles across, and the Station is on the island at the fringe, the one shaped like a shark. The reactors are just about at the jaw."

"Yeah." Now that she'd given him some idea of the scale the rest of the picture was clear. Ta'avu consisted of seven atolls, but only three were in use at the moment. Nuclear General leased the whole chain from the King of Tonga, paying off with electric power, fresh water, fish, fertilizer, and expert advice on how to support too many Tongans on too few islands. The land area of Ta'avu was insignificant, but it wasn't land they needed.

Now he could make out the big microwave dishes which beamed power from the Station to the inhabited parts of the Tonga Islands. That was an inefficient way to transmit power, but there was plenty to spare at the Station. The plane circled lower, and Adams could see dams and locks, enormous sea walls closing off the lagoons from the oceans. He winced, remembering how much they had cost, and then there were the smaller dams and net booms dividing the lagoon into pens.

A chime sounded and Adams picked up the phone. Mike King, his assistant, said, "We're almost there, sir. Shall we take her in?"

"No. Have the pilots circle the Station. I want a better picture before I land."

"Yes, sir. Want me back there?"

"No, I think Miss Graves can tell me what I need to know. Unless you'd care to join us?"

King laughed nervously, betraying his youth. "Thanks, but I'd rather not . . . Uh, the pilots are giving me a pretty good briefing, sir."

"Fine." Adams hung up the phone and chuckled softly. There was no question about it, Mrs. Leslie King had great influence over her husband. Fancy being afraid to be around Courtney. . . . Of course she was pretty and Leslie would be joining Mike if Adams decided to leave Mike at the Station. Maybe Michael was right to stay away from temptation. The plane dropped lower, down to five hundred feet. Bill Adams turned to Courtney.

"Where are the whales?"

"In the big lagoon—there, look carefully, you can usually see them. Yes!" She pointed excitedly. "Over there, on the other side from the reactors."

Adams looked for a moment, then gasped. There were three dark shapes visible under the water, and they were *big*. One seemed to grow, larger, larger, impossibly huge, then broke the surface and rolled lazily, great flukes splashing. A hundred feet long, the largest thing that ever lived on the earth.

"That's Susie," Courtney said happily. "She's almost tame. You can get close to her in a boat."

"My God, that's a big animal!" Bill said. "What are the small things around her? Baby whales?"

Courtney laughed. "Those are *dolphins*, Mr. Adams. We don't have any baby blue wales, nobody does. We hope Susie's pregnant, but how can you tell? The dolphins patrol the lagoon for us. You know how we used them to get Susie and her friends here in the first place?"

Adams shook his head. "Not really. I was busy on something else." He made a wry face. "This whale business is strange. Only thing the Company ever did that doesn't at least *threaten* a profit. Mr. Lewis insists on it, but you can't imagine how much it has cost."

"Oh." She looked at him sternly and let a note of disapproval into her voice. "It was worth it, Mr. Adams, Look at those whales! How could you let something so magnificent be exterminated? I guess it was costly, though," she added hastily. "Shouldn't get him angry with me. . . ." "Never gave it a thought, but—"

well, training the dolphins to herd whales took a long time. Then finding the whales—there aren't more than a dozen left in the whole world. And even with the dolphins it took a long time to drive four whales to the Station. They kept getting away and the dolphins had to go find them again."

"I know something about how long it took," Adams observed dryly. "While *Cerebus* was on that project, Southern California Edison grabbed two icebergs from us. Big ones, three hundred billion gallons at least. *Poseidon* and *Aquarius* were left out in the Antarctic with nothing to do for months—it's too expensive to bring the tugs home and send them out again. So I know the costs."

Courtney turned away, not so much disgusted as sad. It was true, then; he was one of Lewis's hard-eyed troops with an account book for a heart.

Adams grinned suddenly. "But it brought us luck. Or something did. A couple of months later we found a nine hundred billion gallon iceberg. A real monster, and we've got it under tow."

And it's still under tow, he thought. The tugs were bringing the monster iceberg up the Humboldt Current. The fresh water was worth at least three hundred million dollars if they could get it to Los Angeles. The trouble was that Ecuador claimed sovereignty out to two hundred miles from the coast, and the passage fees could eat up half the value of the ice. Ecuador wanted cash. . . .

And now *Persephone*, with all that plutonium, was held by the Fijians, and Nuclear General was in real trouble. There were a lot of assets tied up in those two projects, and Mr. Lewis was stretched thin with risky investments. The big bergs made a lot of profit, but exploration and towing weren't cheap, competition was stiff, and the taxes kept going up all the time. If they couldn't get that plutonium back . . .

"The other lagoons have smaller fish," Courtney said, breaking in on his reverie. She wondered why he'd lost his grin, but it came back when she pointed and said, "Rainbow trout in that one."

"You're putting me on."

"No, really, they adapt to salt water very easily. In fact, they do it naturally — haven't you ever fished for steelhead? And hatching them is easy, that's been done for decades."

"Yeah, I guess it figures," Bill answered absently. Come to think of it he had known that. He used to fish for steelhead when he was younger. Hard to think of anything but the plan. It had to work. It had sounded good back in Santa Barbara, but neither he nor Mr. Lewis had ever met the Tongans and it all depended on them.

"You can see the different color waters," she continued. "We pump cold water from six thousand feet down. It's rich in phosphates and nitrates, so the plankton and krill grow fast. Dr. Martinez is experimenting to see what works best. But if we can feed Susie, think how many fish we can grow in the other lagoons!"

