Ruler of the World by J. T. McIntosh

CHAPTER ONE

Spacemen are flabby. They spend most of their lives in nogee or mere token gravity, there is little to do in space, and there's always plenty of good food and drink or they wouldn't have signed on.

Flabbier than any of the crew with her was the freighter *Elegant Girl*, invariably known with immeasurably greater accuracy as the *Dirty Cow*. She had been a good ship once and, within her limitations was still a reliable ship. But you couldn't run the best of ships forever without a broom or a woman on board, never fix anything but the engines, and expect her to smell of violets. The owners, Astrogo, didn't expect the *Dirty Cow* to smell of violets. They had no intention of ever coming nearer to her than the bank.

The bunk cabin had once been luxurious in its way. In low gravities, three-tiered bunks are not at all inconvenient; you can jump into the top one without effort and falling out of it doesn't necessarily wake you up. There had been tables and lockers and wardrobes and individual scanners and scores of other amenities for the men who had to spend weeks at a time in space.

The doors of the lockers and cabinets that still had doors swung crookedly on torn hinges; the tables were hideously scarred, and the gee units underneath, which had once secured things placed on top, had been kicked and bashed to improve their performance, with the opposite result; only two or three of the scanners still purveyed cracked music, only one a passable picture. And over everything lay the thick crust of assorted grime from a hundred planets.

Six of the crew of the *Dirty Cow*—there were only ten altogether, counting the three officers—were gathered around the fixed table in the center, each with a bare toe stuck into a deckring. They wore soiled pants, shorts, T-shirts, but mostly just shorts. They were a hairy lot, bearded and unshorn. Although they washed themselves occasionally, itches and body vermin being things even spacemen wouldn't encourage, their fastidiousness did not extend to wearing clean clothes.

The six spoke quietly, though no one even inside the door could have heard a word they said, far less anybody outside. Presently, having reached a decision, they turned to look up at the third-tier bunk where the seventh crewman, having given up trying to coax entertainment from his battered scanner, was reading a tattered book.

"Are you with us?" asked Weir, the hairiest of the six. The man in the bunk didn't hear him. "Are you with us?" Weir said more loudly, but still with furtive restraint, as if trying to shout in a whisper. The man in the bunk looked down. "In what?"

"Can it, Burrell, don't play the fool," said Collina irritably. "You know all about it. You said you were fed up hearing about it. Well, now we've made up our minds without you."

Ram Burrell rolled out of his bunk and with an experienced shove reached the floor, where he expertly grasped a deckring between two toes. Unlike the rest of them, he was naked. Although his stocky body, above average height but not much above, was lightly fuzzed, he was less hairy than any of the rest of them. And he was cleanshaven.

On the *Dirty Cow* a certain degree of personal uncleanliness was a matter of pride. Nobody got filthy enough to offend the sensitivities of the others, although sensitivity was a rare quality on the ship. Burrell, a hard, rough man, not only kept himself clean but ensured that his immediate surroundings were immaculate too. He reacted savagely when any crewman borrowed his sheets, blankets, or towels. The other six strongly resented this, though they were not precisely sure why.

"You've made up your minds about what?" he said. His avoidance of repetitive obscenity set him apart as much as his cleanliness. He didn't mind swearing, but when he did so it was for emphasis, and there could be no emphasis when every second word was the same. He was fortyish and, in clothes appeared overweight. When he was naked, however, it

became clear that all his bulk was accounted for by bone and muscle, not always in the most aesthetic places.

"We're going to jump ship," said Weir, the usual spokesman. Collina, the other crewman with a lot to say, seldom achieved even the appearance of being constructive. Weir did. "Jumping ship isn't mutiny. The thing is, we do it together. The law won't be called in: the captain will have to find us and make us a better offer. It's not so easy to get a crew for the *Dirty Cow*."

Burrell nodded. "Fair enough. But why all the conspiracy now? You can't jump ship before Marsay, and it's nine weeks to Marsay—"

"We're jumping ship at bloody Paradiso," said Collina. "Can't you get that through your thick skull?"

Burrell looked at him pityingly. "You can't jump ship at Paradiso. I already told you."

"You haven't been there any more than we have. For God's sake stop acting like—"

"Listen," said Burrell patiently, fixing the others with his eyes: the waverers Sneddon and Burks, the thinker Maddox, and the man who couldn't think at all, Johnson. "Paradiso isn't a planet, it's a space station, an artificial world, built and ran by Starways Inc., and it's run for millionaires. There's nothing for us there—"

"There's no law on Paradiso," Weir broke in. "For us, that can't be bad."

"For us, that can't be worse. There's no law for the rich. There's too much law for the poor. And that's us."

"Some say you're not so poor," Maddox murmured pensively.

Burrell shrugged and gazed contemptuously around him.

For no apparent reason, something snapped in Collina.

It was impossible for Collina to argue without eventually exploding into violence. They all knew that, but what made them particularly wary of him was that there was no telling when he would become violent—often when

the argument appeared to be dying out.

Perhaps it was the shrug that annoyed him. Anyway, he launched himself homicidally at Burrell, which was not a smart thing to do.

There are dangers in nogee. A fall can't hurt you, even in a big ship that has mass enough to give her some sort of gravity. You fall all right, but air resistance prevents you from working up speed.

Propel yourself in nogee, however, as Collina had just done with a foot against the fixed table, and you so completely overcome air resistance that you resemble a runaway train. Anything in your way is doomed. And Burrell, naked, anchored, in a deckring, was in Collina's way.

A runaway train cannot be stopped. But where the rails turn, it has to turn. If Burrell had tried to stop Collina dead he would have damaged himself considerably. Instead, he pulled himself to one side, released his toehold (or he'd have had two broken toes), and pushed Collina's shoulder. The reaction sent Burrell flying back against a steel wall, but he took the impact on his buttocks; his landing was nothing to the impact with which Collina struck the adjacent wall with his head.

Nobody went near him. He was out but probably not dead.

"I was telling you," continued Burrell, joining the group at the table, "you can't jump ship at Paradise Marsay, sure. I'll jump ship with you at Marsay if you like. Only whatever the offer, I'm not coming back. I've had enough of the *Dirty Cow*."

"Stick to Paradiso," said Weir doggedly. "Why not Paradiso?"

Burrell sighed. "Because there's no place to hide, that's why. Paradiso's a great big hotel in space. Everybody there is either a master or a servant. And the so-called servants, the Starways staff, get paid about ten times as much as us. So in Paradiso, assuming you get past the docks, which is a big assumption, you would get spotted in no time unless either you're getting paid twenty a day or you're paying two hundred a day."

"There's no cops—"

"Who told you there's no cops? You've been reading the travel agents' brochures on Paradiso. *Paradiso, where anything goes! Paradiso, where*

the party started twenty-one years ago and it hasn't stopped since! Take your pleasures wild or wonderful, you'll find them all in Paradiso! Paradiso, where there's never been a crime! There can't be any crimes because there are no courts and no cops!"

They were licking their lips. "Well, what's wrong with that?" said Burks.

Burrell gave up. They couldn't see that to keep things running smoothly in such a plastic heaven, Starways had to have a special branch in control—an iron hand in a velvet glove. Millionaires got drunk and aggressive as often as anybody else... more often than anybody else. There had to be an irresistible force to stop customers from annoying each other too much, or Paradiso wouldn't have lasted a month, let alone twenty-one years. That was obvious. It wasn't advertised but it stood to reason. And with that kind of undercover efficiency, the idea of a bunch of spacerats getting off a ship like the *Dirty Cow* and finding themselves a pad in Paradiso was ludicrous.

"The point is," said Weir obstinately, "we've got to be together in this. Are you with us, Burrell?"

Burrell didn't answer because Burks and Maddox and Sneddon were looking past him. The old trick of looking past a man to make him turn made sense only when an attack was intended from the front. And nobody had the guts to attack Ram Burrell except Collina.

Burrell moved slightly as the knife came down. He caught Collina's wrist, pivoted, and wrenched. Collina screamed, and the knife, which happened to be motionless at the instant of release, floated in the air like Lady Macbeth's *Is this a dagger which I see before me*?

Collina, released, stopped screaming and began to whimper.

"I've dislocated your shoulder," said Burrell casually. "I could put it back for you, but I won't. You'll have to go to the captain and see what he can do for you. He knows you, Collina. He'll get Schick to fix your shoulder and then he'll throw you in the brig."

Hate exploded from Collina's eyes. But Burrell wasn't interested. Even in his pain he would have refused to let Burrell touch him. So there was nothing for him to do but start for the door and the captain.

"He'll get you," said Maddox dispassionately. "Probably while you're asleep. He'll wait, and finally get you."

Maddox was probably right, except that Burrell wasn't going to be there to be got. The others weren't going to jump ship at Paradiso, but Burrell was.

Weir said again: "Are you with us, Burrell?"

Trying to talk them out of it wasn't going to work. He said: "Sure, why not? You've convinced me. We'll all jump ship at Paradiso."

CHAPTER TWO

Paradiso was a perfect silver sphere except for the docks, a huge square box against which the Roaring Twenties mirror ball slowly revolved. To the *Dirty Cow* the box was the docks; to the well-heeled patrons of Paradiso it was the spaceport. There were no luxury liners due, of course, or the *Dirty Cow* would never have been allowed within a million miles of Paradiso.

Yes, Paradiso could have stopped the *Dirty Cow* a million miles away. Though not officially armed, the space station had a defensive field superior to anything the Federation Navy possessed anywhere.

"Sure, we make our own way in, where and how we can, every man for himself," Burrell had agreed with the other five (Collina was still in the ship's brig). It didn't matter what he said to them, what he agreed to. They weren't going to make it. "Sure, we'll meet twenty-four hours from now at the nearest thing they've got in this place to a town square."

Gravity came on as the freighter turned and drifted in to make contact with the port of Paradiso. *In* became *down*. Paradiso was below them. Landing bottom down, the men on board weighed first a couple of kilos, then ten, finally nearly thirty. But part of that was accounted for by deceleration.

There was one minor favorable factor in the plan to jump ship at Paradiso. Normally the crew was very busy indeed at loading and unloading times, but Paradiso claimed to possess the most automated docks in the galaxy: freighter crews didn't have to do a thing to help and

were not encouraged to try. The crew, therefore, would not be immediately missed if any of them succeeded in getting lost.

The *Dirty Cow* made contact. Weir led the group to the bridge, where Captain Hoyt was talking to Unloading Control by the phone link automatically created when the ship was secured. The six crewmen waited respectfully, and when he put down the phone he looked at them suspiciously, with good reason. They were washed and in clean whites; as if that were not enough, their very respectfulness was a clanging alarm bell to him.

"Permission to go ashore, Sir," said Weir formally.

"You can't go ashore here," Hoyt snapped. "You know damn well—"

" 'Crew refreshment facilities,' " Maddox quoted, " 'must be provided at all unloading installations of F status and above.'"

"The focsle lawyer," Hoyt sneered. "That's for men engaged in loading and unloading. Here you don't have to."

"We don't have to sweat to get this old cow unloaded," Weir agreed. "So we can go ashore for a drink. We're respectfully asking permission. Sir. Also permission to draw on wages. Sir."

The captain glowered for a moment. Hoyt automatically kept them battened down even when he could have allowed them liberty. However, technically they had every right to land if Paradiso would let them, which he very much doubted.

He picked up the phone again. "Six of my crew want to land for a drink," he said shortly, willing the dockmaster to slap down a veto.

The reply at first didn't please him, but as he went on listening a hard smile slowly grew to quite a benevolent beam, which meant, Burrell thought, that they were going to have about as much chance of getting through the docks into Paradiso as of getting out of a high-security jail.

Burrell took care to say nothing at all. He had intended all along to jump ship at Paradiso. The fact that the rest of the crew later decided the same thing was to him, merely an unfortunate coincidence.

Five minutes later they were ashore, on dry land. Burrell still found the archaic words that spacemen used slightly ridiculous. No scholar, he didn't know why the Control-room was called the bridge or what a focsle was or had been, but "ashore" and "dry land" to him still meant going down the gangplank of a seagoing vessel onto solid earth. This he had done often on many worlds, particularly Orleans, while none of the *Dirty Cow's* other crewmen had ever sailed the sea. Any sea.

This shore, this dry land, was a steel corridor remarkable for two things, its cleanliness and its bareness. There was not a door, hatch, join, rivet or screw to be seen. There was not even the slightest indication of where the light was coming from. The one thing the corridor did have was gravity, about thirty percent gee, and since it didn't have the short-range effect associated with all the artificial gravity systems (like magnetism, strong at the point of contact and rapidly fading to nothing perhaps only an inch or two away), it was a reasonable assumption that the mass of Paradiso proper was directly below and supplying most of the gravity—not all of it, because although the silver sphere was big it wasn't that big.

Weir and the other four were fifty yards ahead, whooping at the thought of booze and women and freedom. BurFrell followed more slowly, observing what little there was to observe.

The corridor made a right-angled turn, and through swing doors was a bar. It was a very ordinary bar except in one respect. There was only one door, the one by which they entered, and they knew already how little use that was to them. True, there was a toilet, but it was hardly worth investigating that. There would be the usual facilities and nothing else.

There was a single barman behind a semi-circular bar with a counter higher and wider than usual and with no apparent break in it. Nor was there any perceptible way for the barman to get out at the back. One thing that was perceptible, however, and it needn't have been if it hadn't been meant as a warning, was a closed-circuit camera in the ceiling, watching.

That Weir and the others were disappointed was evident from the sullen way in which they were ordering drinks. They wanted the drinks but they wanted far more. What Burrell had told them had made no impression—they expected to find a bar with the world going by outside, big windows, bustle, traffic, noise, open space, and women. What they got was a small conventional lounge bar entirely to themselves, with no windows, no door except the one they entered by, and certainly no women.

Burrell, when his turn came, ordered beer and sat at the end of the bar, away from the others. His behavior for the last three months made this no surprise to the other five crewmen.

Weir and Maddox were in the washroom, checking it out. The other three had taken their drinks to the farthest table, no doubt to discuss the situation without being overheard by the barman.

It was as good a chance as Burrell was going to get. He waved a ten and said quietly: "I want to call at a bank."

The barman took the ten, saw what little there was to see in Burrell's face, saw the wad the ten came from, and nodded. "Dock bank only," he said.

"Sure. So long as it's a bank."

Spacemen, like any other men who worked for months on end without being able to spend their pay, ultimately had to handle large sums. The wisest among them would bank, or better still invest an occasional nest egg at ports of call that were not only financially safe but also in constant contact with other such places.

"Through there," said the barman.

He reached under the counter and the white quasi-marble pillar at the end of the bar rotated eccentrically. The gap created was wide enough for Burrell. As the pillar closed again, he heard the *Dirty Cow's* crewmen clamoring behind him, shouting after him, asking the barman where he'd gone, demanding the opportunity to go with him. Then silence.

The barman wouldn't let them follow him. If they caused trouble he would put up the shutters and call the cops. It stood to reason he wasn't as alone and unprotected as he seemed to be. And none of the others were smart enough to hit on a way to make the barman let them through.

He was in another bare steel corridor but the angle was different. This one led downwards and was therefore a shaft. The ladders on the sides seemed strangely primitive. But then, none of Paradiso's guests ever came here: only dockers and, occasionally, spacemen.

At the bottom of the ladder was a small landing and another set of

swing doors. Through small circular windows, Burrell could see a circular shopping center, with the shops round the perimeter and a large clear space in the middle. There were groups of people milling about, men and women, mostly in overalls or whites like his own: dockland employees, Starways staff. But there were also tourists taking pictures (not that the scene was worth photographing—there were a thousand such centers in the galaxy at bus depots, railway stations, spaceports, seaports, trading posts). A group of chattering women wore bright trousers, playsuits, leotards. There were even some in long or short skirts, which meant they took gravity for granted even in a space station. Bald, overweight men wore shorts and sandals, with cameras bumping against pendulous bellies.

Burrell threw off the whites that proclaimed him a servant rather than a master, stuffing them behind the rungs of the farthest ladder. Underneath he wore spotless white shorts. It had been a good guess that in a play world the golden people would wear play clothes, and the hired help would not.

He put his money, six hundred plus, in one pocket and a small leather case in the other. Now attired only in shorts and shoes, he pushed open the door and boldly walked into the crowd.

CHAPTER THREE

The bank was right opposite. He didn't go near it.

When people are moving about in an open space, a keen eye soon spots the patterns of purpose. A group of elderly tourists stopped taking pictures and began to move in twos and threes towards an arcade. Burrell casually inserted himself among them. His guess proved to be correct; they were leaving the area, having had enough of slumming, and were going back to Paradise.

"Allow me," he said gallantly, and relieved a stout and puffing woman of the heaviest of her parcels. She looked at him doubtfully for a moment, afraid he might run off with them, and then her own inclination to accept his assistance decided her to trust him.

"Thank you," she gasped.

The arcade led to a shuttle stop, where two Starways employees, a man

and a woman, were packing tourists into the cars as they arrived. Burrell hung back for a moment to make sure no tickets changed hands, then followed the stout lady.

Four minutes' later, having allowed himself to be persuaded that she needed no further assistance, he alighted at the shuttle's third stop.

It was quite a place. The architects, faced with the problem of building within an artificial sphere, had decided neither to pack it like a block of office units nor to make a Pellucidar world using the rim as the base, which would have been possible using centrifugal gravity. Instead they had put a solid core in the center and made that the base, not only simplifying the technical problems by making several kinds of gravity possible, through multiple reinforcement, but also allowing for a type of architecture somewhere between Disney and the conceptions of the early science-fiction artists.

There were at least a dozen levels, Burrell guessed, between the central sphere and the rim. Each was so far from the next that the impression given was of spaciousness rather than of being closed in. And broad, sweeping walkways led from one level to the next, cunningly arranged so that wherever one stood, the eye could find real distance to look into, glimpses of three levels down or six levels up. The predominantly spiral lines gave the illusion that there was always open space directly above.

There were no cars and only a basic public-transport system—the shuttle, the many elevators, an escalator here and there and a slow moveway on each level. Walking was obligatory. It was no hardship in halfgee.

Burrell found quite a few of the passers-by looking at him curiously, and soon realized why. This was a cool level, cooler than in the docks section, too cool for shorts only. The people here wore street clothes. On the nearest spiral walkway, however, he saw more gaily dressed tourists, going up, apparently to a warmer level. He walked across and followed them.

Here there were few obvious employees: the whole area belonged to the tourists, the guests, the millionaires. As Burrell suspected, the next level was warmer and the people about him began to shed sweaters, wraps, skirts. Some shoved them straight into disposal chutes. Others put them down, evidently expecting them to be there when they got back. He

remembered another line from Paradiso publicity: *There are no thieves in Paradiso*.

To one side of the via was a garden leading to a recreation area. On the other was a small business complex that included a bank.

He walked into the bank and found it laid out quite conventionally. People liked their banks to look like banks, even when restaurants looked like glass balloons.

He told the first teller he saw: "I want to see the manager."

The teller hesitated only for a second, then said: "Certainly, sir. Your name?"

"I'll tell him."

"Her, sir. Flora Fay. This way."

If Burrell had known the bank was managed by a woman called Flora Fay (she must be fifty and arid), he would have found another bank. It was too late, however... and when he saw Flora Fay, who was not only at least ten years younger than he was, but also much more gracefully formed, he was glad he had not missed the experience. He felt a very familiar urge stirring within him.

She was tall and blonde. When she gave him a cool hand, he put a diamond in it.

"I carry it for security. I'm not trying to sell it. I've got identification, but I find the diamond generally smoothes the way."

"It would."

She held out the cool hand again. Her eyes, he saw, were of the green hue intended for redheads. Very likely she was a redhead and had become a blonde for business hours. A bank manager, even in Paradiso, had to retain some shreds of respectability to be credible.

Again he slipped his hand in the left pocket of his shorts. From the small leather case he extracted a tiny black marble.

She took the marble and dropped it in the top of her desk computer. A

typer began to chatter and a strip of paper rolled out of the slot. As Flora tore off the paper, the marble popped up and she gave it back to Burrell.

"Credit up to a million," she mused. "You're Ram Burrell of Orleans, retired contractor... retired?"

"I sold the business."

"Burrell," she said thoughtfully and looked at him for the first time with a spark of genuine interest. A long finger stabbed a repeater button on her desk. She tore off the slip and gave it to Burrell.

TO ALL BANK MANAGERS:

RAM BURRELL SPACEMAN FREIGHTER
ELEGANT GIRL AT LARGE OSTENSIBLY
TO VISIT BANK. HAS NOT TAKEN FIRST
OPPORTUNITY TO CALL AT BANK.
IF HE CONTACTS YOU, REPORT IMMEDIATELY.

FRIENDLY SERVICE

So that was what they called their non-existent cops—the Friendly Service. They were even more efficient than he had expected. It could not be much more than half an hour since he failed to show up at the dockland shopping-complex bank, and already the word was out for him. They believed he was a dangerous man with a mission in Paradiso—assassination, blackmail, espionage.

"Better tell them I'm here and mean to stay for a while," he said. "And that you've checked me out."

"As to that, there will have to be a medical check against the details in your capsule. But we'd have done that anyway before advancing you a million."

He would have answered, but when she started to send a message on the typer he left her to it and went to see the view from the window.

"Well, Mr. Burrell," said Flora Fay behind him, "I think that will regularize matters."

"My million buys off the cops?"

"There are no cops," she said coldly. "Merely a discreet security service. Naturally a spaceman loose in Paradiso has to be found and investigated. A spaceman with a million is another matter. But you must understand that it's up to you to settle matters with your ship, your captain. If you have a contract and he holds you to it, you must rejoin the ship."

He came back from the window to sit in the client's chair in front of the desk.

What happened then seemed like an accident, and perhaps it was. Burrell moved lightly in halfgee, and the woman, who had sat down to program her message, was not looking at him. She rose and turned just as he came round the desk. The result was she rose into his arms. He could not have avoided embracing her if he'd tried.

He didn't try.

CHAPTER FOUR

On the way to a hotel recommended by Flora, Burrell realized that he might like Paradiso very much, but not for long.

Paradiso had everything. It offered the top food of the galaxy, the top drink. The entertainment was by the top stars of the galaxy, recorded of course, but in exclusive recordings, not to be seen or heard elsewhere.

No hotel, restaurant, diner, café let Paradiso down. Some were more modest than others, but all were controlled by Starways. Your ham and eggs in the tiniest snack bar got the attention ham and eggs needed, just as in the top restaurant your *fricassée de veau au vin blanc* got the attention—and the six hours—it needed.

And Paradiso had one clever selling point. You paid for accommodation, drinks, food, but that was all.

Transport was free. Entertainment, sports facilities, use of equipment or special clothes, exhibitions, all were free.

Even banking was free. Burrell smiled.

Probably in the end, Paradiso took you for more than you would have paid in smail charges for admission and hire, but Paradiso was for people who signed bills without looking at them. And such people, traditionally, were furious when they thought they were being cheated out of the smallest coin of the realm.

The Arcady, according to Flora, was the kind of hotel he was looking for—with good food, good accommodation, but no flunkeys. Burrell was not only prepared to light his own cigars, he preferred to light his own cigars. He had once thrown a hovering waiter through a window that was not open at the time. And he preferred to find his own feminine company.

Before he had done more than take a shower to get the last of the *Dirty Cow's* grime out of his pores, the door buzzer went. If it was anything supplied by the management and not ordered by him, he thought grimly, he would throw it downstairs, whether machine, food or drink.

In fact, it was Captain Hoyt, in whites and a flaming temper.

"You've been quick," said Burrell. "I only just got here."

"Well, now you can get out again and back to the ship. I've got you on contract, Burrell, and you know it. They told me at the docks Paradiso won't let you break it."

"Somebody told me that too," said Burrell. "You must have had to show the contract, Hoyt. Show it to me."

Hoyt hesitated, suspicious as ever. However, he had only a photostat with him, the original being secure in the ship's safe. "Here," he said, handing it over.

Burrell merely glanced at it and grinned. "I signed on for the voyage," he said. "I noticed that at the time, on Senta. Otherwise I wouldn't have signed."

"And the voyage is to Marsay."

"Hell, no. It's to Paradiso."

"Burrell, I made it perfectly clear what you were signing."

"I know you did. But you didn't put it on paper. The *Dirty Cow* just made a voyage from Senta to Paradiso. I've fulfilled my contract and I'm signing off."

Hoyt breathed hard. "Since Senta, we've called at Valley, Persus, Pecta—"

"And I didn't leave the ship because I didn't want to stay in Valley, Persus, or Pecta. But I do want to stay here. I signed a contract that let me stop off wherever I liked."

"Look at the minimum pay clause!" Hoyt shouted. "That's your pay to Marsay. Anybody can see that!"

"Sure," Burrell agreed. "And I'll have the other five hundred now."

The captain cut himself off. He had made a mistake with that contract and he knew it, though he would never admit it. The contract should have specified either the length of time for which Burrell was signing or the discharge port. Hoyt had used a standard "voyage" form for his own convenience, enabling him to fire Burrell at Valley, Persus, or anywhere else he liked, if Burrell proved useless. But Burrell had done his work well enough, and Hoyt needed a full crew to Marsay.

If he didn't go on to Marsay, Burrell hadn't a hope of getting the extra five hundred but it was a just plausible counter-claim, and counter-claims could prove an expensive nuisance. With the captain claiming that Burrell had signed on to Marsay and Burrell claiming the company owed him five hundred even if he left the ship at Paradiso, the probable legal outcome was that Burrell wouldn't get the five hundred and the *Dirty Cow* wouldn't get Burrell.

At this point Burrell dangled a carrot. "Just to settle the whole thing here and now, Hoyt," he said, with an air of making a great concession, "if you sign my discharge, I'll forget about the five hundred."

"You're not due the five hundred till we dock at Marsay!"

"Okay, I'll fight the case. Paradiso *and* the five hundred."

The captain had belatedly seen the carrot. He was comparatively honest, as honest as any captain of the *Dirty Cow* could be expected to be.

However, there was this matter of the five hundred. If he could get the ship to Marsay with the crew apparently complete and file Burrell as discharged there, the five hundred was his. Of course he would have to sweeten the two other officers, maybe the rest of the crew as well.

"If I make out a Marsay discharge," he said, "will you sign it?"

"Sure. And I'll also sign for the five hundred you're not going to give me."

It was soon done. Before Captain Hoyt of the *Dirty Cow* walked out of Burrell's life, he asked curiously: "How do you think you're going to be able to stay here, Burrell? You just drew six hundred fifty. That won't last you a week here."

"Oh, I'll get by. For a fat man I don't eat much."

He grinned at the door after it had closed behind Hoyt, who would have to go straight back to the ship. The law was not looking for Burrell, though there were a few places in the galaxy, especially places where former customers of his former business lived, where trouble might start if he showed his face. It was not necessary to lay a false trail when nobody was looking for him. However, it might at some time in the future prove convenient that he had officially signed off at Marsay from the crew of the *Elegant Girl*.

Like a ravenous man fobbed off with a snack, he found himself desperate for companionship. The encounter with the glamorous bank manager had been fun at the time, but that was finished. On the way to the hotel, he had had thoughts of food and drink and cigars and clothes. Now he had only one thought. The urge was rising in him again and, as he had done for many long years, he let it take possession.

A pool, he thought quickly. There were always girls at a pool. Then he thought: girls, yes, plenty of them, but escorted girls, gaggles of girls, girls showing off to chosen males. Cutting one out wasn't difficult but it took time. And then he thought: in a place like this there must be scores of women at every pool with exactly the same object in mind as his own. It was necessary only to identify them.

Besides, there was a pool right in front of **him.**

You could call it a pool, though it was more like a giant goldfish-bowl, towering over the artificial-sun-drenched patio on which a hundred sunbathers lounged, drank, or slept. Spiral walkways' led from behind the patio to the circular rim forty feet up, and at intervals there were ladders affording a quicker way up and down. Underwater swimmers nosed the glass like goldfish and explored the plastic grottos at the base of the bowl. Some had masks but most had none. Lower gravity meant less effort, a smaller oxygen requirement.

Spray flew freely from the rim high above but that was part of the fun. There were shrieks and giggles as bikini-clad beauties on sunloungers on the patio were showered with water, and another part of the fun, Burrell observed, was that this spray gave the men a chance to dash forward with towels to dry the damp damsels.

The high, unrailed walkways looked dangerous; even in halfgee a forty-foot fall could be fatal. However, as Burrell looked up, a thin, unsteady youth who obviously did not believe in swimming while sober staggered and fell off the walkway, and a nylon net automatically swung from underneath and caught him. He scarcely seemed to notice.

A girl with ash-blonde hair lay in a sunfilter dress on a lounger beside a table and, astonishingly, read a book. Burrell didn't like sunfilter dresses, for though they were 95 percent transparent, they distorted the underneath image. What you saw was, in effect, a girl submerged in clear water disturbed by occasional ripples.

However, she was alone—also astonishingly. And the one part of her that was not distorted by the sunfilter, her face, was probably the prettiest among the many pretty faces around the pool.

Burrell sat down opposite the girl and said: "I don't know anybody here but you'll do."

She picked up her glass and with a twist of the wrist threw the contents in his face.

"I won't do anything about that now," said Burrell evenly, "but some day I'll pay you back."

"Pay me back now," she said in a clear, cultured voice, "by denying me the pleasure of your company."

"Sure," he said. "On one condition. I'm new here. So are you, or you wouldn't be wearing a sunfilter dress. You only need that for three or four days."

"I know how long I've been here," she retorted. "State your condition."

"You're new here but not as new as me. If you "don't want me, point out some girl who will."

This caught her interest. For the first time she looked at him. Evidently she didn't think much of what she saw, for she said: "No, I don't want you. If it will get rid of you, certainly I'll wish you on somebody else. See that girl in the green trini? She's a creep. She likes what she calls action. Hit somebody and she's yours."

"Thanks, Cindy."