Bill nodded. He'd seen the figures. There was a good profit in protein, but production was low at Tonga Station, and there'd be no profit at all if the farms had to pay their own way. He tried to explain that to the girl, but she wasn't much interested. Blast it, he thought, she should know such elementary things about the Company. Without funds and profits you couldn't do anything.

"Profits. I see." Her voice was acid. "I guess you have to worry about that, Mr. Adams, but out here at the Station we're proud of what we're doing. We can feed a million people some day, more even, and prevent kwashiorkor. . . . Do you know how much misery is due to simple protein deficiency?"

"No. But I know we couldn't have built the plants if that were all we were doing out here, Courtney. Breeding plutonium on a grand scale makes power, and as far as the Station's concerned that power is free. But plutonium, not protein, is the reason for the Station."

"Why out here, then? You've got breeder reactors in the States. Dr. Martinez is Director of one."

Adams nodded wearily. "We didn't put new breeders in the States because we can't find locations for them. Everywhere we turn there's protest. They even complain about our sea farms because we introduce new species. As if Kansas wheat were native. . . . Anyway, Tonga's got cold water for the reactors and no regulations about our plutonium sales. In the States the government makes us sell over half the product at their own prices." Taxes were nonexistent at the Station, too, Adams thought, Even though there was no market for the electric power the breeders could produce, it was still worth coming out here. And the protein sales would eventually pull their own weight, even pay back some of the investment Ta'avu represented. It had been a good gamble, but too big, too big; now the crunch was coming. A shortage of cash, and the creditors coming around like wolves . . .

A chime sounded and above the entrance to the flight control deck the NO SMOKING, FASTEN SEAT BELTS signs came on. The chime sounded again and Adams lifted the telephone. He heard Mike King.

"We're bringing her down now, sir. Some nasty weather expected later. The pilots want to get *Cerebrus* inside the lagoon while it's calm. If that's all right with you, sir."

"Fine. Take her in," Adams told him. The big plane banked sharply, leveled, and skimmed lower and

lower across the water, touched into the swells outside the lagoon. They bucked four-foot whitecapped waves as the plane taxied to the atoll. Big lock gates opened ahead of them and the plane moved inside cautiously.

Adams watched a floating object appear around the hull; it resembled the plastic baths yachts were kept in back in the States, or the floating tanks used to catch fresh water from icebergs. He turned to Courtney with a puzzled expression.

"Biological trap," she said. "They can purge the whole lock area if they have to, but it's easier this way. They'll sluice out the bath with cold water from the deeps and slide the plane off into the lagoon."

He nodded and was about to say something when the pilot came out with Mike King. "That's it, sir," Mike said. "Boat's alongside to take you to the Station."

"Fine," Adams said, but he didn't feel fine. His senses were dulled by the time differential from Santa Barbara; the mild chop taxiing in had upset his stomach, and ahead of him were problems enough to wreck the Company. The turmoil of thoughts contrasted sharply with the peaceful scene of the lagoon and the girl beside him, and he chuckled slightly, but when Courtney smiled quickly he didn't see her.

She turned away hurt, wondering what he was thinking about. Profits, she thought contemptuously. How could any man look at that out there, blue water and sparkling sun, the dolphins dancing around the open companionway hoping for attention—they got enough to eat—and the big Tonga boatmen grinning from their long narrow outrigger; how could a *man* look at all that and think about money? It never failed. The unmarried ones had something wrong with them, and of course that would be true—if they didn't, why weren't they married?

The outrigger flashed across the lagoon, skimming almost silently in the strong trade wind and calm water. Samual and Toruga, the boatmen, handled her almost effortlessly. They weren't really boatmen, of course. They'd call themselves fishermen, or just sea people; back in the States they'd be technicians, and damned skilled ones at that. They and fifty like them tended the sea farms under the direction of Ta'avu's ecologist on loan, Dr. Arturo Martinez, who'd no doubt be anxious to get back to his home in San Juan Capistrano.

There were motorboats at the Station, but the silently skimming outrigger seemed more natural and was certainly almost as fast. Besides, it disturbed fewer sea creatures. After a while Adams was able to lean back and enjoy himself as Courtney chattered with the Tongans in musical Polynesian.

Around the edge of the lagoon was a series of pens and baffles and large fiberglass tank complexes, each served with a network of pipes for delivering both cold nutrient water from over a mile down outside the atoll and heated water from the reactors. Courtney tried to tell Bill Adams what each pen was, but there were too many. After a while Toruga took over at the tiller and Samual came forward to join Adams. Like all Tongans he spoke English. It was the Kingdom's second language, a principal factor in locating the Station at Ta'avu.

"We have all kinds of fish, sir," the boatman said. "Some we catch around the reefs, some Dr. Martinez sends for. From all over the world."

"Which ones grow best?" Adams asked.

The Tongan laughed heartily, "We won't know that for years. Look at what we can do, temperatures, plankton mixes, dry fertilizers—one thing we try is different cleaners."

"Cleaners?"

"Yes, sir. What lubbers call trash fish. Little ones that clean up parasites. And shrimps. Big fish need 'em to live. There's a lot even the sea people don't know."

Adams looked at him sharply and nodded. No wonder Dr. Martinez was pleased with his technicians. They'd know more about the reefs and the water than anyone else, and with their excellent basic school system it shouldn't take long to train them in systematic observation.

"Another thing, maybe you can see down there," Samuel said. He pointed down into the clear water. "Different shapes for reefs. We make them out of fiberglass in the shops. Makes a lot of difference what kind of fish live in them."

They passed a series of rafts, each supporting long lines dangling into the lagoon. Samual pointed to them and said, "Oyster farms. That's the hatchery, when the rafts are full we move 'em. Take some outside the lagoon, keep some here."

"What do you do about predators?" Bill asked.

"Look," Courtney told him. One of the dolphins swam near the boat, a starfish clutched in its bill. "Our technicians catch them, but the dolphins do a better job," she said. "It's amazing what you can train them to

do. Some are just like dogs, they want to please you."

"Hard to operate here without dolphins," Samuel agreed. "That's something we learned from you. But there's a lot the sea people know that didn't come from books."

"I'm sure," Adams agreed. "You like working here?"

"Who wouldn't?" Samuel asked. "Why would anybody do something else?"

"We're just learning about sea farming, I mean really learning," Courtney said. "When I think of the nonsense I was taught in schools — and there are so many variables. As Samuel said, there's temperatures, reef shapes, species mixtures — and some of the parasites are necessary, some of them have to be eliminated. All we can do is try things, there aren't any good theories."

"Yeah." What was it Helmholtz said, Adams thought. The most practical thing in the world is a good theory. . . . Well, that was all very well, but this wasn't just a research station. It was supposed to be a producing farm, and they'd better start getting something to sell out of those lagoons if they expected any more internal research and development funding.

It was nearly dark when they reached the Station, and there is no twilight in the tropics. The sun fell into the sea and was gone. The lagoon became dark and mysterious, then suddenly flashed with whites and blues and greens, phosphorescent streaks, all about them, an endlessly changing light show. Two enormous shapes glided past the boat, turned, and charged for it again. Adams eyed them nervously.

Courtney grinned, her teeth barely visible in the pale moonlight. "I wouldn't worry about them, those are the dolphins again," she said. Then she giggled softly. "They like to swim with the boats, and the phosphorescence makes them look bigger than they are. I pity any sharks that do manage to get inside the lagoon."

"Some do?"

"Yes. We can't keep a perfectly closed system in the open lagoons the way we can in the pens."

"You know a lot about the operations here," Adams said quietly.

She smiled. "I've been here four years." She sighed. "I like it here but it's time to move on. I've asked for a transfer to Company headquarters."

"Why?"

"Well, I'm not really a biologist, and there's not a lot of management work here at the Station. Dr. MacKae leaves most of that up to Santa Barbara."

I've noticed, Adams thought. He looked at the girl, wondering if she could learn the important points about Nuclear General operations. She did all right with the technical stuff, and Mike King would have to stay here at the Station. She might be good company.

They glided expertly to the landing. The reactor domes were invisible a thousand yards away, and the Station was a low series of concrete rectangles along the reef, much of it extending down into the lagoon itself. There was almost no land, and everything had to be attached to the reefs, anchored deep with aluminum pilings to protect it from tsunamis and typhoons. A natural fortress, Adams thought.

Living quarters were made of fiberglass, constructed like the thatch and frond houses of Polynesia but using artificial fibers. They could be taken below into the concrete blockhouses if a real storm threatened, and they were much more pleasant to live in.

Adams took his supper alone, served by Mike King in his rooms. He'd met no one, not even Art Martinez, and he wanted it that way. When he put down his fork, he realized he didn't even know what he'd eaten, and it was probably a special meal. Well, there'd be time enough for the social amenities later. Now he was as ready as he'd ever be.

"Who all's there?" he asked.

Mike King blushed slightly. Staff men assigned to Bill Adams never lasted long — when Adams wanted to know something, you'd better be ready with an answer or know how to find it. And you could never tell what he'd want to know because Adams himself didn't know what would be significant. Mike had spent as much time as he could talking to anyone he could find, but as sure as anything it wouldn't be enough. Working with Adams was good experience, but Mike would be glad when the troubleshooter moved on.

"Dr. MacRae, Dr. Martinez, that I know of," Mike said. "And Courtney Graves. Dr. MacRae said if you were going to have an assistant at the conference then by the white Christ—that's what he said, sir—he'd have one there too."

Adams exploded in laughter. "And what about the Tonganese?"

"Prince Toki Ukamea, the Prime Minister, is at the Station, sir. With a couple of members of the Privy Council. But he's out looking at the reactors so you can have a word with the others alone as you wanted."

"Good." Adams's tone was so noncommittal that Mike King looked at his superior closely, but he couldn't tell what the man was thinking. The hidden amusement was gone from the grey eyes, and King didn't envy the people who'd got Mr. Adams so upset.

The conference room was underwater, concrete walls paneled in rich woods framed with sea shells, an enormous rainbow trout stuffed and mounted on one wall. Another wall was completely glassed to show the dark waters of the lagoon outside. Several large fish and one of the inevitable dolphins swam dartingly just outside the conference room.

Dr. David MacRae was a tall, elderly man who spoke with a thick, broad Scots accent mixed with something unrecognizable, and he sucked endlessly on a meerschaum pipe carved into the shape of a dolphin. Adams shook hands with the Director, and let his mental filing system bring up the important facts. MacRae, licensed reactor operator, master of arts in marine biology from Wellington University, New Zealand, honorary Ph.D., Edinburgh. Reactor physics courses at Nuclear General's own schools. With the Company over fifteen years, mostly in overseas posts. Apprentice power operator somewhere in his native highlands; that was a long time ago.

Bill turned with pleasure to Arturo Martinez and shook his hand warmly. "Glad to see you, Art. How's Dianne and the kids?"

"Everyone is fine at home, Bill," Martinez said. "I was supposed to go back last week, but now ... I don't know if I can help, but I thought I would stay until this is settled."