The attempt to induce her to give her name didn't work. She didn't even answer.

The girl in the green trini—stars fixed in three places—had a court of seven men and a handmaiden, predictably plumper and less pretty than herself. She laughed a lot, and Burrell summed her up: rich widow or divorcee, without mental or spiritual resources enough to appreciate anything but play.

Burrell didn't expect to like her much. But then, there were few rich people whom Burrell had ever liked, and all these people had to be rich, including Cindy. In his business career Burrell had been half a latter-day Robin Hood. Instead of robbing the rich to feed the poor, he robbed the rich to feed himself. Whether he liked her or not didn't matter.

Burrell moved across to the girl in the- green trini, without a plan yet suspecting that the brash approach that fell flat with Cindy would be efficacious with this one.

For the second time in several hours, somebody clambered to his feet and collided with Burrell. This time it was a slim youth, a member of the court. He was a nice-looking youngster, no more than eighteen, hairless in bathing trunks, dark-haired, tall.

"Sorry," he started to say. But Burrell hit him in the teeth, breaking

two. The boy went down, blinking tears, and it became clear he was not eighteen after all but even less.

The girl sat up on her lounger, her breath coming fast. She was intrigued.

The handmaiden quietly slunk away and the remaining five men, without actually moving yet, gave the impression of having retreated.

It was obvious that even if all five rushed Burrell, most of them, perhaps all of them, would get hurt. On the ground, the youth was spitting blood, and as everyone sensed, it was not yet a case for the cops who didn't exist, but it could be. All other activity on the patio had ceased; everyone was watching.

First one, then two, finally all five of the woman's admirers turned away. The youth, with a frightened glance at Burrell, jumped up and took to his heels.

Burrell touched the girl lightly but possessively. "Sugar," he said softly, "let's go."

CHAPTER FIVE

Paradiso, predictably, was an expensive sham, teeming with people who were expensive shams. It was worth seeing, and when he had had the food, the drink, and the cigar that were now becoming urgent necessities, he would walk around and look at it. It was no use having been in a place like Paradiso without having looked around it while he was there.

However, he wasn't going to be there long.

He had told Sugar neither his name nor the name of his hotel. The situation would be as he liked it—he could find her but she couldn't find him.

Burrell had no objection to promiscuity in women, but the trouble was, they took all and gave nothing. He would not have pretended for a moment that he gave much himself, except satisfaction. But that's all he was looking for, too. Yet why he remembered some women, particularly his wife, was because these few had something to give.

Although he was rich himself, Burrell had not had much social contact with rich people. He did not, however, despise them. On the contrary, he admired people who could amass money without stealing it, and for that matter people who, like himself, stole and got away with it.

Unfortunately the rich people he encountered, like Sugar, always seemed to be loaded through no virtue of their own. Sugar had started out with a rich daddy even before she started collecting sugar daddies.

In his rare introspective mood, Burrell realized that although without principles himself, he liked other people to have principles.

His need for food, drink, and a cigar became so great that he had to get up. Without enthusiasm he put on his shorts and shoes. He really would have to buy some clothes. Always, however, there seemed to be something else to do. Back near the pool, there was bound to be somewhere he could get a drink and a good dinner wearing only shorts.

As he suspected, it proved perfectly possible to order dinner on a balcony overlooking the goldfish-bowl pool. Paradiso ran a twelve-hour, not twenty-four hour schedule, every via, pool, park, café, restaurant, cinema, bowling alley and all the rest of the amenities having a day and a night. This was no inconvenience since the next level ran on a different schedule. And although Burrell found that lunch was being served in the balcony restaurant, that was no reason why he should not have dinner.

He ordered dry white wine, chicken noodle soup, roast chicken, chicken souffle and a chicken flan. The waiter who took the order didn't turn a hair and made no comment. So Burrell, who did not like waiters or their supercilious smiles, and had been considering throwing him over the balcony to see if it, too, was equipped with automatic safety nets, refrained.

He already knew that the bottle of wine he was drinking was going to cost him a week's pay on the *Dirty Cow*. That was all right. One thing he liked about the restaurant, as in Paradiso in general, was that there was a strict no-tipping rule. You might pay twenty for a meal but you didn't have to slip the waiter anything.

Reaching the end of an enormous meal, he noticed that Cindy, the ash-blonde, was still on her lounger on the patio below, still alone, still reading. He tried to work out her age; this was something Burrell was very

good at.

Her coolness, culture, repose, suggested she was not too young. Twenty-six, perhaps. But there was an unwritten rule about sunfilter dresses. Girls of twenty-five or over invariably wore bikinis under them. Girls under twenty-five didn't, which made Cindy under twenty-five.

Settling back in contentment, he had lit his cigar when down below, the girl suddenly shut her book, stood up, and started for the exit.

Burrell had not intended to move until he had finished his cigar. And even now he had no intention of hurrying. He waved to the waiter, paid his bill, and made his way without haste to the via.

There was no sign of the ash-blonde.

It didn't matter in the least, except that Burrell could not now go back and finish his cigar at leisure.

Nobody greeted him in the Arcady, which was satisfactory. He walked upstairs, not taking the elevator, and as he turned the corner into the corridor where his room was situated, there was the ash-blonde, opening the door of the adjoining room.

"Hello, Cindy," he said.

"You followed me." Her voice was furious.

Burrell rarely denied anything, true or false. In any case, she didn't give him the opportunity. She swung at him so fiercely that Burrell, rough-house ace though he was, did not succeed in countering. Besides, instead of swinging wildly with an open palm to slap his face, as a well-brought-up young lady was expected to do, she hit him with a small hard fist under the ribs, where it hurt more.

He marvelled afterwards that he didn't instantly knock her cold. As a rule he didn't hit women first, but if they hit first, he hit harder. On this occasion, however, he remained conscious of the fact that she had some excuse. To her it seemed incontrovertible that he had followed her, that he was pestering her.

The coincidence was not remarkable. Clearly she liked being left alone,

and the Arcady was the hotel for such people. Also the pool where he had encountered her was just across the via.

Instead of doing anything or saying anything, he stepped past her and unlocked the door of his own room.

He heard her gasp. She was no fool. She realized instantly that it was impossible for him not merely to have followed her but also to have the key of the adjoining room in his pocket. Out of the corner of his eye he saw her glance quickly back the way he had come, and he guessed what she was thinking: he had come up the stairs, not by the elevator as she had, and therefore could not be following her, could not have asked at the desk the number of her room and booked the one next door.

He heard her quick step as she moved towards him to apologize, at least to say something. Ignoring her existence, he went inside and shut the door.

Inside he waited, massaging his solar plexus and smiling in anticipation. When she knocked at the door he would be the injured party, the one reluctant to be friendly. There was no better situation to induce a girl to be friendlier than she had intended.

But there was no knock.

Oh well, he thought, you can't win them all.

In addition to the television screen, there was a scanner marked *Entertainment*. Wondering what this meant, he switched on the scanner and found the equivalent of the advertising brochures with which hotel reception desks were generally laden. It told him and showed him what Paradiso had to offer.

Palace Aphrodisia, he learned, was guaranteed to make the impotent virile. The Ritz Restaurant guaranteed to supply any gourmet dish in the galaxy. Cinema Galactic offered individual showings of any movie made in the last fifteen years. Bibliotheque offered every book in print, plus most out-of-print texts on microfilm. Sport Center claimed facilities for every physical recreation and all legal games. Pharmacy went one better in offering all drugs, even those whose use was illegal elsewhere. Femina claimed to carry not only the greatest fashion range in the galaxy, but every fashion which was documented in history; with every purchase a

"survival kit" of disposable underwear, bikinis, shorts, and playsuits was thrown in. Musica offered the galaxy's music, ancient and modern. Travel offered facilities for...

Burrell stopped the frenetic parade of grandiose claims and offers and pressed the button for Travel details. As he expected, Paradiso did not exactly encourage its guests to go away and not come back. What Travel offered was a series of tours or cruises, all returning to Paradiso, all run by Starways and staffed by Friendly Service Guides.

See the galaxy's most spectacular waterfall! the scanner exhorted. *Wild Water Falls on Kenway is twenty-seven miles across and the water falls fourteen miles! It cannot be photographed! The spray defeats all camera lenses! Until you've seen Wild Water Falls, you haven't seen anything!*

There was a lot more of this sort of thing. Usually the tours were illustrated with glowing 3D color, but sometimes, as in the Wild Water Falls tour ad, it was claimed that the view could not be photographed, or *pictures cannot do justice to this awe-inspiring spectacle*. The would-be traveller had to pay up to a hundred thousand for the privilege. The prices, on the whole, were reasonable. There were warning notes, however, that the accommodation and cuisine on the tour ships was modest; the idea, apparently, as well as keeping the prices down, was to make people glad to get back to Paradiso.

Burrell, who was no mere sightseer and never carried a camera, gradually lost interest and was about to switch off when suddenly his attention was riveted.

Visit Earth, the birthplace of man! This now backward world is a reservation. We regret you will not be allowed to meet the natives, but you can visit seven selected spots: Malta, Cuba, Shetland, Hawaii. All islands? No, you can also see the Sahara, Russia, Tibet. You can see—

Burrell frowned at the scanner. The tone was different. Instead of the wild enthusiasm over other wonders of the galaxy, there was understatement and reserve over Earth, almost as if Starways didn't really want people to go there. And the price, too, was considerably higher, an apparent non-bargain among glowing bargains.

Yet the opportunity to visit Earth was a sure-fire winner. Everyone

knew about Earth.

He reached for the phone and called Travel. "Ram Burrell, 407 Arcady Hotel," he said. "Send me along full information on trips to Earth."

"I think the next one is fully booked, sir," a woman told him. "But I'll check and call you back in a couple of minutes."

Burrell put down the phone.

Everybody knew something about Earth but not much. Everybody knew that just about the time which nogee drive made star journeys possible, Earth was heading into dire population trouble. For a time it seemed that easy abortion, birth control, voluntary sterilization and the trend towards sex without marriage or children would solve the problem automatically. But the more people were encouraged to limit their families, the more they tended to rebel... and with the gradual removal of natural population controls such as drought, disease, early senility, and a vast road-accident toll, things started to get really serious.

Yet against all the odds, and over a century or two, Earth did become depopulated. The conditions of overcrowding had made the "grass" really greener elsewhere: the moon soon had a population of several million, and Mars and Venus served as way-stations to transport hundreds of millions to other worlds that attracted people, worlds such as New Terra, eighteen light-years away, with an Earth-like atmosphere but more land area than Earth.

The rules were simple: people who left Earth would be allowed to return for a visit but not to stay on there. This meant that what was known about present-day Earth was only what the few recent colonists from the mother world cared to say about it, and since they were often a tight-lipped lot, this information wasn't much.

* * *

The girl at Travel came back on the line. "That information you asked for, sir, about Terran Tours—are you sure you haven't got it?"

"I only just asked. How could I have it?"

"It was sent to the lady in the next room to you, 406. Roberta Murdock.

I took it for granted you and she—"

"Okay," he said. Evidently he and Cindy were meant to get together, and he wasn't complaining. "But what was that about the next tour being fully booked?"

"I've checked that too, sir. It is. But Miss Murdock is on the list, and if you're together, we'll be glad to find a place for you."

"Do that," he said.

"The ship leaves in three days and the first call is at Sahara. So if you're not sun-conditioned, sir, I suggest you get started on it right away."

That explained the sunfilter dress.

"One other thing," said Burrell. "I hear we won't get to talk to the natives."

"That's right, sir. That rule is by agreement between Starways and the Terrans. You'll visit seven places and you won't see a Terran in any of them, except possibly emigrants leaving by the ship that takes you there. I'm sorry, sir, but we always stress this to make sure there's no misunderstanding—our parties are strictly limited to the areas on Earth leased to us. You'll find it all explained in the material sent to Miss Murdock. If these conditions don't suit you and you wish to withdraw—"

"Leave me on the list. Tell me, isn't it possible to meet some Earthman here in Paradiso, somebody who was actually born on Earth?"

There was a pause, and he expected excuses. Instead, the girl replied: "Certainly, sir, there's a man called John Ehrlich. He lives here in Paradiso."

"Lives here?" Burrell knew of nobody living permanently in Paradiso except Starways staff. "Where can I find him?"

"Oh, it's all right, sir. He'll find you. Is there any other way in which I can help you?"

"No," said Burrell, and hung up.

The first thing was to see Roberta Murdock and keep her on the

defensive by claiming she had received the information on Terran Tours intended for him. The fact that he knew about it would prove he had indeed been in touch with Travel.

He went next door but got no answer. She must have returned only to change her clothes.

Well, it was time he did something about clothes himself.

CHAPTER SIX

To preserve the nighttime illusion in the evening, the lights outside were turned down and the lights inside turned up. The downstairs lounge of the Arcady was cosy, and there was a cosy poker game going on in one corner.

Looking in to see if Roberta Murdock was there, Burrell, now attired in a gray lounge suit, saw the poker game instead. He also saw the Friendly Service man at another table, watching the poker players grimly.

One of them looked up. "Care to join us, sir?" he asked, and there was a sudden slight stir of interest round the table.

Burrell, still in the doorway, entered. The Friendly Service man (he wore no uniform but Burrell could smell cop) continued watching warily. Paradiso, with its boast of having no law, could not stop gambling. However, taking the suckers' money was one thing; letting others take it decidedly another. It was not in Paradiso's interests to have customers fleeced by card sharps. Probably the Friendly Service man was there, more or less openly, to collect evidence on the five cardplayers that would eventually enable Starways to deport them—while they, more or less openly, were fleecing as many suckers as possible without giving any such evidence.

"Sure," said Burrell, and took the place quickly provided for him. "But let me watch for a couple of hands till I get the feel of this game again. It must be fifteen years since I played."

They were a typical team: quiet, nondescript. The man who had spoken had an unfinished face, pretty, womanish, with no feature large enough to give character. Not one of the five would be easy to pick out at an

identification parade.

Another man joined the Friendly Service man. He was older, with pure white hair. They didn't speak: evidently they knew each other well.

Presently, after half-a-dozen totally honest deals, Burrell let them deal him in. He won, lost, won again. Then he held a flush over a straight and bid it up recklessly. When he gathered his winnings he was five hundred up.

And he said: "Thanks, boys. I'll give you a chance to win this back another time." His tone made it quite clear he had no such intention.

They stared hate at him. But the Friendly Service man and his mate were watching.

As Burrell turned to go, the white-haired man rose and motioned him gently to a table in a corner, away from both the gamblers and the Friendly Service man.

"That was pretty cute," said the white-haired man. "I can see you've been around."

Burrell shrugged. "They always let the sucker win to start with. They'd probably have let me win a couple of times more. But I couldn't be sure, so I quit."

"My guess is you could have held your own anyway."

"Me? With five cardsharps?"

"You look the kind of man who's played poker in construction camps. There's no tougher poker than that."

That was shrewd or lucky. But Burrell never gave information away free. He looked at the white-haired man and waited.

There was tacit agreement that the preliminaries were over. "It was you who wanted to see me. I'm John Ehrlich."

Now that was interesting. Ehrlich had found him, known who he was, and sat beside a Friendly Service man.

"Starways employ you?" Burrell asked.

"Not so fast, Burrell," said the old man, taking out an old-fashioned pipe. "Do you smoke?"

"Cigars. I'll have one now." He took one from his pocket and lit it, his second that day. He would not have another. This was one urge he bothered to control.

"What's the mystery about Earth?" Burrell demanded.

Ehrlich took his time getting his pipe going. "Here we have an impasse," he said. "I want to know about you. I want to ask you questions. You want to ask me questions."

"Why do you want to know about me?"

"Because you're considering going to my world."

"Still your world? You live here. You can't go back."

"On visits, yes. And unlike the tourists, unlike you, I'm not confined to the tourist reservations. I see the natives."

"Look, Ehrlich, what's the mystery?" said Burrell rather impatiently. "Let's stop tip-toeing around."

"Mystery," said Ehrlich. "I don't know about that. Lack of communication, yes. But there's no mystery about that. Only a few thousand people can visit Earth every year. Five hundred a tour, a month on Earth. Seven places to visit. It works out about a hundred tours a year. That's only fifty thousand people."

"Starways could do better than that. More tours, more tourists, more money."

"But would Earth allow it?"

"Few worlds can resist tourism pressures."

"You haven't got the picture. Earth doesn't make money from Terran Tours. Starways does."

Burrell wanted to pursue this line but Ehrlich sidestepped smoothly. "Starways has too much commercial intelligence to create a demand for something it can't supply. Certainly the Starways directors want bigger concessions on Earth. They want Scotland and the whole of Australia for a start. Then they could operate a hundred times as many tours, advertise throughout the galaxy, make people come to Paradiso as a jumping-off point. Meantime they just keep the door open."

That made sense. It might be only half the story or less than half. But it did explain part of what Burrell had wanted explained.

Starways didn't have much of a toehold on Earth but what Starways had was apparently the only one there was. If, instead of going cautiously, the company created a vast galactic interest in visiting the mother world, the door might be forced wide, the walls knocked down, a highway into Earth built—but a highway open to all, not just tours strictly controlled by Starways.

"You were born on Earth, Ehrlich?"

"In Austria. Near Vienna. You've heard of Vienna. Everybody's heard of Vienna."

"Yes, I've heard of Vienna."

"Well, you can't go to Vienna. Nobody can. You wouldn't understand the people there anyway. They still speak German."

"A backward world."

"Yes, very backward."

"So how come they can resist Starways? Starways has enough money to *buy* Earth."

"Starways must obey the law."

"Starways can buy the law."

The old man shook his head. "The richer a combine is, the more vulnerable it is to financial sanctions. And remember, Earth isn't unprotected, even out here. I'm a sort of watchdog myself. Let Starways

step out of line in their dealings with Earth, and all over the galaxy they'd find themselves with expensive legal battles on their hands."

The mystery was fading. Yet as the big things became clearer, some small things became more baffling.

"Why did you leave, Ehrlich? To come here, no farther?"

"I've been farther. Much farther. Made money too. But now I'm old I stay here."

"Close to Earth. The closest you can get to Earth."

"Yes."

Once again Burrell sensed evasion. The old man would readily tell him things that didn't matter—about Austria and Vienna, about what Ehrlich himself had done and seen in the wide galaxy, not what Burrell waited to know about Earth.

But what did he want to know? You couldn't expect to find the answers when you didn't even know the questions.

"I guess I'll have to go see for myself," he said.

"Yes. You won't see much."

"You think I shouldn't bother going then?"

The cardplayers, tired of playing among themselves with a Friendly Service man watching their every move, got up and left. So did the Friendly Service man. Burrell and Ehrlich were alone in the lounge.

"Everyone should see Earth," said Ehrlich mildly.

"Suppose when I get to Earth I refuse to stay behind the reservation fences? Suppose I jump them and talk to the natives?"

"You can't." Ehrlich was enjoying a small secret joke.

"Why not?"

"You'll find out."

"Ehrlich, stop the playing around. *What's the secret*?"

The old man looked at him reproachfully. "What is the secret of life? What is the truth of religion? Is there a God? I, too, would like someone to tell me, in simple words that I could understand. But I'll tell you one thing."

"What's that?"

"Having met you and her, I think you should go to Earth with Roberta Murdock. I can arrange it if you like. I've already seen her and answered some of her questions, as I answered some of yours. I could quite easily—"

"No thanks," said Burrell, getting up. "I do my own arranging."

"You haven't had dinner. Dine here. She should be in the dining room now."

Burrell gave him a hard look and left without another word.

The girl was indeed in the big dining room, sitting alone. He waited until she looked in his direction. At first she glanced at him without recognition, not knowing him in a lounge suit. She frowned, then she smiled slightly and pointed to the seat opposite her.

"Hello, Cindy," he said, sitting down and picking up the menu.

"I'm sorry for what I did earlier," she said. "And it's not Cindy. Roberta Murdock."

He shook his head. "You had your chance to be Roberta and didn't take it. Now you're Cindy."

For the third time he saw a flash of anger in her eyes. She had a low boiling point, this one.

Then, surprisingly, she laughed. "Very well," she said. "It's changed to Cindy. Who are you?"

"Ram Burrell."

"Ram." She wrinkled her nose. "I don't think anybody could call anybody Ram."

"Most people call me Burrell. Nobody's told you about me?"

Suspicion this time. The flashes of sunshine were few and brief. "Why should anyone tell me about you?"

He played it cool. "I've been told about you. I've just been with John Ehrlich. He said I should go to Earth with you."

"And five hundred other people. There's only one trip in the next three weeks, and it's leaving in three days."

A waiter approached. Burrell said: "Steak. Roast and grilled."

"Roast *and* grilled, sir?"

"Consecutively. Roast first, with all the trimmings. Then grilled steak, with all the trimmings."

"Certainly, sir. What else?"

"If I think of something I'll tell you."

The waiter bowed and left them.

"Is that meant to prove you're a rugged individualist?" said the girl. "Do you put your feet on the pillow?"

"Sooner or later I thought the conversation would get around to bed. But I thought I'd have to introduce the topic."

"The subject is already closed," she said coldly.

As she ate her salad, delicately, and he waited for his steaks, he said: "Why do so many people know so little about Earth?"

"Lack of communication. Didn't Ehrlich tell you?"

"That's like saying I'm having steaks because I want to eat. Why the lack of communication?"

She debated visibly the question of whether it was worth talking to him or not. Then she said indifferently, as if it was all obvious: "Earth wants to be left alone. The limited tours are a sop. They let some visitors from the

galaxy outside step on the soil of the mother world, so they can see it's still there." Her gaze became calculating. "I wonder why Ehrlich wants us together? I think I can guess."

"I've got a slow mind," said Burrell. "It can only grasp one thing at a time. Earth still exports people. Why don't we pump them dry, and learn all there is to be known about Earth?"

"I've tried that. So have many others. It doesn't work. Either they don't know or they won't say. Some are conditioned so that they can't say."

That jolted Burrell. "Brainwashing?"

"You could call it that."

His roast beef arrived and he attacked it. He would have liked to drink wine again, but one bottle of wine and two cigars a day was his limit. As for food, he ate when he could. Then he was able to go for a long time without it.

The girl had lit a cigarette. "Let's stop beating around the bush," she said. "You must be about four times stronger than I am. With you around, anything I try is doomed. Ehrlich is sending you to watch me, is that it?"

The grilled steak arrived and he started on it.

"If I watch you, it'll be my own idea," he said. Until then he had scarcely noticed that she wore a long gray dress, covering not only her legs but also her arms and shoulders. Burrell's taste in women's clothes was unsubtle. If nothing was revealed, he scarcely bothered looking. What was the point in examining the cover of a book?

"He told you, didn't he?" she persisted.

"What?"

"That I mean to escape the guides. Meet Terrans, talk to them. Study their way of life. You're being sent along to stop me."

It was years since he had had such a steak, seared on the outside, full of red juice inside. "I think Ehrlich knows very well I mean to jump the fence too."

For once, the girl looked flustered.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sahara was the first call. There were splendid views of Earth on the big screens of the shuttle: sun and shade, misted, clear, hazy, bright.

"They could be recordings," Burrell murmured to Roberta.

"Why?"

"I just said they could be. We wouldn't know the difference."

She nodded thoughtfully.

By now they had a certain cautious respect for each other: Burrell appreciated the woman's knowledge, which was considerably greater than his own in almost all theoretical matters, and her intelligence, which didn't have to be vast to top his. Roberta sensed that there was more to him than had first appeared and she admired Burrell's bull determination, strength, and honesty. On the last she was slightly deceived—Burrell knew that having acted like an honest man, one could always turn out to be a crook when necessary, but it didn't work the other way. Meantime he was proceeding cautiously with the girl, more cautiously than he had started, because she was undoubtedly going to be useful to him. She knew more about Earth than he could find in any book; he was not a great reader anyway. The main snag was that she wasn't tough even for a rather less than medium-sized girl, not the ideal partner for a venture which might demand strength and stamina. It was possible he would have to ditch her at an early stage.

The voice of a Friendly Guide came over the intercom. "In half an hour, ladies and gentlemen, you'll have to be strapped in for landing. If you wish to change first, now's your chance. Sahara is hot, very hot and very dry, and you'll need sunhelmets at all times. Don't wear sunbathing clothes, you need protection even if you're already tanned.

Wear whites—shirts, slacks, shorts, dresses—and close-fitting shoes or boots, or sandals if you don't mind the sand. It's harmless, but don't go barefoot—the sand is too hot..."

Burrell and Roberta were already in tropical kit. The girl's white skirt was not short; in fact it concealed her knees, and Burrell realized that had it not been for that first day he could only have guessed that she had a figure and skin that could stand revelation. Even now he couldn't be sure of it. Her sartorial modesty ever since vaguely irritated him: it was as if while writing a letter she kept her arm round the paper so that nobody could see what she was writing. He was not perceptive enough to guess that to Roberta, strangers didn't matter. Strangers could see her naked for all she cared. Friends and acquaintances could not.

"Now there aren't even pictures," he said, nodding at the blank screen. "We could be landing anywhere."

The three people in the seat in front and the four in the seat behind had all gone to change. Nobody could hear what they said.

"Are you suspicious of Starways?" she asked. "Do you think they're putting something over on us?"

"They don't tell us much, do they?"

"No," she agreed, thinking about the kit. The Starways Terran Tour information about the Sahara was either a 100 percent deliberate lie or 100 percent ignorance, and it could scarcely be the latter. The Sahara had originally been a desert area of some 3,500,000 square miles, though the actual wasteland had been a million square miles less. In the map supplied, a single oasis was sketched in detail. Tourists could explore this area during their three-day stay. Babylon, according to the map, was thirty miles to the north and Bagdad twenty miles to the south, which was nonsense for a start. Bagdad and the ancient city of Babylon were indeed about fifty miles apart, but Babylon was south of Bagdad and both were in Iraq, on the opposite side of the Red Sea from the Sahara, a thousand miles away.

There might be nothing more behind the misinformation in the tour map than typical tourist-exploitation cynicism, linking five names the visitors might possibly have heard—Sahara, Bagdad, Babylon, Lake Chad and Timbuktu. Originally, these places had been thousands of miles apart, not within the fifty mile radius shown on the map. While one of the locations might be genuine, the others were undoubtedly renamed to give the tourists the pleasant feeling that they'd really seen these magic places.

Roberta was reasonably certain that not one of the locations was genuine—except that the oasis called Sahara might well be somewhere in the Sahara region.

Gradually the other tourists returned and strapped themselves in. Burrell and Roberta might have been forced into each other's company anyway, for the others were all in groups, mostly plump and elderly, garrulous, credulous, snap-happy, rich and conscious of it. They were typical tourists, collecting places to stick in their scrapbooks, places with bright colors and fancy names.

"There's not a single person with intelligent curiosity among the whole five hundred," said Burrell wonderingly.

"One," she said rather coldly. "Me."

"Sure. But it's funny—you'd think the people on this tour would be professors, historians, researchers, people like that, and instead—"

"You know why. Professors don't have this kind of money."

"I know. I'm just wondering how you come to be here, Cindy. You're not like these people."

"Nor are you."

"I mean you're not rich and idle, like them."

"I'm not rich and not idle at all."

"I know you have to have some money," he said, checking his safety belt once again. The shuttle—a powerful, ugly ferry that had taken over from the starship twenty thousand miles out—swerved into horizontal flight. "But you're not one of these people. You're a student, aren't you? A scholar?"

"You could say that."

He had never been so long with a girl before and made so little progress. For once, he was not thinking of becoming her lover—that tended to terminate his interest in a girl, and Cindy might turn out to be too useful. She not only concealed her body from him, she concealed her

mind and except in flashes, her history, even her personality. Only in anger did her femininity come out.

Her sarcasm, her rudeness, her insults were a smokescreen. She hid behind it and he didn't know what she was really like. It kept others at arm's length, too, as it was meant to do.

The shuttle tried to stop in midair. Burrell had known better pilots than this one; Hoyt for one. If the *Dirty Cow* had been thrown about like that in atmosphere, she would certainly have disintegrated messily.

Beside him there was a sudden sharp snap, followed almost instantly by a second identical sound. The slight, white-clad figure of Roberta Murdock, unrestrained, moved to dash itself to destruction on the back of the seat in front.

Burrell's powerful arm swung and met her soft midriff with considerable impact. She gasped painfully but she had more to worry about than pain. The catches of her safety belt had snapped, and Burrell, himself strapped beside her and facing the same way, could use only his right arm.

Burrell's straps were strong enough to hold him, perhaps not strong enough to hold them both. His right foot found purchase against a strut of the seat in front, taking some of the strain off the belts. Strong as it was, his arm could not force the girl back into her seat. Indeed, as the acceleration-deceleration battle continued, her usually slight, now immense weight gradually beat him and his arm was forced forward. In another moment she and his arm would be crushed.

But then the pilot ceased the reverse force and Roberta crashed back into her cushioned seat, breathless but otherwise unhurt. "Thanks," she gasped.

"What's the matter with your belts?" he demanded.

"Things always break with me. Burrell—you saved my life. I don't know how I can ever—"

"Forget it." He had the belt catches in his hands. They were perfectly sound. She had somehow managed to fasten the clasp wrongly. Of the five hundred people on board, 499 had managed to do it right.

He slammed them both shut and said: "Cindy, you sure as hell are accident prone."

"I know; around me things never seem to work properly. But nobody's ever had to save my life before. Sometimes I've wondered how I'd feel if anyone saved my life. Now I know. I didn't trust you before. Now I have to trust you."

"That doesn't make sense."

"Feelings don't make sense, didn't you know?" She leaned over and kissed him lightly on the cheek; after this first gesture of affection between them, it was he who looked wary.

Five minutes later, the ferry was down.

CHAPTER EIGHT

There were palms; there was sand; there was water. Most of all there was blinding, searing heat.