Adams nodded soberly and took a seat at the thick wooden conference table. "All right, Dr. MacRae, how did it happen?"

MacRae lit his pipe slowly, letting the flame play over the entire bowl and taking several experimental puffs before he answered. "We had a storm in the channel," he said carefully. "*Persephone* was in shallow waters with large waves breaking around her. There were reports of a bigger storm comin' and Captain Anderson thinking of the cargo decided to take her into harbor to be safe. . . . Aye, and I agreed when he called the Station. I had nae thought o' trouble."

"And the Fijians boarded her and took over," Adams finished. "Any change in her status?"

MacRae shook his head. Like all his movements it was slow, almost majestic, as if he controlled time and could slow it to suit himself. "They say 'twould nae be safe to allow the ship to leave harbor wi' that cargo, and their 'experts' will examine her for damage from the storm. 'Tis blackmail simple, Mr. Adams. They've nae experts to begin wi' and there's nae the matter wi' *Persephone*. But you would nae let me report the ship stolen."

"Time enough for that," Adams said grimly. "For the moment it's better we don't have an open break. They don't actually claim the ship or cargo then?"

"Nae." MacRae shook his great head. "But 'tis only a matter o' time in my thought. Then they will 'discover' storm damage that only they can repair and confiscate the cargo for the safety o' the human race."

Adams nodded. "The earth safety boys are likely to support them. Are you sure the cargo's still aboard?"

"Aye. There's no man in Fiji fool enough to go in there, they'll need friends from the mainland for that. The containers are sealed, encased in glassite. In case o' sinking, you know. So the plutonium will nae foul the oceans if the ship is lost."

"Yeah." Adams nodded thoughtfully. "Now tell me about the troubles the Tongans are having with Fiji."

MacRae nodded slowly again. "You know about the politics?" he asked. When Adams didn't answer, he continued, "Both Tonga and Fiji have been under British protection, but now the Royal Navy's gone from the Pacific and both countries are independent."

Adams said quietly, "Tonga always was, of course."

MacRae looked surprised and noticed that Martinez was smiling. "Aye. But Britain managed defense and foreign relations. Now that's gone too. And since the British left, the Fijians hae claimed sovereignty over waters almost to the Tonga Islands, hae seized more than a dozen Tongan fishing boats. Now they've had *Persephone* for three days."

"Did the seizures of Tongan boats come before they took *Persephone*?"

"Aye. I see what you're thinking, mon, but how would we know they'd take a ship flying the U.S. flag?" MacRae demanded. "That they'd take boats from the Tongans does nae imply they'd defy the U.S. flag! Mon, you sit here talking to us when you've only to report piracy and have the U.S. Navy get our ship

back!"

Adams laughed bitterly. "Do you think we haven't tried? The State Department says the matter is very delicate . . . and the Fijians have good advice from somewhere. They've unofficially let it be known they'll fight before they give up our ship. The U.S. won't bully a small power to support Nuclear General Company."

"I see," MacRae said. "Then 'tis more serious than we thought."

"But I don't understand," Courtney protested. "Nuclear General has a stranglehold on dozens of little countries. You've got a reactor in Fiji, that's where they get their power . . . and the influence the Company must have, food supplies, everything, surely you can pressure them to give us our ship?"

Adams grinned, but there was no humor in it. "You've misunderstood a couple of things. The mainstay of our power is plutonium, and at the moment we haven't much to bargain with. The Fijians do. They've got a couple of hundred million dollars worth of it aboard *Persephone*. With what they can trade that for, they can laugh at any threats we make."

MacRae puffed at his pipe and relighted it. "Then we're in trouble. But we've the Station, we can breed more."

Adams said nothing. Mr. Lewis's creditors would be on him in seconds if they heard about the loss of *Persephone*. If the iceberg could be got to Los Angeles before the news broke, there might be enough cash to bail the Company out, but the Fijians wouldn't sit on it that long, and the rumors were already out. "Tell me about Tonga, Dr. MacRae. How much of your report about our relationship with the government can I believe?"

"All of it," MacRae snapped. He brooded heavily, then nodded. "Aye. It may sound too good to be true, but it is so. We've nae problems at all wi' the king and government. They're happy to have us here, for their people hae no talent for technology. Or if they do they've no interest."

"They work well with the Project," Martinez added. He nodded confirmation to MacRae's statements. "You've heard me say they're natural ecologists, they'll have no trouble operating when I'm gone. A real talent for sea farming. But David's right, they have no interest in the reactors at all."

"OK. That's the king. What about the people?"

"Same thing," MacRae said, "They respect the king. He gives them good government, and don't forget they're almost the only islands which were never colonized by Europeans, held their independence right along under the same royal family. There's nae opposition to speak of. The king gives every boy a bit of land when he turns seventeen, or something worth the same since there's little land to be had. And they allow no foreigners to own or lease land here. We're an exception, but the land here's worthless without our improvements. With our help they've reclaimed other atolls closer to the main islands, and we've shown them how to build sea farms for their own. . . . No, Mr. Adams, strangely enough this is as close to Paradise on earth as you'll ever find."

"They're good Christians, too," Courtney added. Martinez gave her a wry look and she said, "Well, Methodists then, Dr. Martinez!"

Adams sat quietly for a moment, nodding to himself. "OK. So the basic situation makes it possible for us to survive here. Now tell me about the Station itself."

"What do you want to know?" Martinez asked. "The reactors are fine. And we've got the world's largest sea farms, we're only getting started. *Por Dios*, Bill, it's an ecologist's dream."

"And an accountant's nightmare," Adams answered. "The reactors pay their way in plutonium and the power's free—nearly so, the turbines were expensive, but we had to generate power to pay the Tongans for their atolls. But the real construction—reefs, pumps, pipelines, Art—it's been two years and there's damn little return on investment. The equivalent amount invested in nuclear-powered food processing ships and trawlers would be earning us money right now!"

"Mon, mon, do you nae understand?" MacRae protested. His open palm struck the table with a flat crack. -"Trawlers! No matter how modern you make those beasties they're ten thousand years out of date! Civilized men are nae hunters, laddie. We cultivate, we grow what we need, and how can we do that in open water? The investment here will pay for itself, never you fear, and I'm willin' to gamble you'll be putting in more farms with what we learn."

"He's right," Martinez said. "Our open farms in the States are profitable, you'll agree?" Adams nodded, and Martinez continued, "But we have poachers since we can't get title to the sea beds. Out here we own the waters, and nothing at home has the potential of these reefs, Bill. We can grow anything in enormous quantities. The Project's already starting to produce. Give us a year. I've got five square miles under intensive cultivation. We'll clear over a thousand salable tons to the square mile. At fifty cents a

pound—and you know we'll get more than that, Bill—we'll take in five million dollars."

"About two percent of the cost of those dams," Adams reminded him. Before Martinez could protest Bill interrupted. "Yeah, I know. You've got a lot more square miles you'll bring in next year. I've seen the projections. But the Company's got cash problems, and this place had better plan on paying its own way." He pushed back his chair, turned to the windows of the lagoon.

"Don't—don't you ever do anything just because it's worth doing?" Courtney asked. Her voice was not quite under control, as if she were holding back anger.

Adams shrugged. "When you're talking about as much money as this Project costs, you get into the altruism game precisely once. OK, if you'll ask His Highness to come in, I'd like to meet him. And I give all of you warning, be careful what you say when he's here."

"Would you rather we left?" Courtney asked.

"No. I may need all of my advisors. But keep your little round mouth closed unless I ask for something, will you? All right, Mike."

His Highness, Toki Ukamea, Prime Minister and Crown Prince, was a giant for a Tongan. He stood six feet two, with broad shoulders and the hips. Adams noted the massive hands and legs, and that the full middle had no sag at all. The two councillors were normal-sized Tongans, short and rather slender but well-muscled, and both wore open, flowered shirts. His Highness was wearing a dark suit and regimental striped tie which Adams noted thoughtfully. Cambridge or Oxford, couldn't remember which, or which college . . .

There were few formalities. After the introductions they sat at the big conference table and Adams nodded to Mike King, who began by telling the Prince about *Persephone*.

He was interrupted by a full, hearty laugh. "I already know about your ship, Mr. Adams," the prince said. His voice was deep and rich, with an almost perfect Oxbridge accent. "You must remember that Fiji and Tonga have been close neighbors for centuries, and we have many friends there. My people sail to Fiji whenever they like."

"I thought you would know, Your Highness," Adams said. The amused glint was back in his grey eyes. "But I wonder if you know the consequences of that?"

"Damned awkward for your company, I think," the Prince said. His voice lost the amused tone, and became stern. "For us too, perhaps."

Adams nodded and turned to Mike King.

"Yes, sir," Mike said. "Overseas Foods wants the Station. They've got enough of our bonds and preferred debentures to get it. We might be able to keep the reactors, and then again we might not, but they definitely want the rest of the Project. Except for the whales, which they consider an unnecessary expense. They'll butcher them."

"Susie!" Courtney exclaimed. "But you can't let them do that, we're just beginning to—we might even be able to have them bear young, save the species. ..."

"Aye. And before they can be killed I'll turn them out myself," Dr. MacRae added. "Nae matter what Mr. Lewis says, but I think he'll no forbid it. I hae never met the chief but I'm told he loves the whales."

Prince Toki nodded agreement. "I think even if you did not, Dr. MacRae, the sea people would release the whales. By the way, I'm surprised you've never met Mr. Lewis. But then I haven't either." The simple statement was a demand for explanations.

"Never come to Tonga," one of the councillors said slowly. "Must be a very stupid man."

"No, sir," Adams told them. "Mr. Lewis is crippled. He never leaves his headquarters in Santa Barbara."

"I see," Toki said. "I had heard something of the sort but . . . well, sir. We are agreed that we have common interests. Now what is it you want?"

Adams looked surprised, as if the prince's bluntness was unexpected. "Let's be sure we do agree," he said slowly. "The Project is going well?"

Martinez answered quickly. "Very well. I am astonished at how quickly the Tongan fishermen have learned the techniques of scientific record-keeping. They'll have no trouble operating the farm projects so that the Station can be manned with few non-Tongans, as agreed in the sale."

"A gentleman's agreement only," the prince said. "Quite unenforceable, but I am happy that you have voluntarily kept to it."

MacRae was muttering to himself. "'Twill be a pity to see the Station go to people like Overseas Foods; they've no sense for the future. And 'tis a bonny project."



"There's no hope, then?" the prince asked carefully. "Nuclear General is in that much financial difficulty?"

"Without the plutonium aboard *Persephone* we are," Adams answered.

"Of course you wouldn't be talking to me if your government were willing to help get it back," the prince said. "All right, Mr. Adams, you've an idea. What is it?"

Martinez laughed and everyone looked at him. "I don't know what he has in mind," Martinez explained quickly, "but one thing I've learned, never count Mr. Lewis out until he's not only dead but embalmed. Not even then. *El Patron* has won tougher fights than this." He gestured significantly at Bill Adams. "And we know he is concerned, to send his prime minister."