Somehow Burrell had always thought of Earth, when he thought of it at all, as cold. Merry Christmas, Santa Claus, snow. There were jokes too, about the way it rained on Earth: forty days and forty nights. Most people knew words or phrases that had originated in the unfriendly climate of Earth—fog, smog, the rains came, and stormy winds do blow, the day is dark and dreary, lovely weather for ducks, thunder and lightning.

Roberta was struck dumb. "Isn't it wonderful?" she breathed when at last she could speak.

"It's bloody hot," said Burrell. He found it more interesting to watch her than look around him: in her delighted wonder she came alive as never before, and exuded a fresh, youthful vitality. She had never told him how old she was but he had guessed twenty-two, exactly half his own age. Now she looked sixteen. '

Vaguely he sensed some of the reasons for her ecstatic interest. She had obviously spent years reading about Earth, studying Earth, imagining Earth. And the blazing reality was no disappointment. Burrell himself had to admit that the air, parched though it was, was cleaner and sharper

than the air of most worlds, that the colors were brighter, the vegetation greener, the sky bluer.

He liked extremes of temperature and climate, and though he could soon become tired of the burning intensity of the sun's rays beating down on the rolling dunes, the first prickle of sweat was pleasantly stimulating. The heat, he thought, worked wonders for Roberta, and he remembered that he had first met her soaking up artificial sun, offering her body to it and not to the onlookers.

"And this is only one facet of Earth," she murmured. "Next we go to Shetland. It's colder, wilder there. We'll see the sea... the real sea, the one from which we and all living creatures emerged billions of years ago. But this is the land of the Egyptians, the Pharaohs, mankind's first well-documented civilization..."

Burrell's attention, despite her considerable claims on it, was drawn to the crowd of people waiting to board the tender when the tourists had left it. For they were, obviously, Terrans, five hundred of them, men, women and children, black, white, yellow, red, brown.

The Friendly Guides who arrived with the tourists, and the other Friendly Guides already there, did not encourage the tourists to mingle with the emigrants and interrogate them. The tourists were hustled in the other direction, through the friendly oasis in the welcome shade of the palms, toward a white building that could be glimpsed through the greenery. And while many of the tourists photographed the waiting Terrans, exchanged a few words with them, asked inane questions and told them to be sure to go to this or that place in the galaxy, they quickly tired of the predominantly silent Terrans and willingly sought the shade of the trees.

Burrell and Roberta achieved very little greater contact. Since Earth retained scores of languages that had never made the leap into space, many Terrans spoke with strange accents. They talked politely to Roberta and Burrell but with neither willingness to enlighten nor desire to be enlightened. They were not curious "yet not indifferent either. They had been told or had decided for themselves not to seek information from the tourists.

A tall, well-built black man who, unlike almost all the others, defied conventional dress and was magnificently attired in a loincloth, sensed

Burrell's galaxy experience and asked him: "Where should I go?"

Burrell knew what he meant. With his skin, the big man would be a freak in some worlds, an object of derision in others, a target, a challenge, a reproach, an insult.

"Go to Rexian, Sutcliffe or Renn," Burrell said, "if you want to be a man. Go to Afrique if you want to be a black man. Go to Valuria if you want to be a nigger."

'Thank you. I'll go to Valuria."

"You want to be a nigger?"

"I want a chance to prove I am a man."

"Oh," said Roberta softly. "You have to prove something?"

"Not to myself. To those who still think a black man is a nigger."

That brief contact was about all they achieved before the impatient and, at the moment, not too Friendly Guides ushered them after the others.

Surrounded by blinding yellow sand, the oasis called Sahara was not more than a mile square. Inside the square, however, was everything—palms, dates, bananas, sand and a pool—that the average tourist would expect to find in an oasis, plus a gleaming hotel, swimming pool, casino, and tennis courts. Swimmers could choose between the tiled hotel pool or the more or less natural oasis pool. After lunch most of the tourists chose one or the other; the heat was intense and nobody had the siesta habit yet.

Burrell hired a car and he and Roberta debated whether to go to Bagdad, Babylon, Lake Chad, or Timbuktu. There was at least an illusion that the tourists could do anything, go anywhere they liked, unescorted if they chose.

"Chad would tell us most," said Roberta. "You can't fake a lake. The real Chad used to have an area of more than ten thousand square miles in the dry season—"

"You don't believe this is the real Chad?"

She waved at the sand which surrounded the oasis, apart from the four roads. "Chad was pastoral. It supported large herds of cattle, sheep, horses, and camels. Not much for them out there, is there?"

"Nearly everybody who's going anywhere today," said Burrell, "is going to Lake Chad or to Bagdad. A few to Timbuktu. Nobody to Babylon."

"All right," she agreed, "we'll go to Babylon."

Several feet above the level of the desert, a straight, serviceable road had been constructed. In places sand had been blown across it, but never in sufficient quantity to impede passage.

Burrell drove the small open truck; and discovered that its top speed was about twenty miles an hour. The wheels were small and the tires narrow. Obviously the car would be useless on soft sand. It was a runabout for use on the four roads, nowhere else.

This was obvious to Burrell but not to Roberta. A mile from the oasis she said: "Could we get the car down those banks? Perhaps somewhere where the sand has been blown to form a ridge against the road?"

Once again surprised that one so knowledgeable in theory could be so ignorant in practice, he swung the little truck into the next patch of sand on the road, stopped it, and jumped out.

"Now you get her out," he said.

She moved over, smoothed her skirt primly, and tried to drive out. The small wheels spun, digging themselves in. The vehicle was stuck.

"Burrell," she said anxiously, "have I broken it?"

He laughed, swept away the sand around the wheels, jumped back in, and drove on.

"No," he replied, "but you get the point, don't you? It's not just difficult to use these buggies in sand. It's impossible. They wouldn't travel five yards."

"I see."

"Cindy, you say we're not in the Chad area. Have you any guesses where we really are?"

She looked around at the golden emptiness. "No mountains. Hardly any rocks. No vegetation. I don't think we're in the Sahara proper at all. This is what the Libyan desert is supposed to be like. That's a thousand miles from Lake Chad. Timbuktu is another thousand miles west. And Bagdad and Babylon are in a different country."

"Suppose we're in the Libyan desert, was that what you said? Would we be near towns, rivers, lakes, the sea?"

"It could still be a thousand miles to the sea."

"In what direction?"

"Due north."

He took a small compass from his pocket. "The way we're going."

She gave a startled exclamation. "Where did you get that?"

"In Paradiso. It's scarcely more than a toy. But it works."

She looked at it reverently but refused to touch it, sure she would break it. "I've seen pictures of them. In Dayton they don't work. Too many local magnetic fields. You're sure it points to the true north here?"

"You're the expert on Earth, Cindy, not me. I seem to remember the magnetic north on Earth isn't true north, and mariners had to make corrections. But without a map, what difference does it make? We're going towards the sea anyway, you think?"

"Anywhere in the Sahara the Mediterranean Sea lies due north. If we were in Iraq, where the real Bagdad and Babylon were, we should go west. Maybe we'll get a clue from this Babylon when we reach it."

She did not seem to realize that it was going to take a long time to reach Babylon and a long time to get back, and if they spent some hours exploring what they found, as she was assuming, the drive back to Sahara might be hazardous and better not attempted in the dark.

There was a radio in the car, and when they were, by Burrell's

reckoning, about halfway to Babylon, it bleeped. He flicked the switch.

"Mr. Burrell? Miss Murdock? This is your Friendly Guide. You are now halfway to Babylon. We have you on the scope. All part of the Friendly Service. I hope you've had no problems?"

"We got into a sticky patch of sand a while back," said Burrell. "That's all."

"Yes, we saw you stop. I hope you're enjoying your trip. Mr. Burrell? Miss Murdock?"

They both said yes, and Burrell switched off thoughtfully. So they were under surveillance—probably not on radar, as the word scope suggested, but by a radio signal that went out all the time, whether the radio was switched on or not. Even if it had been possible to drive off the road into the desert waste, their route and direction would have been spotted immediately.

However, if he was right and the location device was in the car, that probably meant that when they left it and wandered about Babylon exploring, the Friendly Guides would have no means of knowing exactly where they were and what they were doing.

He glanced at the silent radio behind the wheel, wondering, if the device could send out a location signal while apparently off, it could also, perhaps, transmit their conversation. Anything was possible. But there were only some fifty Friendly Guides altogether to look after the party of five hundred. So everybody couldn't be monitored all the time.

Roberta, sticky from heat, started to take off her blouse.

"No," he said. "The sun's too strong. Don't do it."

She grinned quite impishly, something she had never done until they landed on Earth. "I got the impression you liked girls to dress skimpily. I even got the idea you thought I was covering up to annoy you."

She saw more than he had guessed. "Right," he said, "both times. But I don't want you to get sunstroke. Here you sunbathe in the shade, if at all."

It surprised him, too, that the car was not provided with at least a

canopy. Certainly no such convenience would not have been blown off at the vehicle's maximum speed. However, he suspected he had already given the reason—it was intended to be obvious to all tourists that long journeys in these conditions, by car or on foot, were flatly impossible.

When they finally reached ruins, Roberta was indignant. "These are modern ruins!" she said. "Look, there was an electric power point here. That was a concrete lamp standard. That was—"

Burrell, having picked up the hamper he had had packed for them under his personal supervision, led her away from the car. She had not said anything which would matter very much if the car was indeed wired for sound. But at any moment she might.

The road stopped at an extensive area of ruins. Burrell himself would have considered them quite picturesque, and might not, without Roberta's prior knowledge of what the real Babylon might be expected to look like, have known the difference. No building stood complete, but there were imposing stone steps and pillars and arches and avenues. Snap-happy tourists would have a field day.

Beyond the ruined city was a small oasis, as green and luxuriant as Sahara's but much smaller. Through the date palms, Burrell saw the gleam of water. Suddenly he realized how much he wanted food and drink, particularly drink after the long drive—the longest thirty-mile drive he had known for some time—and he wanted to plunge into cool water and wash off the sweat.

He had thought (the printed guide was not explicit) that there would be *somebody* at Babylon, though he had been warned to take all the food and drink he thought they might want, with a little extra for safety. No hotel as at Sahara, no restaurant, no store, but surely a Starways representative in a kiosk, a maintenance man, a gang of roadmen.

There was nothing. No animals, few insects, just the ruins and the oasis beyond it.

Roberta grumbled: "Babylon was built on both banks of the Euphrates. Where is the Euphrates?"

"Come on," he said. "Let's get under those trees."

"Can't we take the car?"

He put down the hamper, climbed on a wall, ran up a fallen pillar and surveyed the terrain. The new road ran into a circular parking area that could take twenty cars and half a dozen buses. More parking space would never be necessary, not when the road back to Sahara could be used as well. A jeep or similar vehicle could have bumped its way through the sandy, stony, rutted roads that ran through the ruins. The buggy could not.

He made his way down again. "No. We'll have to walk."

The disappointment of the rains—though she had never believed for a moment they could really be the ruins of Ancient Babylon—was still making her quite cross, for the first time since the landing on Earth. "Let's go right back," she said. "I'll tell them I *know* Babylon isn't Babylon and demand our money back. Make them take us to the real Babylon."

Burrell had been patient for a long time. Not since he savagely chopped down the slim youth at the pool had he revealed the bully side of him.

"Are you coming or not?" he said shortly.

"No," she retorted even more briefly, and started back toward the car.

Even if the car had a concealed scanner that enabled the Friendly Guides to watch them, they could not at the moment be seen because the wall intervened. They might, however, be heard. One powerful arm went round the girl's waist and the other over her mouth. Without gentleness he dragged her along the stone-strewn street and behind a massive concrete block. Now that she could not be heard by any device in the car even if she screamed at the top of her voice, he let her go.

He knew she would go for him and she did. Given this shadow of an excuse, he pushed her down and went down after her.

She fought more fiercely than he had believed possible, proving she had more strength and determination than he ever suspected. He fought back and enjoyed it, tearing her skirt accidentally and her blouse not so accidentally. Her fierceness and her refusal to submit worked both ways on him. If she had shown no spirit there would have been no fun in tussling with her. Her lithe, panting ferocity aroused his curiosity. She was

quite prepared to tear his face with her nails if he let her and she did succeed in raking his chest so savagely he felt the blood spurt and saw the red drops fall on her torn blouse and on her bare midriff.

Eventually, however, the fact that he needed her made him decide reluctantly not to carry the struggle too far. Forceful behavior made some women subsequently submissive, but he did not think this would be the case with Roberta.

He sat, finally, on her stomach so that her kicking legs could not harm him, and leaned on her arms stretched out above her head so that she could do nothing with them either. Even then she heaved strongly, trying to throw him off with the strength of her back, and nearly succeeded.

"Listen," he said. "Go back, make a fuss, and you blow everything. They'd give you your money back. And send you straight back to Paradiso. There's still time. And they would make sure you never set foot on Earth again."

The bludgeon sense of what he said pierced her fury and made her realize that whatever the rights and wrongs of his treatment of her might be, he had had to do something.

"Well, you might have said that," she gasped. "Instead of—"

He told her of his suspicions about the radio. "I'm not saying they were listening to us all the time. I don't think it would be worth their while. But they could have been... and once we tell them in so many words we mean to skip the party, they could make it impossible."

"All right. Let me up."

"You won't run back to the car?"

"I'm not a fool."

He grinned, but didn't say any of the things he might have said.

He liked the way she decided to forget the fight, taking her full share of the responsibility for it. All she said, when it proved impossible to fasten her torn skirt and her blouse refused to stay on her shoulders, was: "I thought you didn't want the sun to fry my soft tender body?"

"You brought other clothes."

"Not for you to tear."

"Well, don't fight, then. I'll go back to the car and fetch a few things I brought. You go on to the oasis. I'll catch up. Do you want your other clothes?"

"Yes, bring them, but meantime I'll stay as I am."

Her tan, though light, betokened sufficient conditioning to ensure that she wouldn't burn or peel if she took reasonable care. The sunfilter dress had done its job.

He picked up her sunhelmet. "I like you better without it," he said, "but keep that on."

Leaving her poking about in the ruins, he went back to the car. It did not surprise him that the radio started to bleep when he started taking things out of the car.

He switched on. "Are you all right?" a voice asked.

"Of course," he said, acting surprised. "What would be wrong?"

"I just wanted to warn you, sir, not to stay too late. If you don't start back in the next half hour, it'll be dark before you reach Sahara. And driving at night is dangerous."

"Listen," Burrell interrupted. "The girl isn't here just now. Suppose we don't get back tonight? You won't have to send out a search party, will you?"

"Not if we know you're all right. You started late, you see. Best time for these trips is in the morning—"

"Well, don't expect us until tomorrow morning. I have a feeling something is going to go wrong with the car."

"Well," said the Friendly Guide doubtfully. "It's cold at night, you know."

"I know, and I brought plenty of food and extra clothes. Besides, there

are other ways of keeping warm."

"The only thing, sir, is that the lady is our responsibility too. If she complains—"

"She won't complain," said Burrell with far more certainty than he felt. "Whatever turns out to be wrong with the car, I'll say I can fix it, but not in the dark. There are no wild animals or wild people around, I take it?"

"No animals and I can guarantee you won't see a Terran. You're completely free here to do as you wish, sir. Just so long as you're sure the lady won't complain—"

"By the morning," said Burrell with a low chuckle, "I guarantee she won't complain."

Not that it made much difference, he switched off, picked up Roberta's bag and a few other things, and collected the hamper on the way back.

She had not gone much farther on. She was examining the ruins, becoming interested, after her first annoyance that the site was not that of Babylon, in what were nevertheless ruins of a genuine desert city.

Apart from her sandals she was wearing nothing but a white bikini, having thrown away her torn blouse and skirt and her sunhelmet.

"Watch that sun!" he said sharply. "It's too hot to sunbathe. And put on your helmet!"

"All right," she said, and they made their way on to the oasis. There, in the shade of the date palms, it was merely comfortably hot, and she again tossed aside the sunhelmet, to which she had taken an aversion.

"In a minute," she said, "we'll investigate that pool we saw. But first, what's in that hamper? I could use food, but it's a long cool drink I want... oh!"

He had taken off his torn, sweat-sodden shirt. There were four long, deep scratches on his chest. She glanced at her nails, and then she spotted, apparently for the first time, the blood on her bikini top and on the bare skin below it.

"Don't pretend to be sorry about it," he said.

"I'm not. But I hate blood on my clothes."

"Then take them off."

She laughed. "Make up your mind. If you weren't here I would. But you're a lusty man, and one fight a day is enough."

He shrugged. "If I was going to do anything that drastic, I'd have done it back there."

"I expected you to, and if you had I'd have killed you. Not right away, but whenever I got the chance."

They drank wine and ate chicken sandwiches. He prompted her: "You'd have killed me, Cindy?"

"Somehow. With a knife while you slept, maybe. So take due note. I'll tell you this, gratis, and you can make anything you like of it—I've never been in love. I only once thought I was, and it turned out to be a mistake."

He nodded, getting the picture. As a rule he frankly and deliberately used women, with no pretence of involvement. It seemed to be necessary, however, to become involved with Roberta, to understand what made her tick.

The strength, determination and ferocity she had shown did her no disservice in his eyes: the only black mark he gave her was for her temporary willingness to blow the whole thing out of mere annoyance. But at least she had quickly acknowledged her mistake when it was pointed out to her.

She jumped up. "Let's investigate that pool."

The small, shallow pool was scarcely deep enough for swimming. But it was cool, and it washed off the blood and sweat. Burrell noted with interest that she was a good swimmer. That opened up new possibilities. An island needn't be a prison.

The time passed quickly. Roberta liked soaking in the friendly pool, then lying in the sun for the few minutes it took to become completely dry

and rather too hot again, and plunging back into the pool. And Burrell liked watching her.

Darkness came even more swiftly than Burrell had expected, and when the girl emerged from the pool for the umpteenth time—he had been content to lie on the sand for some time and watch her—she said: "Hadn't we better get back?"

"We're not going back. There's something wrong with the car's engine."

"Oh?" she said coolly. "The radio too?"

"No, the radio's working. I told them not to expect us till morning."

"And they stood for that?"

"I said I could fix the engine in daylight, but not in the dark. That's right, too. There *is* something wrong with the engine, and you can't fix it."

"You intended this all along."

"That's right."

"I told you," she said evenly, "I'll kill you."

"They warned me the nights get cold. It's getting cooler now."

The stars were switching themselves on as the blue sky went deeper and darker. Although it not cold yet, merely divinely cool after the glare of the sun, the sudden drop in temperature was a foretaste of what would come later.

"Your idea is that after an hour or two I might be more willing?"

He stood up. "My idea is that after an hour or two we'll be a long way from here."

She gasped, whether from relief or surprise he couldn't tell.

"I've brought clothes," he said. "Plenty of food and water. We know the sea lies due north. We set out due north. We won't leave tracks. The sand is dry and there's a light breeze that will cover our footprints in half an hour. We travel by night, stop when we find shelter for the next day,

perhaps an oasis, perhaps rocks, perhaps shrub. Anywhere that provides shade from the sun and hides us from the copters they send looking for us."

She said nothing. In the luminous darkness she was more beautiful than he had ever seen her. Although she could stand the full glare of day, the night gave her the spice of mystery.

Since she didn't speak, he went on: "We can make twenty miles, maybe more. The nights are long, and they won't miss us until at least an hour after dawn. I made sure of that. We may never get a better chance."

"No," she said at last.

The one word was so definite, so coolly certain, that he said nothing and merely waited.

She sat down beside him, and it was amusing that after the hatred of just a few hours ago she came quite close, almost touching him, friendly again^even trusting.

"It's too easy, too obvious, too potentially suicidal," she said. "It can't be possible. I've told you how vast the Sahara is. I know I also told you this might be the Libyan Desert, which is comparatively near the Mediterranean. But it could be the Nubian Desert, the Syrian Desert, the middle of the Sahara. We've only seen a tiny thirty-mile stretch of sand. The Mediterranean could be two thousand miles to the north."

"We're looking for Terrans. They can't be far away."

"That's where you're wrong, Burrell. They're probably very far away. Earth isn't vastly overpopulated any more. The Sahara always was one of the least useful, least developed areas in the world. The Terrans may have given Starways this little area of oases and ruins because nobody lives within a thousand miles of it."

Burrell thought it over and then nodded. He liked action and hated inaction. It was typical of him, having planned to do something, to take the first, boldest, most direct opportunity. What she was saying, however, made too much sense.

She said: "Another thing. Perhaps this is a test, a trap."

"How?"

"Anybody can hire a car and drive here without guides. Anybody could know what I know. There could be an automatic radar installation hidden in the ruins, waiting for us to step over the line. Then they'd know."

"And they'd do what?"

"Perhaps nothing. Let us wander off into a thousand miles of desert waste, with no hope of getting anywhere and no hope of getting back."

"We could come back if—"

She laughed sceptically, waving her arm. "Out there? In nothing but sand? With your toy compass? We could miss this oasis by a hundred miles!"

"All right. I'm convinced. You've been wrong once; I've been wrong. Now let's try to figure out something right."

"Yes, and the first thing is to go back."

"Go back?" He was still interested in the prospect of spending the night in the oasis with Roberta, and had taken it for granted that this was still on, even if the desert hike was off. She was sometimes friendly. She was quite friendly now. When it became cold she would probably huddle close to him. He had known women whose wide-awake *No*! became sleepy acquiescence.

"I can guess what you said on the radio. I can also guess that the Friendly Guides thought what you were saying *might* be true, or that we might be planning to take a walk—and they'd soon find out. Suppose we drive back now. We stay together, eat together, but we're sulky. You've got scratches on your chest and you don't hide them, in fact you exhibit them unnecessarily, looking for sympathy. I think the result is going to be that the Friendly Guides will write you off as a fat loudmouth, and me as just..."

"Go on," he said, when she stopped. "You as just what?"

She grinned, her teeth gleaming in the starlight. "Just a silly girl who gets a man excited and won't deliver."

"Which you are."

She grinned again. Her arm went round behind him and her fingers played with the hair at the back of his head. "No, I'm not," she protested gently. "I never even kissed you, did I?"

He pushed her away, and she didn't take offence.

"Okay," he said grimly. "We go back. There's plenty of light. We get in late, tired, cold, sulky and we go to our separate bedrooms... but first, since we can talk here—tell me about the other six places we're going to visit."

"First," she said, "I'll tell you about me and how I come to be here. You've asked before, but the times when you asked and the times when I was prepared to tell you never happened to coincide."

In the darkness he smiled. Incredible though it sometimes seemed, they had things in common.

"I'm from Dayton—I think I let that slip. My parents died when I was eleven. There was enough money for me to stay at school, so I stayed. There wasn't enough money for me to go to university, but I checked on scholarships and found one that would support me at college if I studied Terra."

"I see."

"Yes, that was the start. I got so interested that the study wasn't work, it was fun. I graduated in Terran history, geography, and anthropology at eighteen. Then I stayed on at university as a fellow—"

"That must have been hard."

She realized he didn't know what a fellowship was. "There are lots of bursaries, scholarships, fellowships, and research grants for Earth study," she explained. "I started collecting them. It was easy. *I* don't think I know much about Earth. But by the time I was twenty I knew more about Earth than anybody on Dayton. I started thinking about actually going to Earth, and the idea caught hold of me."

"I know the feeling."

"But the various grants weren't enough. Eventually I'd have got here, when I was about thirty-five. But last year, when I was twenty-one..."

On the nose. He could always tell a woman's age. Sometimes it was necessary not to tell it to her, but it was often necessary to know it. She was exactly half his age.

"... I was left money by an aunt I didn't even know existed. It was, well, it wasn't a fortune, but with research grants I managed to make this trip."

Her life so far, it seemed to him, had been lonely and cheerless. Studying all the time—he couldn't understand how that could be fun. She had had at least one unfortunate love affair, deciding afterwards, not before or during, that she'd never been in love. With her face and figure she was bound to have been an object of desire to many. Instead of tasting, testing, living, learning, taking the pleasure and the pain, accepting and rejecting, she had turned it all down. And convinced herself she liked this approach.

"Tell me about the other six places," he said.

CHAPTER NINE

On the fourth day a huge jump jet arrived just after breakfast to take them all to their next destination, Shetland. A jump jet was an ideal choice for the transport of the tourists. It didn't require an airfield, just any reasonably clear flat surface. The sand was adequate: grass, prairie, concrete or baked earth would do as well. It had to be big to take the five hundred tourists—a three-decker, Burrell observed.

As the party was herded into the plane, Burrell and Roberta exchanged only surly monosyllables. They had agreed that while it was entirely possible the Friendly Guides had no interest in their charges beyond the obvious ones, they could not afford to drop chance remarks that might mean they would get the conducted tour and nothing more. The pretense that they had fallen out was convenient.

When the jump jet leapt up into the sky and the oasis fell away, Burrell soon saw that if he and Roberta had followed his first plan, they would have achieved nothing but death. Maybe they were meant to see that, he thought.

The four dots which were the places that could be freely visited from Sahara came into view as the plane climbed. Nothing else but sand was visible in any direction.

As the jet climbed still higher, more could be seen but in less detail. There were mountains. There was a vast green patch. No sea.

To Burrell's chagrin, his compass refused to work in the plane. It spun aimlessly, disturbed either by the metal all around them or by some device in the plane. However, Burrell had already learned not to be entirely dependent on the compass for direction. He had checked the sun against the compass and vice versa. The sun rose in the east and set in the west. This fact was not of much use at midday, when the sun was directly overhead, but very useful at dawn and sunset. Also, Burrell always knew the time. Using his watch and the shadow of the sun he always had a rough idea of direction, even when the compass failed to work.

Now he saw that the plane was heading almost due west, even slightly southerly. Why this should be so was a puzzle; no matter what desert on the continent they had been on, the way to Shetland was northwest, more north than west.

Roberta, who had also learned to tell direction by the sun, could have told him the answer but did not since they were still officially sulking. After two days of this she was getting tired of it and would gladly have broken it, would certainly have broken it if it had been real. Since, however, they shortly would be landing in Shetland, and be able to talk when they were sure it was safe, she kept it up.

The straight course would have led them over the Mediterranean, Italy, Austria, Switzerland, France, perhaps Britain, depending on where Sahara actually was. Instead they were going west across the Sahara to the Atlantic and would then turn northwards to reach Shetland without overflying anything but the Sahara.

It could be by agreement with the Terrans: no violation of airspace. Europe was still heavily populated, and the tourists were not supposed to see cities and large cultivated areas. Whatever the reason in detail, the general explanation was certainly that flying over the Sahara was all right but flying over Europe was not.

Presently Burrell sniffed, at first unconsciously and then with growing

irritation. For the first time in their acquaintance, Roberta was wearing perfume. He disliked all artificial perfume and had hitherto given her a grudging good mark for never using it.

"Why the cover-up?" he inquired. "You smelled a lot better without it."

Roberta, to her annoyance, found herself flushing. She knew perfectly well why she was flushing. As she had dressed that morning, knowing she would be stuck next to Burrell in a double seat for four hours, she had put on the perfume with the deliberate though only half-conscious intention of attracting him. She was annoyed that it didn't work, annoyed that he detected it instead of... the most irritating thing was that she had done it at all.

She didn't answer.

Drinks were served on the plane but no food. Only some half-dozen Friendly Guides travelled with the five hundred passengers, and the flying crew had not been seen. With no rival airline in competition, Starways did not go to the expense of running a flying kitchen and carrying food for five hundred. The drinks were shorts, no beer or wine; after a single whisky Burrell had no more. Roberta started on gin and stayed on gin, annoying him still further. First she showed she didn't have the sense, after all, not to overlay her fresh natural scent with chemical aphrodisiacs, and then she showed that she was capable of drinking too much for no reason. Burrell lived hard and to excess himself, but the injustice of his critical attitudes toward her excesses did not occur to him.

Over the sea the plane turned north. "How far this way?" Burrell granted.

"Four thousand miles. Perhaps five."

They were making a thousand miles an hour to reach Shetland in time for lunch.

Flying at a considerable height, they could see nothing of the sea. A little after noon, the jet descended confidently through the clouds; and only a few minutes later they saw Shetland.

They didn't see much. Their eyes still accustomed to the sunlight above the clouds, they found the gloom of the overcast like dusk. Checking on

shadow for direction, Burrell was chagrined to find there was no sun shadow at all, and therefore his secondary direction-finding technique was useless. His compass still spun aimlessly. So after maneuvering in the clouds, they could be descending on the islands below from any direction.

He scanned the horizon but could not see any other land. Shetland itself, which he knew from Roberta consisted of over a hundred islands, was only a dark gray-green mass in a dark gray-blue sea. Having memorized the Starways sketch map, he soon identified the north-south shape of the main island, with Yell and Unst off to the northeast.

Roberta was sitting up and trying to take an interest, but having drunk too much gin, she had little success.

They were coming in from the north, Burrell saw, probably to avoid overflying Orkney. According to the printed pamphlet, landings were sometimes at Scalloway, sometimes at Lerwick or Sumburgh, depending on weather conditions. This time, he saw, they were landing at Lerwick on the east, guarded by the island of Bressay.

The landing was as coldly routine as all jump jet landings. The plane simply settled like a giant fly. Burrell and Roberta, not hurrying, were among the last to leave the plane. Roberta was unsteady on her feet and he didn't offer to help her.

An array of signposted choices stood at the foot of the ladder. Unlike Sahara, Shetland did not have one big hotel where everybody went for lunch. You could go to the Magnus or the Viking in Lerwick, but you might have to wait; you could board the bus for Scalloway, and have lunch there in fifteen minutes; you could go on a boat trip round Bressay and have a snack lunch on board; or you could take the bus for Sumburgh, but the trip would take nearly an hour and you would get nothing to eat until you arrived.

Burrell pushed Roberta, not too gently, in the direction of the truck waiting for passengers for the Bressay boat trip.

"I wanna go to Sumburgh," Roberta protested, her usually precise speech slurred, her usually cool manner aggressive. "Za Bronze Age village there. At Jarlshof. Excavacuated. I wanna go there."

"You wanna get something to sober you up," said Burrell. "And

something to eat. A sea breeze and sandwiches will either sober you up or make you throw up, and which it is I don't give a damn."

Lerwick had once been Shetland's major town. There was little of it left, and unlike the ruins at Babylon, it was neat and tidy, derelict buildings having been demolished. Instead of a garish new hotel there were two stone buildings that looked perfectly in character, and the cottages and shops, which formed what was no more than a village, could easily be four centuries old.

The boat, however, was modern, a big radio-powered cruiser. Burrell looked curiously at the slim radio antenna. He knew of broadcast electricity but had rarely seen it used. Though it was possible, it was not practical: power loss was enormous and installations using it were inefficient because of the frequent variations in voltage.

The boaters were supplied with packed lunches that proved surprisingly adequate—hot soup in cartons, meat pies, cakes, coffee. Roberta ate hers sulkily; it was hard to tell how much of her and Burrell's behavior was pretense, or for that matter if any of it was.

Since the landing, the weather had gradually and steadily improved. Patches of blue sky began to appear overhead. On Bressay, a gleam of sunlight turned the somber green to emerald, the black rocks to gold. Warned to expect cold, especially after the blinding heat of Sahara, all the travellers had wrapped up well.

It was certainly not warm, yet the air was so clean and bracing after the breathlessness of the Sahara that nobody felt cold.

The sun was full on Bressay as the boat sped out from Lerwick harbor. Burrell was not looking; he was checking the many small boats in the harbor. There were cries of delight from many of the passengers; Shetland was rocky, green, picturesque. The emerging sun turned the dull, greasy sea into sparkling white and blue.

The sea fascinated Burrell. Though the weather was apparently mild, it surged with a power an Orleans mariner would scarcely have believed. The oceans of Orleans were small, the oceans of Earth vast. A wind across a Terran ocean could build up over four thousand miles. Burrell had heard of tidal waves. On Orleans, nobody would ever see one.

Bressay was bold and rocky. Seagulls screeched around it and followed the boat, wheeling and suddenly darting in a new direction, plunging to the sea to snatch some scrap of food and sometimes a fish.

Out beyond Bressay was another, smaller island. The cruiser took a wide sweep around it... and suddenly the motor died.

The boat, smooth and stable under power, was a pitiful, helpless thing without it. It rolled and pitched in the waves, and within seconds some of the passengers, hitherto quite comfortable, began to look green.

The uniformed captain came out of his tiny bridge and raised his voice to reach the score or so of passengers. "Nothing to worry about," he said. "My fault—sorry. I took the turn too wide. We're temporarily out of range of radio power. But the wind and tide are carrying us back in. Any moment now—"

As he spoke, the motors purred again and he dashed back inside. Under control once more, the cruiser became as smooth and stable and powerful as before.

CHAPTER TEN

Two hours later, Burrell and Roberta sat in a small sandy cove buttressed by black rocks. By now there was scarcely a cloud in the sky, the sun was bright and Burrell felt warm and good.

Roberta was cold and felt anything but good. She had been grumbling for half an hour about the Starways arrangements, or lack of them; the boat party didn't go back to Lerwick but to a small jetty that served an isolated inn. Tourist accommodation was spread all over the islands, and the five hundred visitors could later go anywhere there were vacancies but, for the first night, not having had a chance to look around, they had to stay where they were put. In the small inn called, most inappropriately, Queen of the Isles, there would be dinner at six but nothing before then, and their bags had not arrived yet.

For the heat of Sahara followed by the warmth of the plane, Roberta had worn a blouse and shorts. For the landing in Shetland she had with her a coverall jumpsuit. Normally the blue all-in-one suit was well insulated and should have kept her warm but the gin had released her

physical reserves. She huddled, shivering in the worst kind of hangover, the kind that came of drinking too much too quickly and then stopping dead.

Burrell said: "Serves you right."

"That remark is hardly calculated to endear you to me."

"Why did you drink like that, Cindy? You're not a drinker."

"There was nothing else," she said coldly, "to do. Not with you sitting like a dummy."

"We agreed—"

"Yes. So I had a drink to pass the time. A few drinks."

"A lot of drinks. Well, never mind. We came here to talk—"

She groaned. "My head aches. I don't feel up to it."

He looked at her speculatively. "In ten minutes you could be feeling fine. On top of the world. How about it?"

"If you mean what I think you mean—"

"No. Something worse. Much worse. Kill or cure."

"I must admit I don't particularly care which."

"Okay, get that suit off for a start."

"Take it off?" she almost screamed. "We're practically in the Arctic Circle!"

He pulled the zip, however, and she didn't have the strength to resist. She found it soon afterwards when he stripped to his trunks, picked her up and made his intention clear. She shrieked, fought, struggled, tried to make him drop her. But she didn't scratch, she wasn't in a fury like last time, and her struggles were ineffectual. Burrell did not miss this, and he smiled to himself. As he knew very well, when a girl fought and meant it, she let you know. In Babylon Roberta had meant it. Now, though she certainly wanted to get free, she wasn't fighting him with hate, trying to

kill him.

He waded into the curling breakers and held her above them. The sea, like the sea air, tingled with life. It didn't even resemble the warm, tired, sad waters of the pool at Babylon, which Roberta had liked so much but which bored him after a couple of tries. Of course it was cold. It forced a response: resist or die.

Enjoying the irony, he didn't even drop her but waited until her struggles nearly got her free and this time let her get free. Instead of going in inch by inch, she was dry one instant and totally submerged the next.

She came up gasping and, amazingly, laughing. She clung to him, still laughing, hugging him when the receding sea tried to pluck her away from him into deeper waters. Then a seventh wave bowled them over and swept them back to the beach.

Roberta, faster on her feet, ran to where they had left their clothes. Behind her, as she picked up the jumpsuit, Burrell said: "Not over those wet things. Get them off. And we'll run."

"Not on your life," she said, laughing again. "We'll run, yes, but I'm not taking anything off."

"Suit yourself."

"I will. I usually do."

They ran back and forth across the small, rock-enclosed beach. He tried to make it a chase, finding himself strangely drawn to her but she stopped that... with a brisk shyness that surprised her a little.

When their thin clothes were dry they stopped, and while Burrell pulled on his jacket and jeans, Roberta zipped herself into her jumpsuit.

"All right, I give you that, it's worked," she said breathlessly. "I could push a mountain over. The only trouble is—now I'm starved."

He put a hand in his pocket and handed her a couple of plastic-wrapped ham sandwiches. For a moment she stared unbelievingly, then accepted them gratefully. "Where did you get them? I've been with you all the time."

"You ever heard of the Boy Scouts? I used to be a scout. On Orleans. Our motto was 'Be prepared.' " Smilingly he took out another pack of sandwiches. "I brought these from Sahara. Now, let's talk."

His idea had been that they would steal a small boat in Shetland, where obviously there would be many boats, and sail southwards to Fair Isle, which was marked on the tourist map, or Orkney, which was not. It was some thirty miles to Fair Isle and in mild weather practically any craft larger than a rowboat could accomplish the journey.

"But they've thought of that," he said. "Every boat in the harbor is radio-powered, except a few tiny rowboats. I expected to find sailing boats, dinghies with outboards, oil-burners—"

"Are you quite sure they're all radio-powered?"

"Oh, yes," he said wryly. "That was quite clear. Also, there was that demonstration for our benefit."

"What demonstration?"

"You don't think the cruiser just accidentally ran out of power range, do you? They knew those interested in boats, the few among us who could handle a boat, would pick the boat trip. So they showed us that the power range extends only a few hundred yards offshore. That could be faked, but I think it's true. It explains their use of radio power too."

Seeing her bewilderment, he explained: "Radio power isn't much good except in certain special cases where the advantages are greater than the disadvantages—where there's plenty of power, usually nuclear, and the enormous power loss doesn't matter. When you're doing a job on rough ground, for example, it's easier and cheaper to use a mobile power unit and half a dozen slave units than lay permanent cables maybe hundreds of miles long. Here the idea is to supply power to the whole island in a way that makes every motor, every machine useless if you take it off the island. The force field that contains the power area creates a wall round the island. You can move through it without knowing it's there but every engine stops."

"So what we need is a boat with a sail?"

"And there aren't any."

"Can't we hoist a sail on the power masts?"

"All the power masts are too flimsy. Besides, every boat in the harbor, big or small, is flat-bottomed."

"Does that matter?"

He remained patient because he knew she could think, once she had the facts, and explained. "To sail a boat you must have a keel or a centerboard, or all you could do was sail before the wind. He did, however, let his irritation show when she asked how he knew the small boats he had seen didn't have a keel.

"Because they don't need them, that's why," he said shortly.

"You haven't looked. You didn't dive into the water and swim under them."

He took a deep breath to blast her for her silliness, but it turned out she was not being as silly as he thought. "I know a little about radio power," she said. "It's unreliable in bad weather. Sometimes in electric storms it has to be turned off."

"That's true," he said, arrested.

"So there must be some alternative. The boats, buses, lights, cookers, and heaters on the island can't be entirely dependent on a source of power that sometimes has to be switched off."

"Batteries," he said. "Cindy, you've hit it. There's got to be an emergency system."

He stopped, thinking. He had not seen a battery in Shetland. It would be no use installing radio power and then letting every tourist know that there was an alternative. The batteries would be for emergencies only. Hidden, locked up, yet kept handy for the rare occasions when they were needed.

When the cruiser lost power, suppose the wind had suddenly veered and blown her out to sea? That would have meant danger, perhaps death, not only for a score of tourists, but also for the captain and his two crewmen. There was auxiliary power somewhere on board.

"Batteries," he said again. "I'll find them. Maybe they're stored at the powerhouse, wherever that it. Maybe—"

"I wasn't thinking about batteries. They could be built into boats so that you'd never find them. Especially if, as you say, tourists are supposed to believe there's only radio power. I was thinking about all those little boats. Starways staff have to live here when there aren't any tourists. Sometimes engines fail. Couldn't some of the boats sail, if they had to?"

"Well...." Burrell said doubtfully.

But he turned the idea over in his mind, and next day, while Roberta was poking around in her ruins at Sumburgh—which, as it happened, was the most southerly point on the island, and therefore nearest to Orkney and the Scottish mainland—Burrell took bus trips to Lerwick and Scalloway and looked closely, though not ostentatiously, at all the small boats in the harbors.

At Lerwick he was fairly sure his first impression was correct and that all the boats were power vessels and nothing else. He found nothing to support the idea that they could be speedily converted to run on battery power, or any convenient place where batteries could be stored.

At Scalloway, however, on the west side of the island, he saw several boats that interested him. Although there was no sign that they were or had ever been sailing boats, Roberta's suggestion that sails might be used in emergency made him look with particular intentness at those dinghies whose lines didn't absolutely disqualify them for sailing. In particular, he found one fifteen foot half-decked boat which, though fitted with a sleek radio outboard, looked as if it was meant to be sloop-rigged. There was no sign of a centerboard, which would have been a complete giveaway; no mast, of course, anywhere on board where conventional sails could be stored; no rudder such as would be needed if the outboard was removed. But there were oars, and this made him consider the possibility of reaching Fair Isle by rowing.

Twenty-five miles or so of open sea to Fair Isle; it was a daunting prospect, even in the calm weather that prevailed. It was not impossible, but it was a big undertaking and highly dangerous. His compass should keep them headed in the right direction; but Fair Isle was small so they would have to travel by night. He didn't know if the island was inhabited. There might be no lights; they could be swept past it and out into the

Atlantic. Even a light mist could prevent them from seeing land less than half a mile away.

Then, too, there was scarcely any darkness. It was approaching midsummer and he had observed the night before that sunset was very late and dawn very early. A copter sent up to look for them would have a very easy task.

Nevertheless, he arranged rooms for Roberta and himself in Scalloway and took another bus trip to fetch her. She was very calm about it. "If you're prepared to chance it, so am I," she responded.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

At dusk that night, the half-dark of these northern latitudes, Burrell told the two Friendly Guides who ran the small hotel that they were going out for a walk. They would let themselves in, he said. They might be quite late. They wanted to see the Northern Lights.

They could not take their bags, not so much as a small valise. But Roberta wore a coat over a skirt, trousers and shorts, two sweaters and two shirts. Burrell had trousers, shorts, sweaters, and shirts under his coat.

They had no weapons except clasp knives and an open razor Burrell had bought, no map except the one in the Starways pamphlet (which might be deliberately misleading), and no navigational aids except Burrell's toy compass. For food they had sandwiches, collected at various places during the day to avoid the suspicion that asking for them at the Scalloway hotel might have aroused. They had no water, not having been able to acquire a suitable container, but had four bottles of lemonade in their largest pockets.

And they had no money. Roberta was almost sure that outworld currency was useless on Earth. Burrell had not brought his diamond. The disadvantages of having it on him, to be discovered in a search, might prove to be greater than the possible advantages. Paradiso knew about the gem; he had lodged it with Flora Fay.

On the way down to the harbor Burrell said: "Cindy, this is the most dangerous thing you ever did in your life. There are so many things that

may happen—"

"But we won't go into them, will we?"

He smiled at her appreciatively.

Earlier there had been people about and he had not been able to get closer to the half-decked dinghy than fifty feet. Now the harbor was deserted.

Terran Tours were run with a minimum of Starways staff. Because there were so many small hotels, buses, boats, sports, bathing and fishing facilities to be maintained, there was necessarily a much larger caretaker staff staying permanently in Shetland than in Sahara. But not enough helpers had been hired. The tourists, in accordance with the warnings on Paradiso, had to do many things for themselves which they were not accustomed to doing, such as making beds, cleaning their shoes, looking after their own clothes and sometimes serving food to themselves.

There were certainly not enough Friendly Guides to keep a close watch on everybody.

Burrell pulled in the boat and in the half-light made out the name on the stern: *Flora*. He remembered Flora Fay with pleasure and was quite willing to take this as a good omen.

"So that's how you do it," said Roberta as they stepped down into the dinghy. "So easy. I thought we'd have to get wet."

Burrell felt about in the boat. He could not see much: his hands told him more.

There was no sign of a centerboard, but he had known it wouldn't be obvious. More disappointing was that behind the foredeck there was no mounting for a mast. The boat had side decks about six inches wide but there was nothing stored under them except oars, a few ropes and sleeping-bags. Welcome as these were, he would rather have found sails.

Feeling around the foredeck again, he made an exclamation of satisfaction: "Fine. It's all right, we'll take this one. *Flora* it is."

He let the rope loose, leaving it trailing in the water. Although that rope

might have been useful, he thought it better to leave it trailing in the water, enabling the owner of the boat, and others, to believe if they liked that the *Flora* had not been properly secured and had drifted away.

The tide was on the ebb, which was good, and the light wind was from the north, which was still better. Burrell let the boat drift southward and westward, and presently switched on the radio-powered outboard. It was not noisy, and the *Flora* moved out from the land smoothly, still southwestward.

"Aren't you going to lose power?" Roberta asked.

"Eventually yes. Meantime no, I don't think so."

"Why?"

"Remember the map. The power failed out beyond Bressay. Much farther from Lerwick than we are from Scalloway now. And there's a group of islands ahead of us. West Burra. Power must be maintained all round those. Anyway, I'm taking the chance. There's a narrow passage southward close to the coast, but I'm going outside the islands. To make sure we aren't seen or heard."

Roberta knew the map as well as he did, and what lay beyond it considerably better. At this point, the main island ran due south to Sumburgh, where she had been earlier that day. From the headland there she had just made out Fair Isle, and that was reassuring now. They were not making for an island that might or might not be there.

Radio power would take them to Sumburgh and with luck some distance beyond it. There was no harm in being optimistic, she reflected, so long as you had something to fall back on—like the oars. It was quite possible that radio power extended all the way to Fair Isle, Orkney, and to the Scottish mainland for that matter. The power failure off Bressay, as Burrell had admitted; could have been faked to mislead them.

In her two sweaters and two shirts Roberta was warm, too warm. She took off her coat and folded it beside her. Burrell was at the stern with the outboard.

"Keep a watch ahead," he said. "Tell me if you see anything."

"A long island to the left," she said.

"Port."

"Oh, all right, port side. It's still on the left."

"Fine. We're running southwest. Tell me when you see the end of the island and we'll turn due south. Then southeast when there's no more islands."

Of course, there could be radar plotting their course already, and at any moment a big cruiser might come out to intercept them. But as the coast slid away northward Burrell became more and more sure that they had been successful at least in phase one of the enterprise.

Phase two came when, shortly after they had left Fitful Head behind them, the motor suddenly stopped.

So it was true that the radio power covered only the islands and a few hundred yards of coastal waters. "Now we have to row," said Roberta resignedly. "Maybe not. Wait."

He went forward and operated the concealed control he had found under the coaming of the foredeck. Loud ticking started, and he reared back, fearing for a moment that the boat had a self-destruct device.

A stout telescopic mast began to extend itself from the rear of the enclosed foredeck. Also something moved beneath the boat, and he guessed exultantly that a center-board was being lowered.

"Clockwork!" he exclaimed. "Well, who'd have thought it... but it's perfectly logical. We've lost radio power and there's no battery on board. That would make it too easy for people like us. There's no gas engine either. Just a strong clockwork motor."

"What good is a mast without sails?" Roberta objected.

The clockwork motor had not finished its job. Up the short, stubby metal mast, a second, thicker mast began to climb—in fact, two masts. Burrell kept well clear, careful not to touch anything. This was an automatic job.

The mast had drawn up with it a short foresail, very thin but presumably adequate for its purpose, probably of some synthetic fiber. It took Burrell quite a while to work out exactly what the next two masts were, and indeed it was only when it became obvious that the process was not entirely automatic and he had to step forward and grasp one that the design became clear.

The two poles were gaff and boom, another thin sail already in place between them. They were exactly the same length, longer than the mast, the thin whippy metal yard extending beyond the mast.

The boat had, in fact, become a gunter sloop with a tall, narrow mainsail. At least, it had almost become one. The one important thing missing was a rudder...

This didn't bother Roberta. She looked at the tall white sail in wonder. "You expected this?"

"I knew from the start that this boat was meant to be a sloop. The question was, where was the rig? It wasn't much use storing it ashore if it might be needed in emergency."

He secured the boom and gave her the usual warnings about being decapitated. Already the sails were filling and hauling them smoothly to the southwest, which was not where he wanted to go.

There just wasn't a rudder. Apart from the clockwork-motor, the foredeck was now empty. A short handle had come up with the rigging and it was obvious the motor had to be wound up before it would operate again. Winding it now would take the mast and other gear down again, he guessed, with enough power left in the spring to bring them up again.

There could be no rudder carried underneath the boat, or he would have felt the drag already. That left only one possibility—the radio-powered outboard had to be used as a rudder. This was not ideal, and he guessed that when the little boat was used as a genuine sailing dinghy the outboard was left behind and a proper rudder used. But that would not be when the islands were full of tourists. The rudder was stored away carefully until they left.

He trimmed the sails, put Roberta at the outboard and showed her how to keep the *Flora* heading southeast.

"Southeast?" she said. "Why? We'll miss Fair Isle."

"Exactly. I never meant to go there."

"But you said—"

"Cindy, if we'd had to row, all we could have done was head for the nearest land and hope for the best. Maybe Fair Isle is uninhabited, and there I'd have tried to rig some sort of sail. But now that we've got a decent boat, fair weather, and a reasonable wind, we've got a good chance of making the mainland of Scotland."

"The mainland... of course, that's much better. You don't mean to land on Fair Isle, or Orkney either?"

With the boat trimmed to his satisfaction, he lit a cigar. He didn't offer to take over from Roberta. The sooner she got the feel of the boat the better. So far she was doing astonishingly well.

"Cindy," he said at last, "we can't be the first to try this. Just tell five hundred people, 'You can't see any of Earth but the seven places we take you to, and you can't talk to any native Earthmen,' and the twenty or fifty of them with most spunk suddenly want to show they can. Most of them, unlike us, ruin their chances by arguing, challenging the Starways staff to stop them, and either get sent back or watched closely for their trouble. We got this far by not doing anything like that. But we may not get much farther."

"Planes, boats after us?"

"That, too. But I guess a call at Fair Isle would finish us. Notice that the propaganda handed out, while never suggesting we do anything like trying to run away, placed subtle emphasis on Fair Isle and the Orkneys? That's where anybody like us, having got this far, would naturally go, if only to have a look and prepare for going farther. So I guess that on Fair Isle, there are a couple of men with guns to capture runaways and, in the friendliest way possible, of course, take them back. And while Orkney's far too big for that sort of thing, I'd say it's quite likely there's an agreement with any Terrans living there that runaways are locked up and kept until called for."

"That may be the case anywhere in the world. Probably is."

He shook his head. "I wouldn't say probably. Possibly. We'll have to wait and see, won't we? Anyway, the way Orkney is included in the subtle propaganda smells. It's almost as if we're being directed there. No, if the weather holds, we'll go for Scotland."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Mid-afternoon, and bright sunlight on a rocky coastline. The sun was welcome, for they had not had it all easy. During the first night, which had started well, they had been blown too far eastwards and Burrell cursed the imitation rudder.

The next day they had sailed southwest, their navigation by now a matter of blind guesses. Burrell had no idea of the tides and currents and could only guess the wind strength. And all he had for charts were the rough sketches Roberta made of this region. Although she was a mine of information on Ancient Earth, it was not to be expected that she would have detailed information on just one region of a world she had never seen. Several times he had to bite back his impatience with the vagueness of her information, particularly on distances. It was evidently a great deal farther from Shetland to the Scottish mainland than she, or he acting on her information, had believed. Maybe that was why they had seen no sign of a search party.

Now, however, after two nights and nearly two days at sea, they were approaching a coastline that spread farther and farther northeast and southwest, a coast which could not be that of a small island. It must be the coast of Scotland—or possibly England, if they had been blown even farther south than Burrell had guessed. And after two days of light winds, strong winds, rain, mist, and sunshine, the weather was again perfect and the wind obliging, blowing almost straight at the land.

Though Burrell did not know it, he had made an almost perfect voyage. Neither he nor Roberta dreamed that this was so. The lemonade and the food were gone and they had never been quite dry since a sharp ninety-minute squall had soaked everything.

The coast became more and more attractive as they drew nearer. At first the rocks were black and forbidding, but as they got closer they saw there was sand too.

"We'll land there," Burrell said, pointing, and Roberta, whose behavior on board had so far been impeccable, acted without thought.

Standing up to get a better look at the broad sandy beach, totally clear of rocks though backed by a steep stony cliff, she released the outboard-tiller. The boat yawed, the boom snapped across, hit her on the head, and pitched her into the sea.

Burrell swore but that didn't do any good. Feeling some panic, he brought the boat into the wind, looked for Roberta and saw her face down six yards away. There was no boathook, only the oars.

He must go in after her, though for a split second he considered the safer course—as far as he and the boat were concerned—of running down the sails and rowing to pick up the girl, but he might not be able to get back with her to the dinghy before the wind caught her and piled her on the rocks. He might not manage to reach the shore with Roberta.

But floating face down wasn't doing her any good, and so he leaped into the water and struck out for her. She was quite limp and none of his fears about the boat materialized. He pushed Roberta over the side and got in after her, shipping water.

There was no blood, and after he leaned two or three times on her back, squeezing water out of her, she gasped and gulped air and then, having almost regained consciousness for a moment, lapsed into coma.

He thought it best to beach the boat first, and did so, jumping out and hauling the dinghy clear of the high-water line. Although concerned about Roberta, he quickly wound the mast and sails until the spring was fully charged; it might be necessary to make a quick getaway.

Then he hoisted the girl onto the warm dry sand and pumped her a few more times. Her breathing, however, was all right—it was the bump on the head that had done the damage.

Now he found it—a swelling lump above her left ear.

Her thick blonde hair hid the lump. It had also done something, no doubt, to protect her. She didn't look good and he realized that if he removed her wet clothes, he had nothing dry to wrap her in. Both he and she were wearing all their clothes, a piece of bad luck since in the warmth

of the day they would certainly have taken some of them off if their attention had not been taken up wholly with the prospect of landing soon.

"Carry her up to the house," said a voice with a strange accent.

He looked up, startled, to see two girls, one tall and fair, the other short and dark. Footprints in the sand showed they had approached from the cliff, where he now made out a steep path.

At another time he might have laughed to see how ordinary they were—two girls in their twenties, the tall one in green jeans and a white sweater, the other, who was pretty, in a blue shirt and short yellow skirt. There was hardly a colonized world in the galaxy where they would have attracted any attention exactly as they were, and there was not one where anyone would suspect they were natives of the legendary Earth.

He didn't speak, giving them every opportunity to talk to him before he committed himself to talking to them. He picked up the unconscious Roberta and followed the two girls, who had started back towards the cliff path.

"We saw you from the cliff top," said the dark girl. "The path is steep. Can you manage?"

That remained to be seen. At least the steepness of the ascent and the exertion of carrying Roberta made him breathe so hard he had an excellent excuse for not talking.

From the girls' conversation as they climbed the path ahead of them, he gathered that their husbands, two brothers, were not at home at the moment. The tall, fair girl was Anne and the dark, pretty one, Lynn; their names were as ordinary as their clothes.

Flat grassland topped the cliff, and two or three hundred yards away stood a cottage. Beyond the cottage was a farm of sorts, but there were no farm buildings, just the cottage.

The girls hurried on ahead, which was just as well, for it gave him a chance to talk freely to Roberta when she stirred in his arms and opened her eyes.

"You bloody fool," he said rather brusquely, only his eyes showing his

concern.

"The boom... yes. How long ago was that?"

"About twenty minutes. Listen. Two women are leading us to a cottage. I don't think they know we don't belong here. Keep quiet and listen when they talk. Maybe you'd better be unconscious again. At least dazed."

"I am dazed. And my head hurts."

"You surprise me," he said.

"I told you I'm not very practical. Sometimes I forget what I'm doing and..."

She didn't have to act. She lapsed into unconsciousness again.

At the cottage door Lynn was waiting. "You must be very strong," she said. "Will you manage to take your wife upstairs? She is your wife, isn't she?"

He had to speak, and he didn't have much time to make up his mind whether, in the circumstances, it would be better for Roberta to be his wife or not.

Realizing in time that she might talk in sleep or delirium, he said: "No. Just a friend."

The room at the top of the stairs was tiny. He didn't have a chance to look around, for the two girls shut him out, assuring him that they would look after Roberta.

"Go into the living room at the left of the stairs," Lynn told him. "I've put out a dry pair of trousers and a shirt for you."

The women were going to find that Roberta was wearing quite a collection of clothes, and being women, they would examine them curiously. Burrell had told Roberta to cut off all the labels, but had she done it? A girl who would let the tiller of a sailing boat go and stand up to be knocked into the sea by the boom was capable of anything. One label saying *Dillon, Riga*, or *Carter, Dayton*, would blow any chance they had of passing as Terrans.

In the room Lynn had indicated, he stripped naked and was about to pull on the clothes laid out for him when he noticed a door left open, apparently on purpose. In a tiny corridor beyond he found a tiny bathroom, the smallest he had ever seen. There was no tub, just a toilet, a washbasin and a shower.

He took a quick hot shower, his first wash since leaving Shetland, though he had scraped his beard off every morning. Then he reflected on the facilities of the cottage. Primitive certainly, unbelievably small but the clean water on tap indicated pipes, and a piped water supply indicated not just civilization but organization.

Back in the living room he pulled on the pants. It was pleasant to have his back and chest bare again after days and nights huddled in sweaters. The room was warm; although it was warm enough outside to go without a shirt, the room heating was on.

He examined it. Oil. Narrow-gauge pipes. Full central heating in an isolated cottage. The contradictions interested and baffled him. Hot water and central heating. No radio, television or telephone. Books. No scanner. Oil lighting. No electricity. Cooking presumably by oil too. No car, no tractor. From the window he could see the fields. Vegetables and fruit—potatoes, cabbages, carrots, onions, gooseberries, blackcurrants, in far greater quantity than four people would need. He wondered if there was a deepfreeze. There could be a deepfreeze running on oil.

Some of the books were printed in Edinburgh, which he knew had been the capital of Scotland. Most were printed in London.

There was a tentative tap on the door. Lynn came in but nearly withdrew again when she saw him bare to the waist, He grinned at her, and saw a familiar response in her eyes. He felt the familiar stirrings within him...

She said: "Your... friend is all right, I think. Concussion, probably, but I expect she'll be fine tomorrow. Anne has gone to a neighbor's house—Dr. MacKay is due there today and she might catch him."

The girl went on hesitantly: "I don't think your friend really needs a doctor, and if Anne misses Dr. MacKay we needn't bother. Unless you feel..."

He had approached her slowly, and now he took her very gently in his arms. Startled, she tried to break free, staring at him.

She seemed incredulous. "I don't even know your name..."

"Ram," he said, tilting up her chin so that her lips were in the correct position.

"Mr... Ram, you must let me go."

"You don't want me to let you go."

"Of course I do, and I never said anything to make you think—"

He kissed her, gently, for this was no Flora Fay or Sugar. Although he never had doubts and never swerved after getting a response, he was well aware that many girls needed time. Only on this occasion he didn't have time. The other girl might return at any moment with the doctor. The husbands might come back. Roberta might come to life and stumble downstairs.

The girl's face was like the softer things in Terran life, not like the bleakness, the isolation. Her skin was as clear as Roberta's, her cheeks as soft, her hair as well tended. And her clothes, simple as they were, were not the clothes of a country wench.

It was now or never.

* * *

Anne came in shortly afterwards. She had missed the doctor and come straight back.

"I came past the window," she said dryly. "I saw I was too soon and waited for a while."

Lynn gasped.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

In the early evening, when the men returned, Burrell was upstairs with Roberta. She was conscious and concussion was not apparent, though she

was weak and had a splitting headache.