Adams gave Martinez and the prince a twisted grin. "He's worried all right." He took a large chart from his briefcase and spread it on the table. "*Persephone's* here?" he asked the prince.

"Yes."

"Aye," MacRae answered. "In that harbor, protected by the entire Fiji Navy, all seven gunboats and a destroyer."

"Radar scanners, I suppose?"

MacRae nodded.

"We can't do much," Adams said. "But you've said that the Tongans sail to Fiji, Your Highness. Even in bad weather. In open boats, small outriggers. Is that true?"

The prince grinned carefully. "It's true enough, Mr. Adams. We have sailed those straits for hundreds of years. I've done it myself often enough. I suppose you've thought of underwater approaches?"

Adams found it was his turn to laugh. "Yes, sir. My company police say the harbor's too treacherous for frogmen. We might train the dolphins, but there's not enough time. On the other hand, our people say the chances of a small outrigger being picked up at night during a storm are just about nil. Of course, no westerner would be able to navigate an outrigger into that harbor under such conditions. ..."

"What will you tell the Republic of Fiji if this succeeds?"

"Why, that we found our ship adrift and unmanned in international waters," Adams said. The grin was back now, Martinez thought his friend looked quite himself. "We'll even offer to pay a reasonable fee for 'caring' for *Persephone*."

The prince's laughter rumbled through the room. "All right, Mr. Adams. We'll help you get your ship back. I've heard of Overseas Foods and I don't want them for neighbors . . . but none of us could sail her, I think. I'm sure there are no Tongans who can operate a nuclear reactor aboard ship. Or probably anywhere else."

"I will take care of the reactor," Art Martinez said. "I may be an ecologist but I am Director of San Juan Capistrano Station. I know how."

Adams nodded. "And I can sail the ship if you get us to her, Your Highness. I also have a couple of sailing officers from Company headquarters in *Cerebrus'* staterooms. If you hadn't been willing to help, we'd have had a crack at it alone, but by God, welcome aboard!"

*Cerebrus* landed in the lee of an uninhabited atoll seventy miles from Fiji. Her clamshell cargo doors opened to discharge men and a slender war canoe.

"Now we'll see how it floats," Prince Toki said. "I wonder that you made your own."

Adams shrugged, then quickly grasped the handrail by the cargo door as the plane lurched to a heavy sea.

"Fiberglass is a bit tougher than your woods," he said, "But this outrigger is an exact duplicate of the one in our harbor. And remember we won't be bringing it back with us. This one can't be traced."

Toki laughed softly into the gathering dark. "You hope it won't be coming back." They climbed gingerly down from the enormous plane to the pitching boat. It was only three feet wide, but nearly fifty feet long. All metal tools and weapons were laid in the bottom of the boat so they would be below the waterline and out of radar reflection.

"As soon as you're ready," the pilot called softly. "That blow's coming up fast and it's getting darker. I'd like to get the old dog upstairs."

Adams waved. The props spun, and *Cerebrus* drifted away, turned, and gunned into the wind. Spray flew from her bows and pontoons, then she was aloft, winging just above the tops of the waves. They'd come in at the same altitude.

The boat wallowed heavily in the rising seas. Prince Toki stood in the stern and spoke quietly to the sea people. Except for a half dozen technicians and company police, Adams, King, and Martinez were the only

westerners. Adams hadn't objected to the prince coming himself; he understood why. It would not have been in a warrior aristocrat's character to send men on something like this and not go himself, even if the Tongan royal families hadn't led men in battle for a hundred years. ...

The prince's teeth flashed white as Toki spoke carefully in musical tones, his voice carrying easily over rising wind and crashing waves. When he sat again, they cheered.

"What did you tell them?" Adams asked, but the prince had gone forward to see to the sails. The outrigger gathered way under sail, flashing across steadily rising seas. When they left the lee of the island, breakers crashed around them, but no water came aboard. Adams estimated their speed at twenty knots.

Toki came back finally after inspecting sails and rigging. "I told them of their ancestors and mine," he said. "I was named for one, Toki Ukamea means 'iron axe.' We once sailed these waters in revenge against raiders. I could have told them in English but — it sounded better in Tongan!" There was amusement in the clipped accents. "If my professors at Magdalene College should see me now!"

The boat was pitching wildly, and the Americans found it hard to pay attention to anything. The storm rose, wind howling until the Tongans reefed, reefed again until the sail was a tiny patch in the night, but the boat tore on at high speed, leaving a great creamy wake behind, actually outrunning the seas, carried along by the screaming wind.

"Quite a blow," Michael King said. His voice was strained, artificially calm.

"Not really," Toki answered. "You will know it when the storm really hits. There will be rain then. I warned you. . . ."

"Yeah." Adams grimly held the bulwarks. He looked behind, saw an enormous wave building up astern, flinched, but they ran away from it so that it broke harmlessly aft of them. Another monster sea came up, with the same result, but it was unnerving to watch them. He tried to close his eyes, but his stomach heaved and he quickly opened them again, grimly took a deep breath, and held it.

"At night, with this storm, there shouldn't be anyone very alert," Adams told the prince. "I hope."

Toki shrugged. "Fijians might, but I do not believe their Asian masters will let them out in boats." Mike King looked up in surprise, and Prince Toki grimaced. "Malays, Indians, Chinese—they outnumbered the Fijians as far back as the late fifties. We would have gone the same way if we ever let the Europeans control us. The Indians came to Fiji as workers, so did the Chinese. Soon there was no room for the sea people. Our King George Tupuo I kept Tonga for the Tongans. A wise policy, I think."