She had been offered food but Burrell hadn't, which was ironic because Burrell was ravenous and she couldn't eat. Anne's grimness and Lynn's apprehensiveness didn't bother Burrell but something was brewing and Roberta couldn't be moved yet. He thought it best to stay with her in case the women, who could do nothing against him, decided to take it out on Roberta.

He thought he heard someone on the stairs and waited. Just as he decided he had been mistaken, the bolt shot loudly. He tried the door and found it locked.

"Why would they do that?" Roberta murmured.

"I could hazard a guess." She knew nothing, so far, of his amorous interlude with Lynn.

"They can't mean to keep us locked up... unless... Do you think they guess we're not—"

"Maybe."

Time passed; perhaps ten minutes. Then there was another step outside and a paper was pushed under the door. Burrell picked it up and read:

> Lynn has told me everything. It was not her fault. She says she has never met another man such as you, and I believe her. You cannot be allowed to stay among us, or in Scotland, or on Earth. We are going to fetch the police. It will be Exile for you and perhaps for the girl.

That was all. It was not even signed. Silently Burrell handed the paper to Roberta. It was impossible to keep her in the dark much longer.

She read it and then said: "What happened?"

"Use your imagination."

"I'd rather you told me. Did you rape her?"

He sighed. "No."

"It seems she says you did."

"A technicality. One that women, particularly married women, take refuge in. I don't suppose she said in so many words that I forced her. Just that she was too terrified to resist."

"Did you terrify her?"

"Do I terrify you?"

"Anyway," she said bitterly, "you might have waited... controlled yourself... instead of taking a tumble with the first Terran girl we saw."

"It's been a long time. And there have been temptations lately."

He knew she was capable of fury, for which there was some justification.

But Roberta was not predictable. He could feel her disappointment in him, but he was surprised when she laughed weakly, holding her head. "Really? I do tempt you, then?"

"I never wanted a girl more."

"But you don't love me."

"What's that got to do with it?" But he looked uncomfortable, his eyes held by hers as though hypnotized.

It was her turn to sigh. "And now?"

They heard a door slam, probably the front door. From the tiny window Burrell saw two men on foot making their way along a path.

"The men have gone," he said slowly. "Both of them. Leaving the girls with us."

"And a locked door between them and us."

"That's nothing. I can kick it down."

"And me in bed."

"You're going to have to move. We'll climb out of this window."

He expected protest but got none. "You'll have to go," she agreed, "but I'm not sure I can make it."

"They don't seem to have gone near the boat, any of them. They think the locked door is enough."

She pushed back the bedclothes and tried to get up. Her head swam and she sat back dizzily.

The women had put a long nightdress on her. But she had some of her clothes with her, rinsed and dried. Burrell did not have his, only the borrowed shirt and trousers.

Sitting on the bed, she said: "Now that I know you're tempted, it's more necessary than ever for you to turn your back while I get dressed."

He didn't make an issue of it. Behind him, she said: "I don't think I can walk."

"You'll have to climb down by yourself. I'll knot the sheets together. If you can manage that, I'll carry you to the boat."

She gave him the biggest of her sweaters and he put it on. "Wouldn't it be easier," she suggested, "to break the door down and go out the conventional way?"

"I want to avoid the women if I can. They could have a gun, though I don't think so. There would certainly be a scene: We'd have to damage property and possibly knock them out and tie them up. Far better to get away quietly if we can."

He made a ladder with the sheets, helped her to the window, and threw the ladder out. "Let me get down first," he said. "Then if you do fall, I'll have a chance to catch you."

He fastened the sheets to the window frame. It was a tight squeeze for him to get through the small window. Once out, he took only a few seconds to reach the ground, for even the upstairs window was not far up.

Fortunately the only window from which the ladder would have been visible was the frosted glass of the bathroom.

Roberta came down slowly and cautiously, her tension obvious, and when she was five feet up he touched her leg and caught her in his arms.

She did not speak as he made his way at right angles away from the cottage's blank gable end. Only when they were three hundred yards from the cottage did he turn toward the clifftop.

He found another path, longer but less steep than the one he and the girls had ascended. The dinghy lay where they had left it, apparently untouched.

"Let me down," said Roberta. "I'll manage now."

He kept her where she was. "You're only half my weight," he said. "Maybe less."

"Funny, now that I've had a breath of fresh air I'm hungry. Pity we couldn't stay to dinner."

"They'd have fed us in jail if we waited."

"I don't think much of Scottish hospitality."

"Oh, I don't know," he murmured, thinking of Lynn. She glared at him.

He laid Roberta in the boat and started pushing the *Flora* out. They had arrived while the tide was rising and were leaving on the ebb; the water was much lower now and he had a long way to push the boat.

He breathed a sigh of relief when the sea took the boat again. For ten minutes or so he rowed before running up the sails. The breeze was still from the north, though it was beginning to come off the land now.

"Pity we never found out where we were," said Roberta.

"Oh, I found that out all right. I stole this; it may be a long time before they miss it."

It was a small book of maps of Britain, a fairly large-scale map divided into sections.

"I think we're here," he said, pointing to the northeast coast just south of Buchan Ness, "and there's where we're going."

He pointed.

Edinburgh.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Zipped into a sleeping bag, Roberta slept all night and didn't stir even when the sun came up. It was mid-morning when she finally sat up with a groan.

And once again they were approaching the coast; only this time it was flat, with a city over to the right. Instead of being blown straight toward the land with a favorable wind, the breeze was dead foul and Burrell had his work cut out making any headway.

"Here," he said abruptly, seeing she was awake, "you take the tiller and I'll attend to the sails. I've had my eye on a harbor for nearly an hour, but I can't make it."

Uncomplainingly she hoisted herself out of the sleeping bag and discovered, after a few uncomfortable moments, that her primary concern was no longer an aching head or the nausea she had escaped only in sleep, but ravenous hunger.

"And don't stand up!" Burrell added.

She winced. "No need to shout at me."

"You wouldn't have a headache if it hadn't been for that boner you pulled yesterday," he said unsympathetically.

"As to that, I think we're even," she retorted curtly. "Those women were friendly enough until you gave your well-known impersonation of a jackrabbit. They would at least have fed us."

"I am hungry," he admitted, "but some things matter more than food."

She gave him a quizzical glance, and said no more. But her face betrayed something akin to anger and, for both, the atmosphere was filled

with tension.

With her at the outboard-tiller, they made better progress tacking towards land.

Suddenly, however, Burrell said: "Damn!" and started winding down the sails. "We'll have to row in," he said over his shoulder. "Ditch that outboard. Tip it over and let it sink."

She was alert enough to comply without argument. There would be people around where they landed, and the radio-powered outboard motor would lead to questions they didn't want to answer.

He pulled for a flight of stone steps and a tall man in white trousers and a sky-blue jacket ran down the steps to meet them.

Burrell cursed under his breath. If there were harbor dues, they hadn't a cent to pay them. He had hoped that in a small harbor like this, nobody would pay much attention to them.

"I watched you tacking in," said the stranger. "You were doing very well... how did you come to lose your rudder? You must have had one then."

Worse and worse. "Women!" said Burrell explosively. "She let it get unshipped and it sank. It was metal, you see."

"Bad luck. My name's Eliot, by the way. That's my cruiser over there. Never tried sailing but I've always wanted to. Your sails came down very neatly. Not a sign of them; how was it done?"

Burrell made the best of it, inviting him to step into the boat to examine the mechanism. Eliot was fascinated, and didn't seem unduly suspicious. Burrell had guessed from what he had seen of the cottage the day before that a clockwork motor running up a collapsible mast and sails would not be startlingly original to these people. Though there might be great gaps in their technological resources, they had not reverted to barbarous ignorance.

"Staying here a while?" Eliot asked. If he noticed that neither Burrell nor Roberta had given their names in response to his introduction, he didn't comment. The story that Roberta's carelessness had lost their

rudder now proved convenient. She sat in the stern apparently sulking while the two men talked.

"We're going into Edinburgh."

"Just for the day, or longer?"

"Longer. Maybe a few days."

"Then I've got a proposition that might interest you. Would you hire me your boat?"

"There's no rudder."

Eliot waved at the boats around. "I can easily get one. I'd like to try sailing, and you won't be needing your boat while you're in Edinburgh."

Burrell considered. There might still be harbor dues. If Eliot took over the *Flora*, he would naturally take over such details. A total lack of money, even small change, was a tremendous handicap; despite their hunger, they couldn't buy a sandwich.

Burrell made up his mind: if Eliot was prepared to close the deal on the same casual basis on which he had suggested it, he'd agree. If, on the other hand, Eliot wanted names, addresses, guarantees, a written contract, proof of ownership and so on, Burrell would not only withdraw... he'd *have* to withdraw.

"How long and how much?" he said.

"Three days. Ten pounds. How's that?"

Burrell, who had been a businessman, was inclined to haggle just on general principles. He himself was always suspicious when a deal was closed too easily. At the last moment, however, he realized that Eliot was a kind of wealthy yachtsman who didn't change much from country to country, from world to world—a gentleman, not the haggling type. Probably his offer was needlessly generous, made casually and expected to be received in the same way.

"Sure," he said. "Only we pay for the rudder. You fix it and we'll settle when we come back."

"Fine," said Eliot enthusiastically. "The wind's perfect for a sail right now. I'll hunt for a rudder right away. Probably pick up an old one for next to nothing."

He took out a wallet and gave Burrell two notes. Burrell stuffed them in his pocket without looking at them. Keeping up the act, Burrell said shortly to Roberta: "Coming?" and without a word she stepped ashore and started going up the stairs.

"No luggage?" said Eliot in mild surprise. "We'll buy what we need."

"Sure you'll be back in three days?"

"If we're not, the boat's yours."

Eliot laughed politely, treating this as a joke.

There was a small town directly behind the harbor. It was marked on the map as Musselburgh.

"Thanks very much," Roberta said bitingly. "I enjoy being an object of derision."

"I had to put the blame on somebody. It worked out pretty well." He took out the notes. "Two fives. Any idea what they're worth?"

"Not really. In Dickens' time, twenty pounds a year was a fair wage. A hundred years later twenty pounds a week wasn't much. But here on Earth, before the exodus, countries kept revaluing. A meal in France used to cost about thirteen hundred francs. So they divided by a hundred for convenience. The meal cost exactly the same, but they called it thirteen new francs. The British may have done the same. Let's find out. Let's go and eat."

He was willing. But he said, seeing a shop that sold tobacco: "Want cigarettes?"

She brightened. "Until you mentioned it, I didn't know I wanted a cigarette more than a steak."

Conspiratorily they both went in. He bought one cigar and twenty cigarettes. The elderly shopkeeper took the five and gave him four notes

and some silver.

Outside, they checked. "Cigar, ten pence," said Burrell. Cigarettes, twenty-five. Any ideas?"

She was lighting up. At the first draw she choked. "That isn't tobacco!" she exclaimed.

Burrell didn't light his cigar, putting it in his pocket to smoke after lunch. "Now that's something I can tell *you* about," he said, "being a man who likes to know what he's smoking. Nothing that anybody smokes is tobacco. That was an old name for a certain plant that people smoked for centuries. Then they found it was a killer and looked for alternatives. You get different smokes all over the galaxy. Maybe for the first time you're actually smoking tobacco... but no, they never grew it in cool countries."

"Cool! I haven't felt so hot since Sahara!"

She was still wearing all her clothes, and people were staring. There was not another woman in sight wearing trousers. They all wore dresses, rather dowdy dresses. Anne and Lynn, it now became evident, were not less elegant than their city counterparts, as might have been expected, but considerably more attractively dressed. There was not a skirt as short as Lynn's in view.

"We'll have to ditch some clothes," he said. "Pity, because we may need them again. We may have to sail back to Shetland. But we can't go around being stared at."

"There's another way. Look."

From the way they looked around them, the young couple were obviously strangers like themselves. They wore stout shoes, shorts and sweaters, and carried knapsacks on their backs. And nobody paid any attention to them.

"Hikers," Roberta said. "That's what they called them. We could be hikers. We've got the gear—"

"Except the sacks."

"I saw packs like that in a shop not far back. As hikers, we'd be

expected to be strangers with strange accents. We'd be expected to look around and not know our way and ask questions."

Burrell shrugged. "You're the expert. So we'll be hikers. But first, let's eat."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It was a big moment for Roberta to walk down Princes Street, Edinburgh. Since she had seen pictures of the street in different periods and from different angles, it was also instructive, for she could see what had changed.

The castle still stood on the hill to the left, with the gardens in the valley between. But the railway was gone, and so was the Scott Monument. In the street itself, all the vast stores and hotels had disappeared; in their place were elegant but not very large or impressive houses.

By constructing a mental picture from photographs she had seen, as well as from her experience with other cities, she was able to discern both what the street had been like and, comparing it with what she now saw, could draw certain interesting conclusions and form some theories. The big commercial palaces had all been axed. There was not a single factory, superstore, or luxury hotel in the whole of Edinburgh. Banks were small and what seemed to be the city's main post office was only a modest shop. On the other hand, the churches, the Royal Academy, the museums, theaters, and conservatories remained and'were in good repair.

Edinburgh had once been called the Athens of the North. It seemed to have more claim to the title now than ever before.

There were no billboards and few posters, these only in discreet locations. They told of concerts, exhibitions, displays.

There were no private cars, only the buses, one of which had brought Burrell and her from Musselburgh. The streets were clean. Where once, presumably, there had been a wide roadway with at least four lanes of traffic and roadside parking, there now remained only a narrow road on which two buses could just pass, and broad, clean concrete pavements for the pedestrians.

These were not crowded. Once Edinburgh had had a million inhabitants; Roberta guessed it had not a hundredth as many now.

The people were drably dressed, even more so than in Musselburgh. This reversal of the usual order of things was puzzling—country girls being gaily, provocatively dressed, the people in a small town less so, and the people in a large town still less so. There must be a reason, but Roberta could not begin to guess what it was.

Anyway, their choice of disguise proved lucky; although they had seen few hikers, they were clearly common enough to attract little or no attention. True, quite a few people stared at Roberta, but that was not unusual. What was unusual, another puzzle, was the furtive way men stared at her bare legs.

One thing was clear—short skirts were out, and so were shorts unless, like Roberta, you carried a knapsack. But the men still stared... furtively.

Edinburgh was clean, sober, civilized, rather drab, and its people were clean, sober, civilized, drab...

They had to halt as a scuffle erupted in front of them. Three youths, then four, then six fought. Three or four girls, none over fourteen, screamed encouragement.

The girls proved the most startling. Roberta had never heard so many filthy oaths strung together. Although there were, after all, only about a dozen words that really qualified as profanity and obscenity, these young girls used an astonishing mixture of the profane and obscene. And this in the Athens of the North. Meantime the fighting became more desperate, more savage, the youths panting and gasping as they drove fists into faces, chests, abdomens. Presently some of the smaller fighters were bowled over, and then the kicking started.

On the other side of the fracas Roberta saw, unbelievingly, two policemen watching. They were not enjoying the fight: from their expressions it was clear they would have liked to stop it but didn't dare.

None of the bystanders were enjoying the fight either, except those in the thirteen-to-sixteen age group. Now there were nine youths fighting. Four of them were kicking two, who had given up all attempt at offense and were merely covering their eyes with their hands and arms.

Then Burrell waded in.

He had dropped his knapsack. He seized one of the kickers and threw him horizontally against one of the others. He was stronger, more violent, and more destructive than any of the youths. Teeth were jarred loose or knocked free as he chopped the face of another youth with a karate blow. A gargantuan shove sent a sixteen-year-old rocketing into the chorus of foul-mouthed girls, scattering them, and that was not accidental.

The two biggest youths came at him swinging. A boot came up. Burrell seized the leg and twisted it violently, upending the youth into the other. The second youth staggered but did not go down, and came on. Burrell hit him so hard on the chin that his feet left the ground. He fell back and did not move.

Impartially Burrell hauled up the two on the ground and sent them, too, staggering into the screaming girls. Then he looked grimly at the two policemen, challenging them.

They stepped forward. The youths, those who could, ran away. Four of them couldn't. The girls, except one, disappeared into the crowd. The remaining girl darted across to the unconscious youth to whom Burrell had given an upper-cut, then started kicking him in the face.

Burrell lifted her off her feet, kicking wildly. He might have done no more to her but she succeeded in kicking him on the kneecap. He put her down and slapped her across the face so hard that everyone in the crowd jumped at the sharp crack.

She blinked, burst into tears, and ran.

One of the policemen took Burrell and Roberta to a bench facing the castle while the other cleared up the situation, moving everybody on, acting as he should have done five minutes ago.

"Name?" said the policeman, taking out his notebook.

"Are you going to charge me with something?" asked Burrell belligerently.

"No. I'm going to offer you a job."

Roberta choked on a laugh.

"I'm Sergeant Scott. Who are you?"

After a second's hesitation, Burrell gave him their names.

"Ram... you certainly acted like one. You're hikers? Come far?"

"Yes."

Fortunately Scott didn't pursue that. "Are you down for Exile?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Why should I be?"

Scott grinned grimly. "Anybody who can do what you can do, and does, is liable to find himself with a one-way ticket on a starship... sooner or later."

"But it had to be done. You should have done it."

Scott sighed. "I know. But I couldn't do it. You could and did. Burrell, the kids are getting on top of us. It gets worse all the time. I believe my chief would be glad to hire somebody like you."

"As a professional bouncer?"

"Bouncer?" He didn't know the word. "Break up a few gang fights, that's all. Get yourself known. Be around. The kids are not so tough really."

"I know. They're just toueher than anyone else."

Roberta stepped in. "What would I do while he was breaking up gang fights?"

He hadn't thought of that. He looked her over doubtfully.

Scott was a tall, slim man of about Burrell's age, but there was something effete about him, something Burrell didn't expect in any cop. He had met a few senior police officers elsewhere who had something of

that look, but generally, they were crooked. Scott, he was prepared to wager, was not crooked; yet he didn't seem to be much of a policeman, and nothing at all of a sergeant.

Suddenly Scott brightened. "There's a possible job for you, too, Miss Murdock, if you're interested. We need a girl to investigate the clubs. My daughter Tanya is too well known. If the two of you would care to come along to the station, we can talk it over with my chief."

They wanted jobs, money, some stake in this world, some position from which to survey and evaluate Earth. But even Burrell, a tough man who didn't mind being tough, had no desire to go around hitting kids. To act as he had done, in anger—violently, even brutally—was one thing. To go out again deliberately looking for violence was another thing altogether.

But this was a chance to learn a great deal quickly. He caught Roberta's glance over Scott's shoulder and also caught her quick nod.

"No harm in going to the station with you," he said.

* * *

If Burrell was not quick to assess a complicated situation, Roberta was. As they left the small unimposing police station to walk to Sgt. Scott's home address, she explained: "They're weak. All their strong characters are sent to the colonies—into the galaxy. Very much as rioters and sheep-stealers were transported many centuries ago. Women go too, if they transgress, or if they won't let their men go without them."

Burrell stopped in his stride at this. "Women?"

"You know women go. You saw them at Sahara."

"Yes, I was thinking of something else. Somebody else. Go on."

"You're a tough character. Aggressive. Used to getting your own way. You saw Lynn and you wanted her. You took her."

She spoke quite composedly. She had felt annoyance, even anger, over that. Perhaps a touch of jealousy. But she told herself, rationally, that if she wouldn't give him what he wanted, she couldn't complain if he got it from somebody else—only complaining that he jeopardized their position

by doing it.

"The poor girl literally couldn't resist you," she said. "You were far too strong for her. I don't mean just physically. You had your way, just as if you wanted the window open and she wanted it shut, you would win. And remember the consequence? Apparently her husband thought, they all thought, that the result would be Exile for you. Transportation, in fact. As a punishment? I don't think so."

"Not as a punishment? Then what?"

"As a simple means of maintaining the *status quo*. That's what they do here, it seems. All aggressive characters are expelled."

"Terrans aren't notable rebels in the galaxy."

"Remember, we know there may be some form of conditioning."

"If they can be conditioned into being tractable, why expel them?"

"They're still aggressive. They may be conditioned so that they accept Exile and don't fight to get back. But they remain strong—stronger than the people who stay here. If Terrans aren't notable rebels in the galaxy, they certainly aren't notable doormats."

He nodded thoughtfully.

"Teenagers, now... of course they rebel," she went on. "The child of weak parents bullies them. But Earth doesn't expel kids. Children go only when the whole family goes."

"Then what happens to young thugs like those today?"

"In time, they conform. As they get nearer twenty-one, they realize that they've got to knuckle under or leave Earth. Some decide, okay, we'll leave Earth. The rest gradually and progressively conform. So a prophecy comes true."

"What prophecy?"

"St. Matthew, Chapter Five, Verse Three: *Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the Earth*."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Sgt. Scott's wife was dead, the elder son had emigrated to a planet in the Tarsus sector and the younger was a doctor in Glasgow. That left a daughter and a larger house than was now needed, with the result that Scott occasionally took police recruits in temporarily.

As they met the daughter, Tanya, who was tawny, tall, and tigerish, Roberta wondered rather wearily why it was that Burrell's path was always so conveniently strewn with attractive girls.

Tanya was in her late twenties. She looked at Burrell speculatively, and Roberta knew it was only a matter of time before they tried each other out.

Yet at first Tanya seemed more interested in Roberta, openly admiring her. Her interest was caught from the first by the fact that Roberta had already accepted the assignment of investigating the clubs.

"Yes, you'll do," Tanya said, "if you don't run when somebody says 'boo' to you. They know me, of course. You can't go with me. Burrell can. In fact, it would be an idea for us all to go tonight, Burrell with me, you on your own, not knowing either of us."

"I haven't a clue what this is all about. I was told you'd brief me."

"All right. There's hardly any organized crime in this city, except for the clubs. Nightclubs mostly, but some are open twenty-four hours a day. Frankly, we let them alone. There are twenty policemen in Edinburgh plus office staff and a hundred or so part-timers like me."

"You can't take on the clubs?" said Burrell.

"Let's say we're not sure we want to try. But we like to keep an eye on what's going on, and a girl like Roberta can be very useful. People will talk to her, tell her things. With her looks—"

"I need looks to qualify? Am I supposed to sell them?"

"One way or another. You work it your own way. Have you any money? Clothes?"

"No."

"Then you can't act the wealthy socialite. You'll have to be looking for a job. Hatcheck girl, cigarette girl—you've got the legs. The clubs not only cloak nearly all the crime there is, they attract the rebels, the fugitives, the people skipping Exile, the pushers, the perverts."

Roberta and Burrell were careful not to exchange glances, but it sounded as if it was in their interests, quite apart from the job, to find out about these clubs and their clientele.

"And you think," said Roberta slowly, "I might get a job in one of these places?"

"You can start off by asking, anyway. Whether you get a job is neither here nor there. So long as you have some plausible excuse for being there. You might do well asking for a job at various clubs and turning down every offer made as not good enough. That's up to you."

Roberta marvelled at the lack of organization. At the station, she and Burrell had not been asked for documents, signed no contracts, signed only for an advance on pay and were given badges. Neither was to work in uniform.

There was no reason why they should not go with the tide. When they didn't know exactly what they wanted to find out, anything they found out was progress.

Roberta had noted one significant thing: just after propounding her theory on exile and aggression to Burrell, they had met his daughter. Tanya was obviously anything but weak and helpless, indeed precisely the type Roberta would have expected to go for Exile long before she was twenty-eight—willing or unwillingly.

"In the long run," Roberta said, "I'd have to get a job. People don't tell you their secrets in the first five minutes."

Tanya nodded.

"And I don't fancy walking about all night with a tray of cigarettes."

"What else can you do, then? Gambling? Could you be a croupier?"

"No."

"Sing, dance, play an instrument?"

"I did appear in college revues," said Roberta, surprising Burrell.

"With your looks, you won't need much talent."

That night, all three of them visited the Marimba, a club near the university.

Burrell and Tanya were there first, apparently ordinary fun-seeking customers, but, as Tanya had warned him before they set foot in the place, certain to be spotted at once. Their presence, she said, might act as a blind for Roberta, arriving later: if all suspicion was centered in them, there would be none left for Roberta.

Inside, the club was like any nightclub: a small band, a small dance-floor, too many tables in too small a space, subdued lighting. The only thing out of the ordinary was the prices. Burrell, who by this time had started to see the Scottish pound in perspective, found them very low.

He and Tanya were in evening dress, which didn't suit him and did suit Tanya. In a low-cut, strapless, floorlength green dress she proved an intelligent dresser. All her good points were emphasized and her bad points minimized.

She started by trying to draw him out, asking oblique questions. He parried them deliberately, almost rudely, and also blocked an attempt to talk about Roberta. Tanya was almost as brusque when he tried to talk about her. An unusual situation, he thought, enjoying it. Most people wanted to talk about themselves to the exclusion of all else.

If the waiters, the barmen, the cigarette girls, or the unseen management were electrified by their presence, there was no sign of it. Burrell did notice, however, that they were attended to promptly, out of turn, which was significant.

The food was very good, in some ways better than in Paradiso, which prided itself on its cuisine. Its simplicity and lack of standardization stood in stark contrast to the rigid variety of the fun-world. Here meals could be much worse or slightly better. Burrell's steak was perfection.

They were just finishing their meal when Roberta came in. There was

no rule or convention about women having to have escorts, and several were alone at tables or at the bar. Burrell had already established by observation the pick-up routine: it was perfectly in order for any man to proposition any girl who was on her own, and she invariably responded politely. But if she didn't want company that was that; the man accepted it with good grace and moved away at once. Burrell hoped Roberta, too, would observe this before giving anybody the kind of brush-off she had once given him. It wasn't done here.

She had scarcely got her order, sandwiches and a drink that looked like whisky, when the lights dimmed still more and the floor show started.

There was a comedian who went down well, though Burrell scarcely understood his patter; it was done in a broad accent and was full of allusions that meant nothing to him. Then the dancing girls came on, six of them.

They were energetic rather than skilled. Paradoxically, in a city where art and culture were rated more highly than in any other city of Burrell's acquaintance, where the food was often superb, service good, manners impeccable, and the band more musical than any nightclub group he had previously encountered, the girls were rank amateurs. They high-kicked with enthusiasm but without unanimity. Although they were young and nearly all pretty, they brought little else to their performance. Their costumes, most of all, reminded him of amateurs rather than slick professionals. The short skirts were just a little too long, the spangled bodices a little too loose.

Roberta, too, missed none of this, waited to gauge the applause, which was mild, and made up her mind. Until then she had not finally decided to try for a job as a singer or dancer, considering the idea somewhat fantastic. To pretend she wanted a job, yes. That would give her an excuse to talk to the manager, ask about the club, hang around without allowing anybody to take liberties, and inevitably learn something. If the dancers had been, as she expected, about three times as good as she was, she would have made certain her talents never came to the test.

As it was, she wrote a note and handed it to a waiter with a terse request that he should give it to the manager. It read:

I've seen your floor show. I can do better.

The band had a singer, a weedy, spotty youth who sang accurately but woodenly. Most of what he sang was new to her, or rather, too old to have come her way, but some of the old standards were familiar. She noted two, the ancient *Night and Day* and a more recent fast number *The World With a Place For You and Me*.

Burrell saw the passing of the note and wanted to wait and see what happened. But Tanya said: "Let's dance"; since it had been agreed that she should call the tune, he got up and danced with her.

If he was not the best dancer in the galaxy, he usually managed to surprise people, for they expected him to be slow and heavy on his feet. Although not shaped like an athlete, he was in excellent condition, and his responses were so fast he could combine beautifully with another dancer, alternating rapidly between leading and following.

"Well," said Tanya breathlessly as they went back to their table, "you really showed me something there. We must do this more often."

Roberta watched them dancing with something like regret. Even without sex between them, she and Burrell *could* have become closer but it had never happened. She had been willing to thaw, that time he saved her life when her seat belt came loose. She had even kissed him. But since then, it had been he, she thought, who had done the back-pedalling. What was wrong, she pondered. It was almost as though he didn't want her because she appealed to him.

The waiter came back to her. "Mr. Conrad says if you come back tomorrow at ten o'clock he'll see you."

Roberta's uncertain temper boiled over. "Tell Mr. Conrad," she said coldly, "that I'm going to finish my drink. That will take about three minutes. Then I'm going to leave. And I'll never set foot in this place again. So if he wants me he'll have to be quick about it."

The waiter was startled. He backed away, saying nothing, and she was reminded of what she had told Burrell: these people could be pushed around. In comparison with Burrell, she was (she told herself) as meek and mild as a lamb. Still, even she could make them jump.

In less than three minutes the waiter returned with a small, tubby, bald man. He bustled up to the table indignantly and opened his mouth. Before anything came out, she took the wind out of his sails by smiling at him.

Roberta's smile was a rare thing: Burrell had seen it only three or four times. Familiarity was given no chance to breed contempt. It was not devalued. The dancing girls' bright smiles had meant nothing. Roberta's was in a different class.

She nodded to him to sit down, which he did. "Miss... ?" he said.

"Just Cindy. If I have to sign for money you'll find out who I am. Otherwise, no."

"Really, Miss Cindy, you can't just walk in here and—"

"I have. The only question now remaining is whether I just walk out again."

"I don't need any entertainers."

"You're wrong. You do. The band is good, the singer only fair, the dancers terrible."

"I offered you a chance to—"

She stood up. "I understand there's a place called the Silver Slipper. And an establishment rejoicing under the name of The Two Left Feet. Goodbye, Mr. Conrad."

"You haven't any music with you. Or stage clothes. You can't just—"

"Tell the band to play *The World With a Place For You and Me*. Then *Night and Day*."

He hesitated, then responded to the tone of command, waddling to the stand.

Now you've done it, Roberta told herself. She was no extrovert. At the same time she was not shy or self-conscious; having made up her mind to do something, she wouldn't be fazed by an audience.

There was no announcement. The band simply started to play and

Roberta began to dance. It was only after she had started that the lights went down and the spots came on. The hum of conversation died a little, not much.

She wore a long gold skirt and a blue coverup top, which bared her arms but not her shoulders. Though the music was fast she moved slowly, swaying rather than dancing. As the customers saw how pretty she was, the talking died still more.

Suddenly she snapped off her skirt and tossed it aside. The blue top proved to be part of a leotard, and if she had seen the club's dancers before she put it on, she couldn't have arranged a greater contrast. Their costumes didn't fit too well because costumes that fitted too well weren't nice. They wore bras which weren't meant to show and did. She wore nothing but the thin leotard, which clung to her like a coat of blue paint.

She talked with her torso, laughed with her legs. There wasn't one high kick in the whole act. Seeming to slow down the fast music, she rippled. A knee bend became a smooth hip movement, a waist flick, a toss of ash-blonde hair.

Instead of shaking everything in sight, as the dancers had done, Roberta undulated gently like reeds in the breeze. The audience, now completely silent, were allowed to watch something she was doing for her own pleasure. There was a deliberate, ironic contrast between the jazzy music and her slow swaying.

Very quickly it was over, and Tanya murmured to Burrell: "No wonder you stay with her..." The applause was sparse and self-conscious, surprisingly unenthusiastic. If Roberta wasn't a great dancer, she had least proved that without words she still had something to say. Burrell realized suddenly that these restrained Edinburgh people , were afraid to applaud such a performance too much. They wanted more, but they would pretend they didn't.

Tanya was in no doubt. "She's got the job," she said.

The polite applause was fading, and Roberta was wrapping her skirt around her again. A momentary halt in the clapping was interpreted by Burrell as disappointment that Roberta's legs, which were well worthy of extended study, were being wrapped up after only two minutes on view.

The band started again and she moved to the microphone. She sang the verse of *Night and Day* and people started leaning forward. Her singing voice was lower than her speaking voice, a warm contralto. Its power had little to do with volume—you felt you had to lean forward to hear it, despite the microphone.

The band proved their sensitivity; their playing became warm and intimate, like Roberta's voice, and the tempo eased a fraction.

And then the song, too, was over. Roberta's two numbers, dancing and singing, had at least one thing in common—the three minutes or so seemed like mere seconds.

This time the applause was generous, perhaps unnecessarily so. She had done nothing remarkable and she would never have got a job singing or dancing solo in Paradise. But in the Marimba, she was in a different class from the chorus girls and the band singer, and everybody knew it. Perhaps she got more applause for her singing because the customers felt they could show the enthusiasm they hadn't dared display for her dancing.

Conrad took Roberta to a small room backstage, and she noticed yet again the *smallness* of most things Terran, the houses, the shops, the offices. There was no lack of space that she could see. The Terrans just didn't have the expansiveness of the colonies.

"Well, I think we can offer you something," Conrad said cautiously. "The dance was a bit near the bone, though."

"They could get used to it," she said.

"Yes, that's what I think," he agreed. "Maybe if you wore a costume more like our girls—"

"No!" she said explosively. "I'll wear less or I'll wear more, but I won't go on in bits and pieces."

"Bits and pieces?"

She had used an idiom he didn't know. To prevent him thinking about it, she said abruptly: "How much, Conrad?"

"Five pounds a week?" he said hopefully.

Five pounds was half what Eliot gave for three days' hire of the *Flora*. *A* tenth what she had already drawn on account for her police job.

She laughed derisively.

"All right, then, twenty," said Conrad, surrendering.

"Five, twenty... what's the next word?"

"Twenty-five is top," he said, and this time she believed him.

"Right, Conrad. I'll take it."

"And you call me Mister."

She had achieved a certain ascendancy that she had no intention of relinquishing. "For twenty-five a week I sing and dance. If you want me to call you Mister, that's extra."

"You call me Mr. Conrad," he retorted with a flash of spirit, "or I tell Starways you're here."

She had overdone it. Her accent, her singing, her dancing, the way she wore clothes were all clues. Her belligerence was perhaps the straw that put the camel through the eye of the needle.

"Tell anybody you like I'm here," she said. "If you think I'm under contract to anybody, you're wrong. And I'm not going under contract to you either. Contracts are for people who think they can't do better. Me, I'm not at all sure."

It worked. She was sure of it. There was doubt in his eyes again. For a moment he had been certain.

"You'll go on again later?"

"Like hell I will. I've got to see about music, work things out with the band. I need clothes. You've got to bill me, advertise, set an opening night. Do I have to tell you everything?"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Burrell and Tanya went on to the Silver Slipper. Roberta was on her own now.

The respectability of Edinburgh's nightclubs was no surprise to Burrell. Some of the patrons got very drunk, as in nightclubs elsewhere, but they didn't become troublesome. No voices were raised; there were no fights.

From what Tanya said and didn't say, he gathered that these clubs were considered dens of vice by about half the community yet nothing remarkable went on in most of them. If the police had no iron control of these places, the magistrates had the last word in the continuance or revocation of licences. The drinks had to be what they were supposed to be and the gambling tables had to be honest. There was no drug problem, rather to his surprise. The anti-drug pressures were social rather than punitive.

That left sex, and it was sexual permissiveness that gave the clubs a bad name.

Like all respectable communities, this one swept certain things under the carpet. There was no open promiscuity. The unmarried male and the unmarried female, unable in this social atmosphere to copulate in the public parks, even at night, had to go to certain places set aside for the purpose: the clubs. The routine was simple and unvarying. Having come to the club already with a partner, or having picked one up there and come to an agreement, financial or otherwise, one asked for a private supper.

"You might have told me," Burrell said. "We ate in the Marimba."

"Are you assuming that we're going to eat again?" she said mockingly.

"Well, aren't we?"

"Maybe. I'm curious. I gather you make Casanova look like Blueboy. Anyway, Roberta thinks so."

"Roberta knows nothing about it," he said, too quickly.

"So I understand. Strange, isn't it?"

"I'm not one for *talking* about sex."

"No great lover, then," she said in the same mocking tone. "Just a bull. Or a ram. Is Ram your real name?"

"Yes. Does a great lover have to talk?"

"Undoubtedly. He has to woo. Make a girl feel great. Flatter her. Melt her. After all, sex isn't so wonderful. It needs a lot of propaganda to build it up to something."

"You haven't lived."

Those three words annoyed her. She liked to feel she had done everything, knew everything. "And you have?" she challenged.

He shrugged. "I told you I'm not one for talking."

"All right," she said irritably. "We'll take a private room. That's all it means, you know. You can have a sandwich and a beer but it costs the same anyway."

The private room was purely functional. Two chairs, a table and a divan. The divan had no sheets.

"Go on, then," said Tanya, still annoyed. "Don't talk. Don't tell me I'm wonderful. Don't tell me you're wonderful. Show me."

* * *

Much later, as they drank their beer, Tanya Scott had to assert herself somehow.

First she admitted, to be fair: "You were right. I hadn't lived." And then, to assert herself: "You came from Shetland, of course. Both of you. You know that, as an Outlander, you don't exist here? I can kill you and it will be as if you'd never been."

He was not shocked, not even particularly surprised. Tanya was intelligent and she was some sort of detective. Also she had been in his company for hours.

Once some tiny thing like a word not in use on Earth or a minor piece of impossible ignorance on his part alerted her, she could go on probing gently and imperceptibly until she had it all. It was absolutely no use

pretending he had not been discovered.

"I thought you'd never guess," he said. "Now tell me why you haven't been Exiled."

She had to smile. "You know a certain amount," she said. "Not much. You want to know more. And maybe I will tell you. But first—just why are you here?"

"Curiosity," he said.

She shook her head decisively. "I've met other Outlanders. Not many. Curiosity moved some of them. I believe curiosity motivated Roberta. But not you."

"Well, more than ordinary curiosity," he admitted. "There's a story... but I won't tell you it right now."

"Why not?"

His answer was unexpected even to himself. "I've never told Roberta. I feel I have to tell her first. Besides, I'm not completely sure yet myself." His brow knitted contemplatively.

She nodded, accepting that.

"Tanya," he said urgently, "we can help each other."

She nodded again. "That's true. You're guessing but I know. Did you ever meet a man called John Ehrlich?"

"No."

"You fool!" she suddenly spat at him. "I *know* you met him. You must have met him. He sent you here, didn't he?"

"Then why ask?"

"To see if you'd tell the truth."

"Tanya," he said carefully, "you haven't told me much. In fact, you haven't told me anything except that you could kill me, and you haven't told me that you're not going to. Now if I met somebody as potentially

dangerous as you in the next five minutes, and he asked me, 'Do you know Tanya Scott?' what would you expect me to say?"

She calmed down. "That's reasonable," she said. "Let's go home and get some sleep. Tomorrow you're going to get a history lesson—from Professor Hamish McCrindle at the university."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The next morning Burrell was sent to an academy where there might be student trouble. There wasn't: the girls and boys, fourteen and fifteen, stared at him; perhaps because he was there, they didn't step out of line. Possibly they knew what had happened the day before.

Burrell missed talking things over with Roberta. He would have told her his real reason for coming to Earth as far as he could discern it but now that he was ready, they were kept apart. He was sent out early and when he returned to Sergeant Scott's house on his way to look in at HQ for further instructions, she had gone to the Marimba.

Tanya was there, just up, still sleepy. She was warm and leggy in a short wrap, and Burrell was willing to take up where they had left off the night before. She, apparently, was not.

"You go to the university this afternoon at two," she said. "McCrindle expects you."

"And Roberta?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"For her the way is different. Maybe she won't be told anything. It depends."

"On what?"

"Burrell, you've already jumped in with both feet. If we let you go on acting the way you undoubtedly will act, you'd be Exiled and my father couldn't stop it. Roberta... we don't know yet. It depends how she's getting on now."

"Your father is in this with you?"

She did not ask: "In what?" She said: "No. He's a policeman. That's all. He guesses I'm something more, but he doesn't want to know."

"What more are you?"

She shook her head impatiently. "Wait. You won't tell me everything. You can't expect me to tell you everything."

"I might do a deal."

"I don't want a deal right now. See the professor."

At the police HQ he was told to report to the university at two and report to Professor Hamish McCrindle. With unaccustomed caution, he tried to find out how Tanya had managed to arrange for him to be sent there officially when according to her, the briefing was unofficial and Sergeant Scott didn't know anything about it. All he was told was that there might be trouble among the students and McCrindle would tell him what to do.

When he arrived at the university he was shown into a small waiting room. Roberta was already there.

"Who sent you?" he asked.

"George Shirran. The pianist at the Marimba. He knows I came from Shetland."

"You told him?"

"No. He found out."

As Tanya had done. It wasn't difficult. Probably Shirran had guessed, when Roberta danced, that no shy Terran miss could dance like that. The chorus girls weren't so terrible after all. They knew they had to be peasants or Exiles.

Burrell found himself more glad to see her than he expected. There was both more and less between them than between him and Tanya. Unspoken though it was, he knew somehow that Tanya had not the slightest intention that any relationship between them should become permanent.

On the other hand, mere habit and the things they had experienced together were forming a bond between Roberta and him. Somehow, Burrell felt, she understood him, understood him in ways he did not understand himself. The thought frightened him a little.

Although he had not fallen in love with Roberta any more than she with him, he wanted more of her than just to possess her once, the pattern of his usual encounters with women.

"Cindy," he said, "we're a couple of minutes early, and before we see this character, I'd like you to know the story of my life."

She laughed. "You've lived so little? And why tell me now?" she added seriously.

"Because I guess I'll have to tell Tanya and I want to tell you first. My wife was Terran, Cindy."

"I guessed you'd been married. But I never thought she could be Terran. Why do you know so little about Earth?"

"Because she wouldn't talk about it. Cindy, I was wild as a kid. Not only wild but bad. When I was seventeen and was sent to jail, my respectable parents gave up. I suppose I had to be sent to jail—everything else had been tried. I was four years in jail—"

"You killed somebody?"

"Not quite. He lived. Anyway, jail worked. For me, jail did what it's supposed to do and often doesn't. I didn't like jail and decided I was never going back. I didn't decide to become honest, just more careful. When I finally got out I was more polished. Then I met Mary. She was small, like you. Not so pretty but appealing. She was quiet, you'd almost think shy. I knew from the start she'd just come out from Earth and that she was on her own. Naturally I wondered about that, a girl of twenty-two emigrating on her own, but she made it quite clear she didn't want to talk about that, and she never did. You see, she wasn't shy at all. Once she had made up her mind, she was like a rock. She made me stay honest. I had to, she would have left me, you see."

"You loved her," Roberta said in wonder.

"Didn't I say so?" He had not said so. "I never met another girl like her. You'd never believe anybody could accomplish so much by doing so little. It was her courage, I suppose. Life in Orleans can be pretty rough, but I never knew her afraid. No, that's not true, sometimes she was afraid like anybody else, but she never let it affect her in the slightest. She stopped a riot once. They would have had to kill her, and they weren't prepared to go quite that far."

Hearing the pride in his voice, Roberta wondered how he could have waited so long without talking about Mary. But even before he confirmed it for her, she suspected what the answer would be.

"She died trying to have a son she couldn't have," Burrell said unemotionally. "All the courage in the galaxy couldn't make her strong. The baby died, too."

She had not thought she would ever feel sorry for Burrell. And she said nothing, knowing that if she did express sympathy he would probably hit her. Burrell could not take sympathy and despised those who could.

"For ten years I worked," Burrell went on. "I wasn't honest any more, only when Mary was alive. It didn't matter to me—nothing really did. I cheated and schemed and built a small empire, just for something to do, I guess, for I had no purpose then. The obsession to come to Earth came on gradually, year by year. From Orleans the fare to Earth is so staggering you have to be a millionaire to think about it. The other way it's subsidized. The idea of working my way to Earth didn't occur to me, for I was a construction man, not a spaceman. Anyway, I found out the Starways deal, and knew I had to get to Paradiso and still be a millionaire when I got there—"

The door opened and a tall, thin, whitehaired man looked in. "Miss Murdock? Mr. Burrell? You wanted to see me?"

Burrell stood up, but it was Roberta who spoke. "We were sent to see you," she said.

He sighed. "They send so many... and it never comes to anything. Oh, well, come in."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

McCrindle looked like a professor. Yet Burrell had seen men very like him who were storekeepers, janitors, and house painters.

"I don't want to know anything about you," he said flatly, sitting behind his desk and taking off his glasses. From the short-sighted way he blinked at them, it seemed he didn't even want to be able to recognize them again. "I don't want to know who you are or what you're going to do. You'll probably be killed anyway."

"Killed?" Roberta exclaimed.

"No questions. Ask the others. Those who sent you. I used to believe in this, but I don't any more... I assume you're Outlanders. I'm here to tell you how Earth got like this."

He looked at the ceiling and addressed it, not them.

"Earth eventually stopped fighting major wars. Then there was a population problem. People lived longer, weren't killed off by disease, weren't blown up by bombs. And birth control wasn't a good thing for the human race. The rich, the intelligent, the talented, limited their families. The poor, the stupid, the useless, didn't.

"At first, colonizing the galaxy didn't seem to be any answer. The first starships could take about fifty people. And it was ten years or more before the ship got back. Fifty was nothing. Earth wanted rid of fifty million people at a time. Men, women, and children. Particularly the children, before they grew up and produced more children.

"Another thing: the people wouldn't go. Certainly there was no trouble finding fifty; but if there *had* been places for fifty million, they would not have been filled. Most people want to live and die where they're born. Only a few have the spirit of adventure.

"But the snowball grew. The colonies started growing, but not nearly fast enough. They wanted people from Earth; Earth wanted rid of people. The shipping problem was gradually beaten; ships got faster, bigger. The colonies built ships too. A practical method of hibernation was found, so that the human cargo didn't need so much space on the way, didn't move around, didn't eat. Vast capsules were assembled in space, and one real ship could handle a dozen capsules—"

"We know most of this," Burrell said.

"You don't know it the way I'm telling it!" McCrindle snapped pettishly. "Listen. Then you can go away. And do whatever it is you do. They send you to me because I know more about this than they do and can tell it better. And because I used to believe—"

"Please go on, professor," said Roberta.

"Before anybody realized it, the actual transport problem was beaten. This was appreciated only when it became difficult to fill the places. All the pioneers had gone. In Britain and America and Russia and China there were still some who were ready to go, but not nearly enough. Earth was still far too full and the colonies, not four or fourteen or forty any more, but four hundred, still wanted people. Small settlements die, big settlements survive. To be really self-supporting, a colony needs a population of at least five million.

"But people wouldn't go. The exodus already started hadn't by any means solved the problem but it took enough pressure off for people to be able, all over the world, to say 'It'll be all right in my time.' So the governments of the world agreed on the Exile Acts."

Burrell tried to interrupt but heeded Roberta's gesture.

"To understand them all," said the professor, bringing his gaze down from the ceiling and bunking at the man and girl sitting on the other side of his desk, "you must realize that whatever was officially said, the real deliberate intention was to use any and every excuse to get rid of as many people as possible. Phrases like 'the right type of colonist' were used, but what was intended was simply to kick out millions and millions of people. The colonies, didn't want murderers and other criminals, but they *did* want strong, aggressive, independent people. So a whole list of categories was drawn up. People who wanted to get out of contracts, debts, marriage, other responsibilities could do so by volunteering. People who got into any sort of trouble could be compulsorily Exiled. Teenagers weren't sent away, but if by the time they were twenty-one they'd built up a record or nonconformism, they were Exiled then."

Burrell understood why the juvenile delinquency problem never quite got out of hand, and why it was the fourteen and fifteen-year-olds," not the nineteen-year-olds, who were tough and intractable. At fourteen, you had

a long time to go. At nineteen, you were not so sure you were prepared to leave Earth, and didn't want to be forced to go. You started, belatedly but perhaps still in time, building up a record of conformity, of reformation.

"It's easier to start an avalanche than to stop it. Here in Scotland, people suddenly woke up one morning to find the life they had known had broken down. There were no railways any more—not enough passengers. Television and radio audiences dwindled, the service became more and more sketchy and finally stopped. Communications gradually broke down. World trade virtually ceased. Communities became self-supporting. In Edinburgh today you can't get rice. Silk. Diamonds. Rubber. Bananas. Coffee. We use our own coal, iron, tin, natural gas, stone, petroleum, wood. Our own dairy produce.

"*And we can't reverse the policy*. It's not possible to call a world summit any more. There are no national leaders—they all got sent way. Earth is bleeding to death and we can't stop the flow. Can't or won't. The leaders we do have, the older people, the town councillors, don't want to stop it. They want to go on getting rid of the hotheads."

"Where," said Burrell, "does Starways come in?"

The professor gave his first sign of approval. He picked up his glasses and put them on.

"That's the heart of the matter," he said. "Starways came in just before our system broke down. They got agreement to use certain regions we didn't want. They ferried in tourists—you must know more about that than I do. It was agreed that neither they nor the tourists would interfere with us or even contact us: there would be little point in exiling strong people, only to bring them back and have them mingle with the population. In return they took over something we could no longer do for ourselves—defence. With many populated planets, each must have a defence system against the others." Roberta nodded to herself.

The sleepy village terrorized by a bully brought in a fighter to take care of the bully. Inevitably the fighter took the bully, and the village.

Earth did need a certain amount of defence... another name for it was protection. Even at that time, there would have been galactic agreement backing up Terran self-determination. Anybody who took a ship to Earth, landed without permission, and started kicking the populace around

would have been a pirate. But the pirate would probably have got away with it.

So when Earth ceased to be able to defend herself, somebody else was needed to do it. Starways was ready to oblige. And take everything.

Leaders could still have been found on Earth to organize, to unify. But Earth continued exporting every leader or potential leader.

It was a suicidal policy. And the result was going to be suicide.

"No wonder you're discouraged," said Roberta, with masterly understatement.

"They want Australia. They want all of Scotland. Then they could bring in millions of tourists. Perhaps build permanent residences for millionaires, I don't know. If we gave them Scotland and Australia, they'd want Africa. China. Russia. America. They want the whole world. And we can't stop them."

That, Roberta thought, was the matter in a nutshell. Not *They can't be stopped* but the far truer *We can't stop them*.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Burrell was impatient with McCrindle as they walked back to police HQ. "An old hasbeen," he said. "Once a rebel, now a frightened old man."

Roberta wasn't listening. "What a story!" she breathed. "A world cutting its own throat. *The* world."

Burrell shook his head impatiently. "It's impossible—"

"No. It's happened. Getting rid of the malcontents... permanently. How many communities have wanted to do that and thought it would be heaven if they did?"

Still impatient, Burrell said: "It's so simple. All they have to do is—"

"Whatever it is, it's not simple. But before we go on, finish your own story. You said you worked for ten years and only gradually began to think of going to Earth."

"I certainly didn't expect this," he grumbled. "A dying world. A dead world. I thought a world that could produce Mary—"

"You don't understand," she said, becoming impatient in her turn. "This world *rejected* your Mary. This isn't her world. It's more yours than hers—you're here, aren't you? Did she never tell you whether she left voluntarily or was Exiled?"

"Never. Once she made it clear, early on, that she didn't want to talk about Earth, I didn't press her. And then suddenly it was too late."

"You were faithful to her while she was alive, weren't you?"

"Yes... though you may find it hard to believe."

"I don't find it hard to believe. What have you been doing since, taking revenge on all other women for being alive when Mary isn't?"

Burrell looked morose.

"Did you come to Earth looking for another Mary?"

"I don't know," he said slowly. "Suddenly one day I realized I was rich enough, if I sold the business and found my own way to Paradiso, actually to go to Earth. The ordinary spaceman isn't trained, he's just unskilled labor. I worked my way to Paradiso and it didn't cost me a cent. I might have joined Starways and got here free too, but that would have taken time. And to get the chance to stay in Paradiso I had to tip my hand and give away the fact that I was a millionaire."

"And once here," she said significantly and a little sadly, "you found Tanya." She had been right, she realized; there was a depth and a strength in- the man behind the brutal facade. But she was too late.

He shook his head. "*Tanya* is no Mary." He might have said more but as they approached police HQ, Tanya herself stepped quickly from a doorway and said: "You can't go there, either of you. Starways have notified all British authorities that you absconded from a tourist party, and that means you'll be sent back. Why did you give your right names?"

"Why not?" said Burrell. "And how did Starways get in touch?"

"I'll tell you all about it, but not here. You can't go to police HQ, my father's house, the Marimba, or the Silver Slipper."

They followed her as she strode southwards, away from the city center, away from all the places they had been in Edinburgh. "Why didn't you give false names?" she asked. "Now everything you started here is finished—"

"Oh, nonsense," said Burrell shortly. "We do it another way, that's all."

"If only you'd given different names—"

"I gave our real names because that's the way I work. If I could have avoided giving names at all, I would. Once I had to give a name, I gave my own. I'm not a spy."

"Aren't you? What did you think of what McCrindle told you?"

It was Roberta who answered. "I agree with Burrell. We wanted to make things happen. Don't you?"

"You know there's a group, then? And that I'm in it?"

"We've guessed a lot of things," Burrell said. "We're tired of guessing. When are you going to tell us something?"

"Soon," she said quite mildly. "You could have been Starways agents, you know. You still could be."

"And what would that mean?"

"That McCrindle and George Shirran and I would all be Exiled."

"Would that be bad?"

"We want to work here, not in the colonies."

"If you want to fight Starways, if you want to make these people their own masters again, that's where you've got to work. Out there."

Tanya stopped in her stride, looking shrewdly into his eyes. "That's what you think, is it? Roberta?"

"No," Roberta said evenly. "I'd work here. Organize. Build up an action

group. Stop or at least suspend Exile. That's what you're trying to do, isn't it?"

"And after that," Burrell asserted, "you'd still have to take on Starways on their own ground. There you might win. Here you can't."

Tanya said: "You don't know what you're talking about," and Roberta said at the same time, more calmly: "You can't organize Terran resistance except among the Terrans."

Burrell answered them both: "I'm no genius, but in business I managed to make several millions. And this is a business matter. You're not going to stop Starways with guns. You've got to stop them in the boardrooms and in the stock markets." He stopped. Suddenly Burrell knew what he wanted to do, what he had come to Mary's home to do.

They had been standing arguing, and passers-by were staring. Tanya, who didn't want to attract attention, calmed herself and led them on. They were entering an area of large old stone houses, many of them boarded up.

Roberta laughed. "I've often called you a bull. And here we are, me wanting to start a revolution and you wanting to fight a paper battle."

"You can't help people who won't help themselves. I can understand Earth's population problem, and the desperate measures that were taken to solve it. But centuries ago Earth should have said 'Right, it's solved,' and stopped Exile. Even now the Terrans could get together, stop Exile, keep their leaders and fighters, and spit in Starways' eye. Instead the older people, the people who run things—as far as they're run at all—still stick their heads in the sand and insist Exile goes on. They don't want the challenge of opposition. All their lives there's been an easy solution—expel the rebel."

Tanya nodded. She and others like her, natural rebels, had had to realize very early in life that to be able to go on rebelling under cover, they had to conform out in the open. Hence her connection with the police.

She looked around quickly, and when nobody was in sight led them into a narrow lane that gave access to the rear of some of the houses. She stopped at a dilapidated green door, opened it with a key, and locked it behind them.

They were in a fiercely overgrown garden.

"Some of these houses are perfectly sound," she said. "Population is still going down, but the optimists think it'll start to rise any day. Now they want it to rise. Substandard houses are knocked down, but these might be used again some day."

Another key opened the heavy old back door.

Inside, the house was clean, though bare, and had rooms larger than any Burrell and Roberta had seen so far in Scotland. The house dated from more expansive days, possibly Victorian.

"You can stay here," Tanya said. "The houses on both sides are empty, and people aren't curious. Just don't draw too much attention to yourselves, that's all."

In the huge old kitchen, she put on water to boil for tea. Burrell was surprised that the house had electricity and the supply was still on. Tanya explained that in an atmosphere of indifference, it was quite safe to bank on people's lack of curiosity. Occasionally electricity was used in this house, and when bills based on central metering were sent to an accommodation address elsewhere, they were paid, and that was all the small, understaffed power board cared about. "You promised us answers," said Burrell. "First, how did Starways get in touch?"

"Radio. There's no public service any more, but there are small, low-power stations at Wick, Peterhead, Aberdeen and here, using equipment supplied by Starways. We think they're deliberately designed so that we can communicate locally but not nationally or internationally. And though we do have scientists and technicians, there's no industrial backing. If you wanted a television tube, you'd have to hunt around for one made a hundred years ago."

Roberta began to see why Tanya had wanted them to lie low for a time while they experienced and learned the current situation. Without this experience, she and Burrell were liable to get themselves Exiled by a careless word or deed while taking unnecessary care over things the incurious Terrans wouldn't notice.

Tanya said abruptly: "All right, I'll tell you the situation. We *have* been organizing. And not for a year or twenty years, but more than fifty. There

is an organized opposition; unfortunately, since rebels seldom agree, it's not united. Since the various Terran groups would never work together under a Terran, we've known for a long time we'd need an Outland leader. John Ehrlich and others in Paradiso and elsewhere have been trying to send us leaders for years. And quite a few have got through, contacted us, and stayed. But most get returned to Starways."

"And some of them are never heard of again?" Burrell prompted, remembering McCrindle had used the word "killed."

"Mostly the ones we don't contact. We have a system of notifying Starways of names, making sure they know we know them and that future Exiles know them too. That ensures their safety."

"Tell me," said Burrell, thinking of something that suddenly became relevant, "are Exiles brainwashed? By you? By Starways?"

"There is a mild conditioning. Part hypnotic, part drugs—not surgical. A general reluctance to talk about Earth is implanted; that's all. This was by agreement long ago, renewed for different reasons ever since. At first the idea was that an overpopulated world didn't want to have to fight off visitors and would-be settlers. The less propaganda there was about Earth, good or bad, the better. Later Earth had developed a hermit complex and wanted even more to be forgotten, left alone. And Starways had come into it—*they* didn't want pressure to open up Earth until they were in a position to make a killing on it. They've been very careful to keep their monopoly. They even keep their Terran Tours profits down so that nobody—"

"You don't need to tell me about that," Burrell said. "I can understand Starways. Go on about your organization. What's it called?"

"That's part of the trouble," said Tanya almost apologetically. "It's called about five thousand things. Here we call ourselves the *Aware*." "I like it," said Roberta.

"I don't," Burrell retorted. "It's got to be something people will die for. Freedom, the Free Fighters, something like that."

"Scotland the Brave," Roberta dug out from somewhere. "Well, that would do locally," Burrell agreed. "How strong are you, Tanya?"

"About a tenth of the population."

"That's pretty good," Burrell said, agreeably surprised. "Ten percent? We're overwhelmed. Even a minority group could outvote us if it ever came to that."

"Ten percent groups have often ruled nations," said Roberta gently.

"We don't want a dictatorship—"

"Well you had better find some way that works," said Burrell coarsely. "You can't afford luxuries like high ideals. If you don't have faith in what you're proposing for your country—your people—then how can you expect the other ninety percent to ever trust you."

Tanya didn't argue. "Well, perhaps that's why," she said quietly, "Ehrlich spoke to you and tried to make sure you came to Earth."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

In the ensuing weeks Roberta came to admire Burrell for his energy, determination, bluntness, single-mindedness.

In two's and three's, by the dozen, by the score, the members of the *Aware* were brought to the old house and Burrell harangued them. He swore at them, Roberta observed, ten times as much as he had ever sworn at her. He acted (or was it an act?) the part of the bluff, honest, unsubtle patriot. That he was not fighting for his own world seemed, paradoxically, to strengthen his hand.

He inspired them and sent them away glowing and proud. Scotland the Brave was tried out as a slogan, and it caught on. It became a password, a rallying call. Members of the *Aware* would not have given up their name and joined the Patriots or the Fifers or any of the other existing organizations, but all could come together under the new Scotland the Brave banner.