Adams looked at the enigmatic face and wondered if there were a message addressed to him. His wits weren't sharp, not in this wild sea and screaming wind.

Prince Toki read the expression and smiled thinly. "No, I don't mean your Company, Mr. Adams. I was worried at first, but you have kept your agreement, brought in only enough westerners to run the Station, kept them on short-term contracts. If you had encouraged your people to settle permanently . . . but do you know why I agreed to help you tonight?"

Adams shook his head warily.

"The whales. The sea people have always respected the whales, Mr. Adams. It will be a sad world for us when they're gone. But there's nothing we can do to keep the powers from killing them all off. Your Company is at least trying."

"Be damned," Adams muttered to himself. Had Mr. Lewis seen that coming, or did he really just want to save the beasts for sentimental reasons? No matter, the books balanced nicely now.

"Understand me," the prince was saying. "We can help each other, and the reefs you occupy would never have been much use to us. You can keep them. But I hope you have no other plans for Tonga."

"We don't," Adams said. At least none I'll talk about now, he added to himself. A thick cloud had moved over the already feeble moon, and it was dark and threatening in the open boat. Phosphorescent seas crashed around them. Ominous black clouds astern added an atmosphere of menace. Bill settled his windbreaker around himself and stared miserably at the water.

In four hours they were at the harbor entrance. A driving rain obscured everything, and Adams was amazed at the skill of the Tongan helmsmen who seemed to know exactly where they were. They had sailed to Fiji many times across hundreds of miles of open water, and they had phenomenal memories, but there was no clue to what they steered by in this wet darkness. A tiny reef to port, swirls and breakers in the water, the boat raced on past the harbor bars in silence, and they were in calmer water.

Then, quite suddenly, a white shape loomed up off the starboard bow. *Persephone* riding at anchor, tossing violently in the big swell that swept in from the Pacific. Even close up the ship was almost hidden in

the driving rain.

The boat moved quietly to the anchor chain and Prince Toki, followed by three Tongans swarmed up it. Moments later a dozen followed. Adams heard a scuffling sound, a noise as loud to him as *Cerebrus's* engines had been, then silence. A few moments later grinning bronze faces peered over the bulwarks.

"They'll have headaches in the morning. What do we do with them?"

"Set the lot of them adrift in the canoe. Only anchor it so they won't get lost," Adams said. Despite his seasickness there was a wave of triumph swelling over him.

Toki nodded. "Ready to be cut loose?"

"I think so. Give us a couple of minutes, eh?" Martinez was already below in the engine rooms with technicians. It would be an hour before he could safely start the reactors but the ship's emergency batteries would take them out of harbor. Adams and a company sailing officer went to the bridge.

"Everything looks good sir," the mate said. "Plenty of juice. I think we can put out."

"Do it." As *Persephone* moved silently out of the harbor and into the storm Adams grinned despite the violent motion. He was miserable, and when it was safe he'd lose his dinner, but he had the ship. And that's half the problem, he thought.

The fiberglass lanai set on top of the Station blockhouse seemed like home after the wild ride. *Persephone* had met *Cerebrus* after the storm blew itself out and a regular crew took over. Bill and the Tongans returned to Ta'avu Station while the big white ship raced out to open water escorted by the plane. She wouldn't be taken again.

Adams carefully squared the stack of papers on the table and placed them in the briefcase. He fussed with their order, being sure that he knew where each was so that he could get what he wanted without hunting and without opening the case wide. As he finished, Courtney came in.

"The prince and his councillors are in the conference room," she said. "They're ready."

"Thanks."

"That was—well, congratulations," she said. She wanted to say more, but he had that preoccupied look again. She wished he would notice her, but now she understood. There was something else, and after that there would be another problem. There would always be another problem for a man like Bill Adams.

"What's that you're carrying?" Bill asked.

"Oh—one of Mike King's books. He loaned it to me." She held out Bernstein's classic *Transportation Economics*. "I thought I ought to study something besides Station ecology."

"Yeah. Keep reading things like that and . . . Look, after this is over we'll see about that transfer you requested. Do you like to travel?"

"Yes—"

"I'm leaving Mike here when I go back to Santa Barbara. Can you type?"

"Damn you!" she shouted.

Adams shrugged. "I can. Bit hard to communicate with the computers if you can't. Can you type?"

"Yes, but I'm not a secretary!"

"Don't need another one. They already gave me four," Adams said. "If you can get over being touchy about being able to type, maybe we can work something out. Just now I've got a conference."

They went toward the meeting room. One of the Tongans came up and shouted to Courtney. She answered in Tongan, then excused herself and ran off.

Prince Toki and his two councillors were seated at the conference table. They stayed there as Bill came in, and he remembered that to stand in the presence of nobility without being asked was considered disrespectful. Evidently he'd been promoted. He shook hands around and took his seat. Everyone grinned openly.

"Perhaps not a feat to compare with the early kings," Prince Toki said, "but wait until the palace musicians are through. You have no idea how strange 'Bill Adams' and 'Arturo Martinez' sound in a Tongan heroic ballad!"

"I'm afraid to guess," Adams said.

"Where is Dr. Martinez?" the Prince asked.

"Some kind of problem in the fish farms," Bill answered. "I'm sure it's not serious. Well. Gentlemen, that turned out well enough. Now let's talk about the next problem. The Fijians are stealing your fishing boats, Your waters too. I expect you want to do something about that."

Toki nodded. "But I wish you would stop saying 'Fijians.' It isn't the sea people, it's the mainlanders who are pirates."