Burrell began to get visitors from farther afield, first the nearby villages and then the more distant towns. Once a group of twenty came from Newcastle, in England. They called themselves the Tynesiders.

Roberta spoke at nearly all the meetings, more cool, more scholarly, than Burrell. Yet her contribution was equally important, as Burrell was the first to acknowledge. She had the facts. As time went on, she gathered more and more facts. Burrell made them feel that the impossible was possible. Roberta showed them how the impossible might be made possible.

A large group from Glasgow calling themselves the Clydemen came along in truculent mood. Their leader, a bigger man than Burrell, seemed to see him as an obstacle to be removed. Burrell plugged his usual line for a while and then, meeting obstruction at every turn, challenged Jock McVicar: "You want to fight?"

Jock McVicar did not *want* to fight. In his teens he had been tough and had fought often, with fists, knives, and boots. But he had learned, as all rebels had to learn if they were to stay on Earth, that at least an appearance of conformity was obligatory. And that was twenty years ago.

However, Jock McVicar was perfectly *prepared* to fight. When challenged "Put up or shut up," he never shut up.

Like many rebels, he had long ago become accustomed to the idea that the revolution would never take place and had accepted that he was the leader of an army that would never be called upon to fight. Thus his role in life had become the crushing of opposition among his allies rather than among the enemy. When you couldn't fight the enemy, there was nothing left to do but strengthen the fighting machine in the hope that one day it would get the chance to fight. This meant assimilating all the splinter groups in the Clydemen. There were no women in the Glasgow group; he saw it as his current duty to take over this new Edinburgh attention-grabbing faction, retain the leader Burrell but put him in his place, and send the women back to their babies and their sinks.

"Sure," he said. So, in the former ballroom of the old house, they went for each other with what on McVicar's part soon became killing rage.

Burrell was twenty or thirty pounds lighter than his opponent and was at a disadvantage in height and reach. Normally a vicious and dirty fighter, he was careful to fight clean now. If he won by foul means, the Clydemen might actively work against the Scotland the Brave group. Burrell could not afford this.

When McVicar found his blows going astray and Burrell's landing, he bored in head down, his arms going like pistons. Burrell had a chance to raise his knee and end the fight, and knew it, but used his fist instead. McVicar staggered back, his nose spurting blood, and when he came in again, he tried clumsy wrestling holds. Burrell let him do this several times until everybody knew that his opponent had started the wrestling. Then he threw McVicar cross-buttock, and caught him in a backbreaker.

McVicar hissed and a moment later shouted his surrender, and that was that.

Roberta, a cool spectator, came in then. It simply would not do to depose and humble the Glasgow leader. He had to be flattered and reinstated.

"One thing you've got to do, though, Mr. McVicar," she said steadily, "is reverse your policy on women members. On the other side, women have a vote. If you don't let them in on your side, you're only—"

"We've done all right," McVicar growled, while his men, silent, listened and waited. "We're strong. We're united."

"But not effective," said Burrell. He knew what Roberta was doing and did not want to queer her pitch. Nevertheless, McVicar could not be allowed to forget that he had fought and lost, not fought and won. "Me, I'm not interested in useless, secret opposition. I fight to win. If I can't win, I'll fight somewhere else where I will."

McVicar, who was not stupid, said belligerently: "Then maybe that's what you ought to be doing, Mister Burrell. Fighting Starways, not us."

"That's exactly what I intend to do. I don't want to be the leader here."

McVicar became interested... extremely interested. He genuinely believed in the cause and had spent twenty years working in his own way for it. His views had not changed and could not change overnight, yet if letting women into the movement and following the orders of somebody else would mean action with a chance of success at last, he would have reluctantly agreed.

"Let's talk about this," he said.

As Tanya and Burrell were forced to admit, Roberta was their trump card in dealing with the motley dissidents who visited the Scotland the Brave headquarters to see what was going on. She stayed cool and she had tact. She nearly set the house on fire twice, she burned her arm trying to cook a meal, and she fused the lights, but in less severely practical fields, she was the queen. She didn't have Tanya's impulsiveness and impatience or Burrell's brute determination. She was, paradoxically, intensely practical in theoretical matters. Time and again in dealing with visiting groups, she ran counter to the other two, placating and wooing people whom Tanya and Burrell would both have handled on an ultimatum basis, and coolly refusing to conciliate others. And she invariably proved to be right.

She was an ambivert, capable both of solitary study and work and of her performance in the Marimba. It was generally agreed now that it was a great pity she and Burrell had not had an opportunity to become established in open employment. For one thing, it would have provided cash, always necessary to undercover groups; as it was they had to depend on the funds of the group even for their food. Fortunately, there was a class of people too timid actually to become open revolutionaries who satisfied their mild craving for revolt by giving money. Open employment would also have taught them more first-hand knowledge of the current situation... not that Burrell and Roberta stayed all the time in the big, apparently derelict, house. They often wandered about together, separately, or with Tanya, always as inconspicuously dressed as possible.

Once Burrell went to Musselburgh. The *Flora* was still there, moored in the harbor, a freshly-painted wooden rudder in place. She looked ready to be sailed back to Shetland.

But Burrell didn't look closely at the dinghy. Never going near the *Flora* , he looked around him and presently picked out a man whose attention never wavered from the boats in the harbor and the people moving around it. Burrell went away for an hour, returned, and found him still there.

This brought up the question: were there Starways agents in Edinburgh, and if so, what were their aims and how far would they go in pursuing them? Tanya said not far. Starways genuinely didn't interfere...

For the meetings, Roberta, and later Tanya at her instigation, chose to present an image both flamboyant and elegant. The timid Earth people wanted larger-than-life leaders. Tales of Burrell's strength, frankness, and

ruthlessness, based on his handling of the affair of the Clydemen and similar incidents, multiplied. The half-reluctant rebels needed to feel they had a superman at their head, and while Burrell refused to build himself up as one, Roberta shrewdly did all she could to foster the idea. As for her own image, playing the shy, dedicated, dowdy intellectual was out. Since she didn't have strength or height or an overwhelming personality, she deliberately used her beauty and her particularly provocative shape to make an impression at the meetings, often on people who might never see her again. The men admired and the girls stared, criticized, were secretly jealous, and then went away and copied her.

Roberta had long since learned why people in the country were relatively smart and townspeople drab: self-protection. In the country nobody cared how you looked, and you could please yourself. In the town anybody who attracted attention, who was flamboyant and daring, who wore bright colors, was a potential rebel and Exile. You weren't Exiled for wearing a dress with a plunging neckline. But once you placed yourself in the public eye, you were halfway to Exile for one reason or another. Dowdy, drab clothes were a sort of camouflage. Pretty girls and virile young men pretended not to be there.

Quite deliberately Roberta created curiosity about the relations among her and Burrell and Tanya, and refused to satisfy it. The men could, if they liked, believe she was a virgin crusader or that she and Burrell were passionate lovers. That Burrell was a great lover was part of the image she helped to foster, and he helped by his readiness to prove it when any attractive girl among the revolutionaries expressed the slightest interest. But she remained an enigma. She could address the meetings wearing a revolutionary-cum-women's liberation outfit of long black pants and a white shirt not only open all the way but with the buttons torn off, and she would talk of sex with a frankness that made Burrell seem like a Methodist minister, and would later coolly, competently freeze any attempt at familiarity with her.

To the revolutionaries, she was Cindy. They heard Burrell call her that, and Cindy it became. Those who heard the name Roberta Murdock shook their heads and went on calling her Cindy.

It amused Roberta that Tanya, after a torrid first chapter with Burrell, cooled off.

* * *

"Why?" Burrell said, puzzled and angry, the first time Tanya refused him.

"Burrell, this thing is important to me; Scotland the Brave. I don't want it complicated and messed up by personal relationships."

"There's not the slightest danger of it being messed up by personal relationships. If you're thinking of Cindy, she doesn't give a damn."

"I'm thinking of everything—you, me, Roberta, the movement, Earth, Starways. When we started this, you were just a fugitive. But now, you and Roberta are doing something that's never been done before. You're unifying us. That visit last night by three of the London group was the biggest thing that ever happened here. And you knocked them out. You and Roberta. They've gone back wild with enthusiasm to spread the word—"

"Sure, I'm terrific. But that's got nothing to do with you and me."

"Of course it has. You're the Messiah—"

"What the—!" said Burrell. "All I'm doing is trying to inject some spunk into people too scared to do what they want to do. Then I'm going to turn the organization over to McVicar or somebody like him and get back to civilization and see what I can do there."

Momentarily diverted, Tanya said: "You don't think this is civilization?"

"No, I don't. This is past civilization, overripe civilization. I once tried to read a guy called Toynbee. I think he had some of the answers. I wish I could remember what they were."

"He was a Terran. He didn't have the answers. Only the questions."

"Tanya, what's got into you? The nearer we get to achieving something, the more you pull back."

"That's why. I'm like McVicar. Like most of the people you've met here. I wanted change. Now that I can see that the change I wanted is at last remotely possible, I'm not so sure I want it."

Burrell swore violently, and at once, before he could say any more, Tanya said quickly: "No, I don't mean that. Of course I want it. What I mean is, it now seems frighteningly important that the change has to be right."

He was so baffled that when Tanya went home, he went straight to Roberta and asked her about it.

She said softly: "Well, you see, Tanya is a Terran, in spite of everything. The first tendency in all of them, even Tanya, is to draw back."

"You mean we're wasting our time? We'll never get them to move?"

"Oh, no. McVicar fought you, didn't he? Get them in a position where it's easier for them to go forward than go back, and they'll fight like heroes. But this thing with Tanya is all bound up in two words she said to you—*frighteningly important*. She's frightened that she will make a wrong move."

Burrell found himself more interested in looking at her than in listening to her.

Her ash-blonde hair was immaculate as usual, her face so carefully made up that nobody could be sure it was made up at all. She wore a tight green sweater, proving once again that she didn't need a bra. When others copied her, they usually proved they did. Her face was quiet, yet alive with the keen interest she found in her work. Strangely enough, he realized, he wanted to please her, make her care about his desires and about his faults; he wished she were jealous of his amorous exploits with women. .

"You know," he said, wondering at the discovery, "you're more like Mary than Tanya is."

"You mean I look more like her?" she asked, deliberately dense.

"No, I don't mean that. Though you do. You're far prettier than Mary ever was but in height and shape you're the same. She was small and had as good a figure as yours."

"Otherwise you would never have noticed her."

"I notice every girl," he said, and she knew it was true. "Cindy, will you

marry me?"

She did a double take, at first sceptically unamused and then amazed as she realized he meant it. Covering up her confusion, she said, "Are you asking because you've decided that's the only way you're going to get me?"

"No, because I finally see how like Mary you are."

"It's no great compliment to be asked to substitute for another girl."

"It's the biggest compliment I can pay you."

She got up and started to walk about, uncharacteristically agitated. It was impossible, of course, yet not so ridiculous that she could laugh and refuse to take it seriously, or let Burrell down gently by explaining incontrovertibly how wrong for him she was.

Although she had come to admire him, particularly since they'd been in Edinburgh, no love relationship had ever grown up between them. It was as though they hadn't allowed it to. She didn't miss him when he was away, and she had decided recently that she was able to work with him better and more smoothly because there was nothing between them, not sex, not love or hate, not even liking or dislike—just a common purpose. But she knew that wasn't true; there was anything but indifference between them.

His amorous adventures had bothered little at first. When she had pointed Sugar out to him in Paradiso, she was glad to be rid of him. The affair of Lynn had annoyed her but mainly because Burrell jeopardized everything through his lust. As for jealousy, she had told herself then and later that it was ridiculous to object to Burrell giving others what she didn't want herself, and she had blocked every other thought from her mind since.

Now she suddenly found, to her intense mortification, that she did want him; he appealed to her physically far more than she had admitted to herself. How this had come about and why it took an honest if unexpected proposal to make her realize it she didn't know, and this wasn't the time for self-analysis.

"Tanya is right," she said, stopping in her pacing. "Sex can complicate things. And marriage can complicate matters even more. Do you think I

didn't know that you started this thing with the idea that I knew a lot and might be useful but you could always ditch me if the going got . tough?"

"I changed my mind on that," said Burrell steadily, "the night you convinced me that trying to escape from Sahara was a mistake. You were right, and you became a partner."

"But now, we still may have to split. You're going back; maybe I'm staying, I don't know. If we leave things as they are, that's all right. If we get married—"

"Why don't you just answer my question—will you marry me? Then we can take it from there."

"As to marriage," she said, "the answer, meantime, is no."

The buzzer sounded. Automatically they both looked at the clock, an old alarm clock that had lost its alarm. It was after midnight and visits by rebels were by arrangement, invariably at least three hours earlier. The buzzer, however, was for Scotland the Brave personnel only, set under the sill of one of the nearby windows. Police or other unwanted callers would batter on one of the doors, either the front or the back: only allies would press the buzzer.

So they went downstairs without particular suspicion, though in accordance with the security routine Burrell had always insisted on, he stayed below the stairs with an ancient revolver in his hand, and Roberta opened the door.

"Good God!" somebody said, and Burrell trained the gun on the doorway in which Roberta stood silhouetted, brightly lit from outside by a full moon in a clear sky.

The voice went on: "It's Roberta Murdock. You're the *femme fatale*. I wish I were fifty years younger. As it is, it's safe to let me in, Roberta."

"John Ehrlich," said Roberta, with mild surprise.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

They had whisky, the most genuine of Scotch whisky, made and

matured not a mile away, and John Ehrlich drank it reverently. "The water," he said dreamily, "the pure Scottish water. Paradiso can't match it with its clinical H2O. Burrell, I expected to find you here. I've heard a lot about what you've been doing, and I had to come and see for myself. But Roberta, I heard only of a girl called Cindy. I presumed you'd dumped Roberta Murdock, or she'd been drowned and you'd found somebody else. It never occurred to me that you'd kept your own name and she'd changed hers. Why?"

"It's a long and unimportant story," Roberta said. "Call me Cindy or Roberta—I answer to either. How did you get here?"

"That, too, is a long and unimportant story—"

"No," said Burrell, quite quietly but with considerable determination. "It's extremely important and we want to hear about it. How come you're a Terran Exile, living in Paradiso, an employee of Starways, a tourist agent for Earth, and able to drop in here when you please—after hearing through Starways what's going on here? And incidentally, I've got a gun in my pocket, and I'm perfectly prepared to shoot you."

"What a lot of questions and statements all at once," said Ehrlich, refusing to be hurried over his whisky. "Very much to the point, though, I must admit. The Starways situation you must know about by now. They want Earth, maybe not the whole world right now but certainly much more of it, probably eventually all of it. They want it peaceably, legally, and without a fight. They want it gradually, so that investment can be made out of profits. They want it exclusively, and their determination to have a monopoly is the real reason why they're proceeding so cautiously. They're not inviting competition by publishing all over the galaxy what a gold mine they're sitting on. That clear?"

"Perfectly clear. And we already knew it."

"I'm not an employee of Starways. True, I get accommodation in Paradiso at a nominal rate, so if you want to say they pay me I won't argue. I help them by telling prospective tourists about Earth, and I help myself by making sure that people like you and Roberta get there. Over the years I haven't accomplished a lot, but this time I seem to have hit the jackpot. I thought you'd get things moving, Burrell, and you have."

"How do we know you're not a triple agent?"

"You don't," said Ehrlich comfortably, "and for that reason I suggest you remember that I could be. That way you won't tell me too much and can't blame me if something goes wrong. My being able to drop in as I please is part of my equivocal deal with Starways. They think I'm with them, not interested in petty cash but very interested in a large lump sum payable when, say, they get Australia. Or Scotland."

"I don't know about Australia," said Burrell, "but there isn't the slightest chance of their getting Scotland. Though these people won't fight, they won't move."

"They wouldn't have to move; the next phase of the Starways plan includes showing off the natives. Letting tourists and Terrans mix.

"It might not be far off. The Terrans, helped by Starways, have done a pretty good job on *divide and be ruled*. There's no real British government anymore. Or Scottish government. All that's left is the local councils. Suppose Starways did a deal wtih Edinburgh, for something Edinburgh wants—there's plenty. Starways would move in, and what would the rest of Britain and Europe and Earth do about it?"

Burrell nodded. "All right. But one more thing I have to know—how do I get back to Paradiso, and farther than Paradiso?"

"That's easy. You've probably heard that some people in your position, who've contacted the Terrans and then want to go back, mysteriously disappear. That's true. To my knowledge none of them have ever been simply murdered—shot in the head by Starways staff. They get lost accidentally. For instance, if you gave yourself up and let yourself be sent back, either through the Exile machinery or as an acknowledged runaway tourist, at some point in transit some unfortunate accident might occur. If you sailed back by boat, one of the big radio-powered cruisers around Shetland might run you down; all efforts to save you, watched by a score of excited tourists, would unfortunately fail."

He poured himself more whisky. "But," he said reassuringly, "I've done a little blundering around in Paradiso, and so have some friends. It's known you left a diamond in the care of a Paradiso bank. That doesn't look like the act of a man who intends to lose himself permanently on Earth. Also it would look very strange if such a man, returning to Shetland, happened to be drowned in an accident involving a Starways boat. No, you can go back any time you like, Burrell. I'm not so sure about

Roberta. It would take us some time to find some way to make sure that it was equally safe for her to return."

"You needn't worry," said Roberta quietly. "I'm staying here."

"And you, Burrell? Despite what you've been doing, you're thinking of going back?"

"You yourself told me," said Burrell pointedly, "not to tell you too much."

"That's so. But if you want to go back soon, better tell me. I could help to fix it. You could even come with me."

"That would suit me."

"I'm going to Vienna first, and returning here."

"Flown by Starways? To Vienna and back?"

"No, my own way."

"That's quite an undertaking."

"I know the ropes. Buses to London. A boat to Hamburg. There are some. More buses. It'll take me a month to get to Vienna and back. So you'll have another month here."

"I'll be ready to leave."

Roberta looked at Burrcll quizzically and tried not to feel disappointment. But soon he would be going. She realized that after all she liked him very much, perhaps loved him.

If he went and she stayed, she would know something that she now realized had been almost entirely lacking throughout.

Fear. Of being alone... of losing him.

* * *

Ehrlich had left for his hotel. Unlike them, he could operate openly in Edinburgh. In fact he had to stay where Starways could reach him.

It was late, and Roberta was tired. She took it for granted the interrupted moment was lost, like so many interrupted moments, and that when she and Burrell took up the matter again, if they ever did, it would be on a new footing. She had declared she was staying and he that he was going, though not immediately.

But as they went upstairs and came to the stairway junction where she went one way and he the other, he took her very gently in his arms and kissed her. With arms encircling her completely, he kissed the nape of her neck, then travelled up to her lips once more. When she met his gaze, it was as unfathomable as her own. Whether his clasp would have tightened if she had tried to escape remained undecided, for she made no such attempt.

Burrell himself broke the spell and dropped his arms. With an ironic smile, he continued up the stairs and quietly closed the door to his room behind him. Roberta stood there for some minutes.

The next morning, Burrell approached her again. "Will you marry me, Cindy?"

"How can we get married? You're going and I'm staying—"

He kissed her again.

She put on a wrap and went to sit beside him. "Burrell." she said, "you told me I reminded you of Mary. But I'm not like her. I'm too intelligent or too silly. I think in many ways, I've been silly throughout most of my life. If we were together, sometimes I'd despise you. And sometimes you'd depise me—"

"No." He was qutie definite about it, convinced in his own mind and only trying to convince her. "Have we spent all this time despising and hating and fighting with each other? Then why should we start? You were right at Sahara. You were a bloody fool when you let go the tiller and stood up and let the boom knock you into the sea—"

"Anyone can make a mistake," she flashed angrily and not very brilliantly.

"And have you noticed something else? You used to have a furious temper. Lately it's been under remarkable control."

Once again she was halted. It was true she had never completely given way to her temper since that moment in Sahara when she was ready to blow the whole thing.

"You really mean to stay?" he said.

"Yes. You think I'm wrong?"

"No. I said from the first the real battle isn't here. But there's a battle here too, of course. That's why I stayed to get it started. Things are moving now. It might be harder to stop them than to keep them going. That's where your sense and tact will influence them. I'm going over now for a frank discussion with Ehrlich before he moves on."

She nodded slowly. "You really have plans? Plans that might work?"

"They depend on Ehrlich. His coming gives me a chance to try something that was otherwise impossible. Cindy, will you marry me?"

"Not now," she said, "but ask me again."

"That I can't promise."

"We both have something to do first... something we must do separately. But I think we needed each other to get started."

He nodded, comprehending. "But Cindy, the galaxy is a big place. When I leave you I'll be going to Paradiso, maybe farther. Whatever you want and I want, I may never see you again. I may never find you again."

It was true. The enormous expense of star travel meant there were hardly any regular passenger services except between a few major ports of the universe. Even if you had the money, you could spend years trying to get from one particular place to another particular place. And Roberta was realistic. It had taken Burrell ten years to reach Earth. Well all she could do, all either of them could do, was hope.

* * *

Burrell did have long discussions with Ehrlich, and she heard little of the outcome. Ehrlich departed. She heard rumors of a council in Vienna, perhaps the nearest thing to a world council left. She didn't try to find out

more; Burrell had said if it was not necessary for her to know his plans, she had better not know them.

Starways remained a vast and sinister presence in the background. What Starways would do, whether Starways would do anything, remained anybody's guess. They knew Burrell and Roberta were in Edinburgh; somebody was watching the boat at Musselburgh. They could have infiltrated Edinburgh, found out about Scotland the Brave, traced Burrell and had him murdered. Evidently this was not their policy.

Burrell was coming to believe more and more that Starways remained determined to do everything the legal way, becoming involved in no local skullduggery that might eventually be exposed in the capitals of the galaxy and rock the Starways' empire. If this was true, it was fine for the Edinburgh end of his operations, fine for Roberta... but it would in no way lessen the severity of the struggle he was going to try to start with Starways. On the contrary, it strengthened Starways' hand. If he had found on Earth the slightest malpractice, breach of contract, scandal, he would of course have exploded it where it hurt Starways most.

But there wasn't any.

For his last few weeks, Burrell threw himself into all-out organization. They had their first public success when the Glasgow council ruled that in view of serious depopulation, Exile should be suspended for five years. It was a mere gesture, likely to be overturned at the next meeting, but McVicar told Burrell exultantly they had plans to make it stand.

"There's hardly anybody for Exile anyway. Those there are, are our people, and they'll obey us. We'll tell them to play it cool, be neither glad to stay nor sorry not to go."

Burrell grinned. "You'll make a politician yet, McVicar. You want to get this accepted, nobody thinking it really matters. Then—"

"Burrell, I'm no bloody politician. Neither are you. I want to break heads."

"But there's a time for breaking heads, and this isn't it. We have to get a few decisions like this through, and while the reactionaries are warning of bloody revolt, nothing happens. Apparently Exile doesn't matter—"

"All right, I heard your speeches. The insidious revolt. The bloodless rebellion. The secret coup. I don't like it, but I'll try it."

"You'll have to do more than that. You'll have to run it."

McVicar snorted derisively. "We all know that when you're not around, those girls run the show."

It was a considerable advance, Burrell thought, that he now called them "those girls." Compared with his previous descriptions of them, this was the height of politeness.

"Cindy is not, never was, and never will be a leader. Tanya is. But I'll be leaving you in charge."

McVicar hesitated, then said: "That's what I want. But I warn you—I'm a man of violence."

"So am I."

"I know. That's why I can't understand why you won't allow any. It would be easy to make these people follow us."

"In a mining camp, in a tough construction gang, you can rule by the fist. Here you can't. Win a peaceful victory and the people go along with it. But any threats, coercion, and blows, and the elders will call in Starways—against you."

McVicar nodded reluctantly.

* * *

Ehrlich, surprisingly, brought back the mandate Burrell had sought, and he brought it back fairly quickly, before Roberta, for one, was ready. Suddenly she found that Burrell was leaving that day, by bus for Aberdeen, then to Thurso, where a Starways boat would take him and Ehrlich to Shetland.

There was only a public, virtually silent farewell. Then they were off.

Tanya said: "Offhand I shouldn't think you and I could get along without Burrell around to knock our heads together, but I suppose we'll have to try."

"Yes," said Roberta absently. "We'll have to try."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The journey was accomplished with no great difficulty. More impatient men would have let the snags and delays get the better of them—at Dingwell they had to wait two days for a bus and it went only as far as Brora, where they found the one inn had gone out of business—but Burrell could be patient, and he used the time to pump Ehrlich, eventually deciding that he now knew more of the things that mattered than Ehrlich did.

At Thurso, or rather Scrabster, the small fishing port nearby, they had to wait for the Starways boat based in Orkney. As Burrell had surmised, touching at Orkney on the way to the Scottish mainland would most certainly have led to capture. There were Starways posts on some of the islands, and there was an arrangement with the Terrans on the others that the presence of strangers was automatically reported.

As the cruiser from Orkney came into Thurso Bay, drawing the local fishermen out to watch, Ehrlich said: "If you're not sure, now's the last time to get lost."

Burrell didn't bother to answer. Even when he wasn't sure he was doing the right thing, once he-made up his mind, it became the right thing.

The boat was very similar to the radio-powered ships used around Shetland, though from the sound of it, it ran on oil or gas. The fishermen, who had seen it many times before, still watched with interest and envy. The dilapidated condition of their own boats explained why. If the Terrans had not reverted to barbarism and ignorance, they had certainly lost all big industry, which meant that maintenance and repair of all things mechanical was slow and difficult. The main source of spare parts was cannibalism, which would mean eventually the end of mechanization. Burrell made a mental note that practical engineers would be more useful in mobilizing Earth than mercenary soldiers.

A Starways man in uniform stepped ashore, nodded to Ehrlich, stared coldly at Burrell.

"Captain Nathan," said Ehrlich, "Mr. Burrell."

"Burrell, you realize we could have you on about ninety-seven charges?"

"We all realize that," said Ehrlich. "But it's pointless even to mention it, Captain, since we know it's not going to happen. Starways doesn't publicize such incidents."

None of the fishermen were near enough to hear what was being said. However, Captain Nathan cast a doubtful glance at them and hurried Ehrlich and Burrell on board.

There were only two crewmen—the spic and span cruiser needed no more and could, indeed, have been handled easily by one man. By picking the right moment, Burrell thought, he could overpower all three and steal the boat, which would be very useful to the Scotland the Brave movement. In a boat like this he could visit three coastal towns a day...

But it was only an idea.

The captain said coldly: "Where did you leave the boat you stole at Scalloway?"

"At Musselburgh, near Edinburgh—didn't you know? Somebody knows."

"You sailed straight to Edinburgh from Scalloway?"

"No, we touched briefly higher up, not far south of Peterhead, I think."

"And otherwise you didn't see land?"

Burrell realized that Nathan, despite his uninviting manner, was professionally curious, and there was no harm in telling him about the voyage of the *Flora*. As he did so, he captain, without apparently thawing, made no secret of his respect for a sailor who could accomplish such a trip in such a boat.

"I wish I'd been with you," he said.

"I wish you had too. Roberta never became much good in a boat." He mentioned the name deliberately, to give Nathan a chance to comment. Also by establishing that Roberta was no sailor, he hoped to give her a better chance if it should ever prove necessary for her to do some sailing.

The captain, however, didn't take him up, merely saying dryly that he didn't know if Burrell was a master yachtsman or had fool's luck. Burrell, balancing the desirability of making this man think he was a fool against the possibility of gaining the friendship and respect of a Starways man, chose the latter.

Ehrlich was alone in the warm cabin. Standing at the stern, swaying easily with the movement of the boat, Burrell and Nathan discussed, argued and sometimes agreed; presently Nathan let him take the helm of the cruiser and admitted grudgingly he knew boats.

It was a useful encounter, Burrell's first beyond the superficial with any of the Starways men on Earth. It showed that he was not necessarily dealing with villains all the time.

* * *

Back at Paradiso, Burrell immediately called on Flora Fay.

In Shetland and on the way to Paradiso with a group of returning tourists, he and Ehrlich had neither sought nor avoided each other's company. Ehrlich didn't want to be compromised and Burrell, knowing he might have a use for him later, didn't want him to become compromised. The official picture was that Ehrlich, still hoping for a large handout from Starways, was rather annoyed with Burrell for breaking the rules and involving him. And Burrell let it be known that it had been Ehrlich who persuaded him to go back.

In case anyone thought he might have left his heart on Earth, he flirted with the three prettiest girls on the ship to keep up his image and afford negative evidence.

It was not until he saw Flora Fay again that he knew for sure the unfinished affair with Roberta had left its mark on him. Flora wore what might have been the same dress except that it was green, with the same reckless plunge. Since he had sent in his name and she was expecting him this time, she could have set her personal temperature control at cool or cold. On the contrary, she came to meet him, the faint smile and the smoky shadows in her green eyes, with an open invitation. Yet she seemed considerably less attractive than he remembered, a steely, mechanical woman.

"About time, too," she said softly, giving him her hand. "All these months in Paradiso, and you never came to see me again."

That was silly and unworthy of her. She must know where he had been. Even if she hadn't been questioned about him, which was scarcely credible, she was in a position to know that he had not drawn on his credit "except for the check for the Terran Tour, and would obviously have found out.

Perhaps she was merely giving him a chance to tell something other than the truth or less than the whole truth. "I've been away," he said, releasing her hand. It was ironic that on the first occasion in ten years when he found he wanted to turn down a chance to make love to a beautiful woman, the situation made it necessary for him to go through with it.

"I want," he said, "to see the big boss, whoever he is. I'm sure you can arrange it."

She stepped back, her green eyes calculating. She was not pleased. She thought she had been slapped across the face.

"The director of the bank?" she said.

"Higher than that. The top man in Starways."

"That's Harry Negus. What reason can I give."

"You won't need to give a reason. Just my name."

She shrugged, searching for a way to be obstructive. Flora Fay was not used to rejection. Even the appearance of rejection.