"I'll try to remember, but what do I call them? Anyway, let's do something about your boats. What Tonga needs is a real navy, something to protect your waters."

Toki shook his head slowly. "Frankly, Mr. Adams, the cost of a navy would be greater than all the fishing boats we'd ever lose. Besides, no matter what you saw last night, our people don't enjoy fighting. The real Fijians are more warlike than we are."

"Not true," the older councillor said. "In older times we fight. No one ever conquer Tonga Islands, we have always had our own king."

Toki shrugged. "Still, we're not about to convert to a war economy. And war with Fiji would take time, kill a lot of sea people. No."

"Oh, I wasn't talking about Fiji," Adams said. He flashed a crooked grin. "Now that we have *Persephone* back we can put a stop to *that* nonsense though economic pressures. It shouldn't take long to settle Fiji,"

"Then why do we need a navy?"

"Funny thing about this world," Adams said carefully. "Legally, a sovereign government can protect its interests pretty well as long as it doesn't start open war and involve the big powers. Certainly a sovereign government can arm merchant ships and protect them against harassment by international gangsters. But there are a lot of sovereigns in name who haven't the means to protect themselves and have to rely on someone else. ..."

"You mean Tonga," the prince said. He frowned, then shrugged. "But I must agree. We wish the British were still protecting us. But they're not, and we see no one else we'd like to have as partners."

Adams nodded. "Now also in this world are big companies—like, say, Nuclear General—who have more than enough power to protect their interests but have no legal right to do it because they aren't sovereign. The United States is supposed to look after our interests, but we don't see them doing much of it. Delicate state of relations, world opinion—" Adams broke off, his jaw set. "Mostly lack of ability, of course. With welfare payments where they are the U.S. can't even do proper research, much less—well. If Tonga were to nationalize some of Nuclear General's ships, you'd have the right to arm them, declare them protected by your sovereignty ..."

"You're asking us to expropriate your property?" Toki asked.

"Well, we'd expect to be paid for it."

"But we don't have the money to pay you. . . . This is silly."

"You'd have enough money if you leased the ships to us. We'd pay very well for their use. At least as much, say, as we'd have to ask for if you nationalized them."

A slow grin spread across Toki's bronze face. "Let me understand something. Does your offer to help with Fiji depend on this deal?"

Adams shrugged. "There could be even more to it than that, Your Highness. For instance, Tongans go overseas to university. I suppose some of your people have overseas property. But you have no resident ministers or consuls abroad. . . . Now Nuclear General has people all over the world. No reason why they can't be given diplomatic credentials by the Royal government of Tonga, is there? Of course that means we'd have to look out for your interests everywhere."

"I will be—" Toki broke off and said something in Tongan. The ministers laughed and replied. Finally Toki turned back to Bill Adams. "It seems to me that we could use this arrangement to capture and protect more whales, stop foreigners fishing in our waters . . . would you agree to that?"

"Of course."

"Just what is it you want, Mr. Adams?"

"Nuclear General has an ice floe in the Humboldt Current," Adams said. He looked intently at the prince. "It's being towed up to Los Angeles, where we can sell it for quite a lot. But a couple of South American governments think they can charge us enormous fees for passage through what they call their waters. Now if we arm those ships and bring the kind of economic pressures that we can swing, we can talk them out of their designs. But our State Department won't let us do that, and the U.S. Navy won't act to protect our property. But if we register those ships under the Tongan flag . . ."

"I see." Toki was thoughtful for a long moment. "But this might mean war, Mr. Adams."

"Not over the ice floes. As to something else, how safe can you ever be? If Nuclear General was really in trouble, we'd have to pack up the reactors and go. Or lose them to someone else. That's not a threat, Your Highness. I know better than that. I'm trying to point out that Ta'avu Station is valuable and one of these days we may have to fight for it. The decision to try to take it from us will be harder to make if the fight won't be easy. But *we* can't arm the Station, we're not sovereign. You can't because you haven't the weapons. Together. ..."

"How would you arm Ta'avu?"

"Coastal batteries. We've got some. Also we've got a couple of warships we bought from bankrupt governments. We can keep them around here under your flag if you'll commission our officers. But there's something else. . . . It's widely known that Nuclear General has the knowledge and fissionables to make atomic weapons. If we're acting for you, whether we have them or not I don't think small powers will want to find out—and the big ones won't bully Tonga, while they'd be happy to push a U.S. private company around."

"Why us?" Toki asked quietly.

"Because you're not ambitious. We've no worries that you'd try to use the Company as a lever to conquer your neighbors. And the whole world will believe that, there's strength in being thought small and nonaggressive in this day and age. Especially if you've suddenly joined the nuclear club ..."

Toki pursed his lips carefully. "I'll have to speak to His Majesty, but—the idea is appealing. Tonga needs powerful friends, and I think your interests are close to ours. We'd thought of alliances with other countries but we ... I suppose you have a detailed agreement with you?"

Adams nodded happily. "It's rather complete, actually. With some long-term taxation agreements which will infuriate the U.S. Internal Revenue Service, but ought to make you happy . . . now, we expect you'd rather collect most of those taxes in services, here's a schedule of what we can provide. ..."

He was interrupted by Courtney and Samuel bursting into the meeting. Adams frowned as the Tongan technician squatted respectfully before his prince. They chattered in Tongan while Adams looked on puzzled and Courtney tried to look casual, although she was obviously bursting.

Toki's grin was reassuring. "Dr. Martinez sends a message which won't wait, Mr. Adams. You are to congratulate Mr. Lewis and tell him he is the father of a three-ton baby girl. ..."