He suddenly realized her type. To Burrell, only a few highly privileged women ever became individuals. Mary was one, Roberta another. Tanya... not quite. The rest he classed principally by their attitude to men and sex. And this cold-hot glossy bank manager suddenly slipped into place. He had seen her type before.

As she turned away impatiently, he bent and caught her ankle, pulled and twisted. She pitched forward, on her face but turning. He launched himself at her and fell on top of her, pinioning her arms on either side of

her head. In normal gravity she could have been quite badly hurt. In the gentle gravity of this level of Paradiso she was merely winded, dishevelled, and angry, fighting back in fury worthy of Roberta and quite capable of throwing him a couple of feet in the air, as she proved.

But Roberta had fought and meant it. She didn't mean to lose the fight and Flora Fay did. Still struggling violently and forcing Burrell to be rough in his handling of her, the passionate bank manager showed in several different ways to the experienced Burrell that she would be more furious still if he stopped.

When the storm was over she murmured: "Shut your eyes. Please. Turn your head and shut your eyes."

He obeyed, and she was gone, an inner door slamming behind her. Like others of her type, once passion was spent she had to resume her elegant fur-clad image quickly and privately.

Flora Fay managed it with characteristic rapidity. In a matter of seconds she was back in a cool white gown, every golden hair in place.

"Harry Negus," she said coolly. "I'll see what I can do."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Harry Negus was small and obese and bespectacled, with little round eyes behind the windows. He was not, Burrell had discovered, the actual top man, though he was managing director of Starways Inc. El Supremo was the chairman, Olaf Fennel, who was often at Paradiso but didn't happen to be there at that particular moment.

Negus said: "I hope you realize, Mr. Burrell, that you have laid yourself open to an expensive lawsuit, which you would lose. When you signed for the Terran Tour you signed a contract, in effect, giving a strict understanding that you would not—"

"Forget that," said Burrell. "I've already forgotten it. Negus, I'm a businessman. I go where there's profit and I find it."

The little round eyes opened wider. "That's interesting. You didn't, then, do what you did for sentimental reasons? We know your wife was

Terran."

"If I wanted to contact Terrans because my wife was Terran, would I have waited ten years? Though I admit that gave me the idea. Negus, I know all about your plans for Earth, and they're okay. The trouble is that you and I aren't going to share in the bonanza. We'll be dead. Me, I go for quicker returns."

"Quicker returns are generally less certain."

"Negus, I've seen Earth and met the people, and you haven't. You want Scotland. I can give you Scotland. You want Australia. I can give you Australia."

Negus made no pretense that he was uninterested. "How?"

"You can take Scotland. I've been there, and I know."

Negus lost interest. "Mr. Burrell, Starways is one of the biggest companies in the galaxy, because we always take a safe ten percent rather than an unsafe fifty percent.

Our present plans for Earth are *sure*. We're not interested in a bigger take sooner—"

"I know how to take Scotland."

"So do we—with a lot of trouble now, with no trouble at all in perhaps a century. I understand you're a fighter, Mr. Burrell. We don't fight. We get what we want without fighting. Eventually."

"I can get you Australia now."

"You haven't been to Australia."

"No, but I've still been nearer than you. Australia is a big country. It felt the pinch of overpopulation later than other places and recovered sooner. There's a hundred ghost towns in Australia. When the population dropped, the Aussies tried to go back to what they'd done before, sheep farming. But world trade petered out, and what was the use of a billion tons of wool they couldn't sell? Cattle, too—a depopulated Earth has gone back to being locally self-supporting. The result is that the Australians, the

few Australians left, are in a bad way and they're prepared to deal if the deal is right—"

"We know about Australia. The snag is that we can't deal with Australia, only with Earth. And the Terrans won't agree. They gave us limited rights in return for guarantees we'd keep everybody else out. They don't want us in Australia, perhaps building up a permanent population greater than the total population of the rest of Earth."

"I can get you Australia for seventeen billion."

"Outright sale?" asked Negus incredulously.

"No. Limited lease. Twenty years."

Negus shook his head. "Frankly, I don't believe you. But even if I did, it's not a proposition we'd be interested in. I'm sure Mr. Fennel would want security of tenure, continuity... and we'll get that by being patient."

"You won't pay seventeen billion for Australia for twenty years?"

The blunt question made Negus slightly uncomfortable, as it was intended to do. Burrell knew the Harry Negus type. Good subordinates, but scared of changing directions.

Negus always thought first: *What would Mr. Fennel do*? and acted accordingly.

Starways' policy was to wait under the Terran tree for the apples to fall—not to climb the tree, not even to shake the tree. Fennel might have taken the decision to change the policy. Negus wouldn't.

The seventeen billion offer was delicately balanced. On the face of it, twenty years' tenure of Australia for seventeen billion was quite a good bargain. Not a giveaway offer but tempting. On the other hand, twenty years was hardly long enough to get properly started. It would take three years to plan and organize what to do with Australia and another five to do it. Meantime Starways could be reversing the policy of back-pedalling on Terran Tours, advertising and creating vast galactic demand. But with only a limited lease Starways could not offer permanent homes in Australia, only tours as at present, though on a vastly multiplied scale. Outlay on all this, say a thousand billion. Starways would have a gradually

inceasing property stake in hotels and other permanent property in Australia, amounting to thousands of billions by the end of the twenty years.

And then Earth could say: *Price for the next ten years—we won't sign for twenty—is two thousand billion*. Protecting its investment, Starways would have to pay any sum. And be bled by the Terrans, instead of the other way round.

Earth could even say: *You've had your twenty years. That's it. Get out*.

Of course, Starways wouldn't get out, not after making such an investment. Starways would put on the pressure and the Terrans would lose; the Terrans would have to lose. Negus came out in a sweat at the very thought of anything else happening.

Yet even if Starways won, this would entail a complete reversal in policy, fighting instead of waiting. In the end, assuming victory, Starways would get at enormous cost something that would have dropped into the bag, free, if the original patient plan had not been foolishly jettisoned.

And the criminally stupid Starways ex-employee responsible would go down in history with Ethelred the Unready and other figures of fun. Harry Negus didn't want that kind of immortality.

"No," he said deliberately, "I won't."

"Very well," said Burrell with suspicious mildness, and got up to go.

* * *

During the next fifteen days, Negus heard of many approaches by Ram Burrell to many people. Not everybody visiting Paradiso was a millionaire, and some of those who were had stopped trying to make more. But naturally at least twenty percent of the Paradiso people were businessmen with capital to invest, quite often as much as seventeen billion. If they didn't have it, they could arrange credit or a cartel or form a company.

But Burrell got nowhere. Quite often the men he contacted made inquiries, and the invariable consequence of the inquiries was no action.

Negus was relieved, even complacent. His judgment was vindicated. If

Starways, with its monopolistic foothold on Earth, was not interested, nobody else was. And although that was to be expected, it was comforting that even when he generously allowed Burrell to try to drum up opposition under his nose, Burrell failed utterly.

On the sixteenth day Burrell left on the first ship out of Paradiso since his arrival, a ship bound for Marsay.

Negus, who still had a slight uneasiness over the affair, was happy about this. Burrell, having failed to sell Australia in Paradiso, was certainly not going to sell Australia on Marsay. Marsay was a rough, tough, uncultured world; it didn't even have a stock market. If Burrell had waited for a ship to Atlas (though he'd have had to wait much longer), Negus would have remained vaguely uneasy. Atlas was the major financial world in this sector.

* * *

The captain only laughed at first. "Mr. Burrell," he said patiently, "you don't do things like that. In emergency, of course, we'd do everything possible to help the *Silverstream*, but there's no emergency. The fact that we and the *Silverstream* will pass within a million miles of each other is merely an interesting fact released to give the passengers a slight thrill. In deep space, that counts as a near miss. But it's no more feasible to transfer you than the pilots of two supersonic aircraft passing each other in oppposite directions could change seats. You have to understand—"

"How much would it cost?" said Burrell.

The captain laughed again, patiently. "The costs would be astronomical. But that's theoretical. Starships simply don't stop in space, short of the most desperate emergency—"

"It's a matter of fuel and time. You've got plenty of fuel. Passenger-ship regulations demand enormous safety margins. And the time you lose can be made up by using still more fuel. So it comes down to cost of fuel. Which I am prepared to pay."

The captain no longer laughed. He was becoming slightly annoyed. "Mr. Burrell, even if you footed a bill that would come to several millions, my company would send me to the nearest asylum if I did anything resembling what you're suggesting, unless I could show far better reason

than—"

"Unless you could show good reason why you agreed. An advantage to your company. Astrogo. How about something that puts Astrogo one up on Starways?"

The captain became alert and cautious. Starways to Astrogo was whale to minnow. When Starways said: "I'd give worlds for..." it could do just that. Starways owned worlds as well as spaceships, real worlds and worlds like Paradise Worlds were more profitable than spaceships, so Starways continued to run ships, more as insurance against ultimata by other shipping groups than anything else. Starways could put any competitor out of business, but seldom did, preferring to throw crumbs. In different cases Starways would buy companies rather than break them, this being probably not as cheap or easy, but quicker.

"One up?" he queried.

"A place ahead of Starways in the queue."

"What queue?"

"A lucrative one, I promise you."

"Starways would elbow us out of the way, or buy us."

"So?"

The captain was no financial wizard. He saw, however, that his company might be very interested in acquiring the tiniest interest in something Starways might want. Whether Astrogo tried to develop this itself or happily sold out to Starways, Astrogo would want it. The question was: did this blunt, stocky man have anything?

He said: "The question is, what have you got?"

Burrell, for the first time, smiled. "No, it isn't," he said. "The question is, will you take a chance and transfer me to the *Silverstream*—which is going to Atlas. You won't lose. I'll pay the obvious costs. And you *may* gain. Your company may gain. I'll give you a paper saying that if what I'm trying to swing—we'll call it Burrell Enterprises, just to have a name for it—gets off the ground, you'll fly it."

Unlike Harry Negus, the captain was used to making decisions for himself. Certainly there were people above him; but they weren't above him in his bridge.

"All right," he said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

After Earth and Paradiso, Atlas seemed frantic. Big gleaming cars flashed past on six-lane highways; the air above was filled with automatically-controlled fliers—hoppers on the first ten levels, then airtaxis, then planes.

When the shiny cars turned off the freeways, they became fish out of water, gasping for parking places. Burrell, astonished to find the sight so unfamiliar, realized it was two years since he had seen anything like it.

For anyone prepared to walk it was easy to get around, but hardly any adult except Burrell was prepared to walk. There was no time to walk. Only teenagers walked, and they ran. The traffic-dodging game was forbidden to anyone under thirteen, and the eighteen-year-olds had driving licences, so Burrell moved on two legs, slowly and steadily, among darting thirteen- to seventeen-year-olds, and enjoyed it. Fashions had changed, or perhaps Atlas had fashions of its own, scorning the rest of the galaxy. The youths wore loose, floppy trousers and tight black sweaters, and the girls wore tight trunks and loose shirts. Burrell liked this. He hated the unisex fashion scene where it was hard to tell the boys from the girls. The boys' hair was short and the girls' long. He approved.

He went first to the Astrogo building and bullied his way into the cool sanctum of a boss or near-boss, who was a slim young man in the usual floppy trousers and tight black sweater. His name was Alvin Thomas and he was no more than twenty-six.

News had not reached him of Burrell's deal with the Astrogo captain, and he listened politely as Burrell told him about it, and made a note to have the captain transferred to a domestic cattle run.

"No, you won't do that," said Burrell. "You'll promote him. If I tell you something, can I be sure it won't leak?"

"If it's to the advantage of Astrogo that it won't leak, you can be absolutely certain."

Burrell liked the look of Alvin Thomas. He was a man who was going to get on. The only difficulty was how to win and keep his loyalty. Men like Thomas were always getting a better offer.

"Have you ever been to Earth?"

"Yes, on the Starways conducted tour. It's a sad place."

"Not so sad. One or two of us have been stirring up the place. How would you like a piece of Earth?"

Thomas, too, could size up a man. "Let's go out on the roof," he said. "Would you like a drink?"

"No, but would you happen to have a good cigar?"

Thomas would, though he didn't use them.

On the roof, under a striped umbrella, Thomas sipped a martini while Burrell smoked and talked. After a bit Thomas interrupted. "Two things I want to get straight. I'm interested, Burrell, very interested. Before you go any farther, though, I want two straight answers. Did you mean Starways to turn you down? And why are you talking to me—just to get Starways to raise the bid?"

"Of course I made Starways turn me down. I don't just want to make a slight change in Starways' rule of Earth, I want to break it. Completely and permanently. Astrogo just happened to own the ship on which I left Paradiso. A few months ago, I was a crewman on an Astrogo ship—a very different sort of ship—but I've no hard feelings. Astrogo will do as well as anybody else. So I'm here, talking to you, not Silver Lines."

"But if we don't bite, you'll go to Silver Lines."

"Yes."

Thomas grinned. "All right, go ahead."

A waitress from the canteen brought coffee and sandwiches. Her face was nothing to look at, but her legs were. Burrell not only looked, he saw

Thomas looking and saw Thomas seeing him looking. Despite the twenty years' difference in their ages, the understanding between them quickly deepened.

"Who's the man you didn't name earlier?" Thomas asked.

"I'll trust you with the name. But you've got to keep it to yourself. It's Ehrlich, John Ehrlich."

"I guessed that. I've met him."

"I guessed that, too. That's why I'm telling you."

They both grinned.

"Ehrlich's life work has been building up a Terran council with at least theoretical representative powers. Thirty years ago there was no such thing. You couldn't get Terran agreement to anything. The last time anybody got Terran agreement it was Starways... Now at last there is such a council, in Vienna."

"You didn't go there?"

"No, but Ehrlich got a sort of agreement. I told him I had to have something to bargain with. I got Australia. Frankly, I don't know how binding the agreement is, how strong a hold the council in Vienna has over what the Australians will do. But my reading is, most Terrans will do what they're told except in a small part of Scotland. I've been careful not to move in there but somewhere else altogether."

Thomas made himself another drink. Burrell watched shrewdly. He was not prepared to trust any man who was a slave of anything or anybody. He noticed the careful, precise way Thomas made his drink. Hard drinkers didn't care; all they wanted was the kick. Besides, Thomas obviously wanted to remain in full possession of his faculties. Evidently he had reason to believe that he was going to go on doing so.

"Why do it this way at all?" the younger man said. "Shoving Earth deeper into the mire, instead of trying to haul her out of it?"

"Money," said Burrell simply. "Oh, in theory there's no problem. If Earth wants to throw off her shackles, all she's got to do is stand up. But

that's not going to happen."

Thomas nodded, and Burrell asked: "Incidentally, how did *you* feel about it?"

"You can't help those who won't help themselves."

"Why the hell not?"

Thomas raised his hand. "Look," he said gently, "you're doing fine, Burrell. But don't try to browbeat me. I don't browbeat. Now let's go back a couple of squares. I said 'Why do it this way?' and you said 'Money.' Take it from there."

"Earth won't even try to throw off Starways. So we have to. You can only fight Starways with money. And it's got to be billions."

"And even then you'll lose," Thomas said.

"Depends how you go about it. I mean to fight in the stock markets."

Thomas whistled. "Surely where you're most certain to lose?"

"I don't think so. The first thing is to form a company. Burrell Enterprises. But I don't care about the name. Anything—Mother Earth, if you like. Or is that too corny?"

"Astrogo-Burrell-Earth. ABE. Everybody's heard of Abe Lincoln. Use the tie-up. 'He freed the slaves.' "

Burrell thought for a moment and nodded. "All right. Abe. ABE. Now this is where you come in. You've got ships, ships going all over the galaxy. Use them to spread the gospel."

They hammered it out. For Alvin Thomas it was a knife-edge decision in the end. If he had been thirty-one, married, with two young children and heavy mortgages, he'd have said no. As it was, at twenty-six, unmarried, he said yes.

"Astrogo may kick me out," he said cheerfully, "and if that happens I'll come in with you."

Burrell took a glass after all, and they drank to it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

They floated a twenty-billion company in units of 10; it was over-subscribed in a week in Atlas alone.

Starways did nothing.

Astrogo did nothing, for Thomas took care that the real commitment was on Atlas, with him at the head, and the reports that went out to head office in Xanadu would make the top men hesitate. The news that he had managed to acquire a bigger stake in Earth than Starways would prevent anybody from publicly disowning him before finding out more. And it was understandable that he might have had to work fast and decisively.

The prospectus stressed that ABE tourist trips to Earth were unlikely to be a commercial proposition for at least five years. It even hinted that a deal might have to be done with other interests—though Starways wasn't mentioned.

But in one way, ABE, unlike Starways, banged the big drum. The cautious Starways policy of limited tours, limited advertisement was exploded. Everywhere Astrogo ships went from Atlas, somebody on board was empowered to spend money to create interest in Earth.

The first thing Starways did was, predictably, to try to buy the whole of Astrogo. But when it turned out that buying Astrogo didn't necessarily mean control of ABE, Starways backed out, leaving Astrogo directors wondering if they were glad or sorry, but certain of one thing—*they* had to control ABE, whatever ABE was, whether to sell it, develop it themselves or squash it.

The first members of the Astrogo head office court, directors Hebben and Tanner, arrived at Atlas.

Thomas told them: "I think you'll agree, gentlemen, that this opportunity would have been criminal to miss."

Burrell told them: "Sure, we've used your name and facilities. But if you think that means you've got more than a foot in the door, it's time for a rethink. We need a spaceline, but there are other spacelines."

Later, with uncharacteristic stupidity, Starways tried to buy ABE.

Starways should have known, and probably did, that the real antagonists were only Ram Burrell and Alvin Thomas; these two had things sewn up so that they alone could block or accept any such offer. But Starways still believed an open checkbook was the irresistible force.

The Starways bid pushed up the price of ABE shares, nominally 10 and standing at 17, to an incredible 136. When it was rejected, the price dropped to only 131, then climbed to 173 on expectation of a further increased bid.

Burrell and Thomas sold quite a lot at 173. Thomas had started out by being scrupulously honest in all his dealings. He refused to become involved in Burrell's double, triple, and quadruple dealings whereby he retained control of a company with only about a tenth as much of his own money in it as he was supposed to have. "Look, Alvin," Burrell said, not unkindly, "if I were keeping my own personal loot safe in Starways while I was doing this, I'd be a crook. But you know very well that if the cash I've got in the company isn't nearly enough, it's still all I've got."

Thomas saw the point, and after that, he cut a few corners too.

Starways presently changed direction and began to ride on the back of ABE's Earth-boosting propaganda. The Terran Tour traffic was to be enormously expanded. Instead of luxury tours to all seven Starways resorts, Cuba, Malta, Shetland, Hawaii, Sahara, Russia and Tibet, visitors would go to one only, at much cheaper rates. And tours would start from Atlas, Xanadu, Marsay, and Persus.

"I don't like it," said Thomas, putting the cork back in the bottle, which confirmed that he was worried. "That looks like panic. The extra turnover is peanuts. Why does Starways bother?"

"I think," said Burrell, unworried, "we're still seeing Harry Negus at work. You remember, I told you about him. A scared little second-in-command who never thinks,

What's the best thing to do? but *What would the boss do if he were here*? No change in program, just turn up the volume. Negus is boosting what he's got while he's still got it."

Thomas relaxed and took the cork out of the bottle. "You may not always be right, but you always sound as if you are. Am I really a better second than Negus?"

"We're going to have to find out, because it's time I got back to Earth. You'll have to run the show here."

"So I'll run it," said Thomas. "Why back to Earth?"

"For a start, to find out whether we've really got Australia."

Thomas nodded. "That would be nice to know. Provided the answer's yes. What else?"

"For one thing, I've got to make sure Starways doesn't try to pull anything there. For another, it's time we both found out how you'd do without me around."

Thomas looked thoughtful. "I guess I'd be inclined to be like Harry Negus. Always thinking *What would the boss do if he was here*?"

"That's all right," said Burrell smoothly, "when the boss is me."

* * *

Burrell decided it was time for an ABE survey of Australia.

Floating a company, getting the backing of a spaceline, creating interest in Earth, making money, confusing Starways, finding another deputy, had all been necessary. Now that things had been set in motion in Atlas, he was free to return to Roberta, and being free, found himself surprised how much he wanted to.

He wanted to see Roberta again, but he realized that marriage to her, even if it proved possible, was going to be very involved. He was almost reluctant to find what he had been unconsciously seeking all these years. That he would have to be faithful to her was not a problem. He and she were at one in that; while neither would allow jealousy to affect them before they were married, afterwards they, expected exclusiveness.

The ship left just the day before Alvin, as acting head of ABE, received a fantastic write-your-own-terms offer from Starways. The sole snag was

that it was open to one man only. It was openly, deliberately designed to split him and Burrell.

Thomas was tempted. He was fully aware that Burrell had a price. Burrell might say a thing was not for sale, but when the price went up and up he would eventually change his mind. And if Burrell was eventually going to double-cross him, why not doublecross Burrell first?

"Doubting Thomas," he told himself. "Burrell hasn't doublecrossed you yet. It's possible that he never will."

What he did with Starways' quintuple-secret offer was publish it. ABE, having dropped from 173 to 61, where Burrell and he had bought in again, soared to 262. Thomas sold enough to ensure that whatever happened, he would never be poor again. He didn't sell for Burrell, although he had such power. He thought ABE might well go higher.

Since they were not going to build enormous hotels and swimming pools in Australia, they didn't need more capital. Tourists would live rough and cheap. That was if **ABE** ever went into the business at all: ABE was a pistol to be held at certain heads, and Burrell and Thomas shared the secret that it might never be fired.

Massive orders were placed for huts, bunks, and tents for the Pioneer trips to Australia; the *See The Mines* tours, the *Bondi Beach* package, the *Bush Safari*, the *Ghost Towns* trek. Details were still vague but the orders were in and that meant business. People were already signing up by the hundreds of thousands. They were furious when the medical check that ABE required showed that some of them couldn't stand up to the rigors of certain tours.

Doubting Thomas wondered uneasily, as the flood swelled, if Burrell really had any rights in Australia...

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Captain Wagner said for the umpteenth time: "You understand I can't guarantee anything, Mr. Burrell. If you're not at the exact spot at the exact time, I'll try to make contact twenty-four hours later, but—"

"Relax, Wagner. I'm not a spy entering the enemy camp."

"Technically you are. Starways were granted full and exclusive rights in their seven bases, and they're still claiming that the Terrans would grant no rights to anybody else anywhere. We may have a right to land in Australia, at least, *you* say so, but we have no right to land in Starways territory—"

"Edinburgh isn't Starways' territory; Shetland is, and that's hundreds of miles away. In Edinburgh, Starways and ABE have exactly the same rights. None."

"Yet Starways have established a connection—"

"Illegal. They wouldn't even mention it in the courts, because they know we'd shoot it down."

"It's still not too late to go to Australia first, contact the Terrans there, establish a base, and then—"

"So long, Wagner," said Burrell, extending his hand. Wagner was not a bad spaceline captain, and he was not as jittery as he sounded. The trouble was that an Astrogo spaceliner captain, unlike the captain of the *Dirty Cow*, was not used to bending the law every time he landed, every time he took off, and over nearly every cargo he carried and the conditions under which he carried it.

The *Triple Crown* was orbiting at fifty thousand miles, and though this was not illegal, the captain had formally informed Starways' main Terran base on Hawaii of her presence (which Starways could be assumed to have established anyway). However, the captain and Burrell had come down in the tender to a spot in the Firth of Forth only a couple of miles off Edinburgh, and this was of extremely doubtful legality. Despite Burrell's assurances, the captain could not believe that in a civilized world, there were no coastal defenses, no radar, no armed patrol boats. He expected at any moment to be blown up or arrested, and his uneasiness stemmed from his conviction that either would be perfectly justified.

The tender, using its hovercraft facility, was sitting, not floating on the water. This time Burrell had a proper compass, and the little collapsible boat had a tiny motor not dependent on radio power. It would not run out of fuel for weeks. The snag was it could make only three knots at best.

Wagner took Burrell's hand, started to say something, shook his head

and stepped back as Burrell jumped into the boat. In fifteen seconds it was lost in the mist.

The tender heaved itself off the murky waters of the Firth using, paradoxically, the rudimentary deepspace drive it carried rather than ordinary jets, because jets were too visible too far, even in mist.

And Burrell, in the little boat, started the engine and headed southwest. He didn't know the tides and the wind was variable. But he was bound to sight the coast soon and eventually a darker shadow presently became a sandy beach.

With no way of telling whether Edinburgh lay east or west, he turned westwards and soon found a spur of rock. He drove the boat ashore, dismantled it, and searched, in first light, for a place to hide it. On the other side of the rock lay a wrecked fishing boat, just above high-water mark. Closer examination indicated it wasn't a wreck at all, just a boat that had been hauled up on the shore one day while there still was a crew, and left there.

There was evidence of some vandalism, probably by children, and everything useful had long since been stripped from the boat—this seemed to Burrell an excellent reason to hide his own tiny dismantled boat in the wreck, which didn't seem to have been disturbed for years.

When he climbed a flight of old, broken stone steps from the beach and found desolation, he was more than ever satisfied that his boat would be safe where it was.

In the brush there was a road, or what had once been a road. It was a gloomy, misty morning, cold at the coast but warmer as he moved inland. Presently he came to a better road, still used at least on occasion.

This time he was dressed in a dark blue sweater and dark blue trousers, with stout boots. This made it easy for him to pass as a fisherman at the coast, and as an unskilled workman elsewhere.

Although he entered Edinburgh from an unfamiliar direction, he struck southwards, and presently found himself in familiar ground.

The house somehow seemed more forlorn than ever, the dilapidated green door even more dilapidated. But it was still locked, and he had no

key this time. He bent down and felt for the loose stone. Finding the stone but no key, he had a momentary revelation of how important it was to him to see Roberta again. He had taken it for granted that within the next few minutes he was going to see her; he had also taken it for granted, for no reason at all, that all would be settled between them instantly. Now he would have to find Tanya, perhaps go to Glasgow or Newcastle or London or Vienna or wherever else Roberta had gone, but could he take the time with the ship waiting for him, with Australia waiting for him, with destiny waiting for him?

Then as he put the stone back he found the key. He had dragged it out with the stone.

Contrary to what he had assumed, she was still there. He found her upstairs, in bed, awakened by his entry.

"Cindy," he said, and moved closer.

"Hello," she said, pulling up the clothes in front of her. The word, the cool tone and the gesture stopped him.

"You don't seem surprised."

"I knew you were coming, through Ehrlich. He was here two days ago. Starways tracked your ship the moment it entered the solar system."

He would not let her coolness stop him. He sat on the bed and when she pulled the sheets tighter about her he grasped her hands firmly in his and pulled them apart.

Her face, close to his, contorted in the old fury and she hissed at him: "Burrell, if you don't let me go I swear I'll kill you."

He could not let her go. She was twice as desirable as he remembered, and if some third party had intervened at that moment and put it to him reasonably that after being away for more than a year with no messages passed between them he might well win her by patience and lose her by impatience, he would have snapped, "That suits me!"

She was clawing, biting, heaving, kicking. Once before they had fought like this, at Babylon. Then he had not cared particularly about her, and though he naturally considered taking her by force, had been cool enough

to overpower her and talk sense into her.

This time everything was different. He had asked her to marry him, and if she had not exactly said yes, she had not exactly said no either. He was not a word wooer. She would have him or she would not.

It was an epic encounter, though one that could only result in defeat for the girl. When he finally had her slim, pale body pinned and helpless, she still breathed hate and fury up at him.

And he said tiredly: "All right, you win, if you want it that much. Goodbye, Cindy."

He left her, panting, on her back on the tumbled bed.

Burrell was a strong man. He did not weep for the might-have-been. But as he walked down the street toward Tanya's house, he considered the irony behind his many inconsequential sexual conquests; when he had desperately wanted to win, he had met defeat. With that thought, he put Roberta deliberately out of his mind and mentally listed the things he must accomplish in Edinburgh.

Many of the formerly empty houses were occupied again, he noticed. There seemed more people in the streets, and they seemed younger. This must be imagination. The Exile drain meant only a few faces disappearing in any particular locality. Even if nobody had been Exiled in the last year, there would be no perceptible difference.

But another thing struck him even more forcibly as he walked. As the sun came out, so did the people, and the change from a year ago was definite and undeniable.

They had been drab. Even in summer they wore dark clothes, heavy clothes, mended clothes. It had been easy for Roberta (he pursed his lips in annoyance as he felt the twinge of regret) to make an impression because she *tried*, and nobody else did. Tanya and a few others in the Scotland the Brave movement did, but they were atypical anyway.

Now there were bright shirts, bright dresses. A young mother pushing a pram wore the shortest possible dress, its hem just covering her bottom. A young couple walking slowly, entwined, wore His and Hers yellow shorts, and they weren't hikers.

So perhaps, he thought with real pleasure, the rejuvenation of Earth was really under way. In fact, if the surprising number of babies in evidence was anything to go by, the rejuvenation of Edinburgh had begun at least nine months earlier, only a few months after his arrival there. He did not give himself all or even a lot of the credit, which must go to Roberta and Tanya and McVicar and many others. At the same time he felt no false modesty about his part in the change.

A small but determined effort, applied at the right place, could work miracles. It could be the faith that moved mountains.

He had helped to make rebellion fashionable. Now the vast don't-know majority, previously scared not to conform, were beginning to become scared not to rebel. Having a baby was rebellion; arguing was rebellion; going out in the streets instead of staying at home was rebellion; being, looking, pretending to be young was rebellion; wearing yellow shorts was rebellion.

He wondered what Starways thought of it all.

* * *

In Atlas, news of a money crisis far away, deep in the galaxy, sent the stock market reeling. Among the few to weather the storm were Starways, of course, and that lusty infant ABE. Alvin Thomas, well aware that at such a moment confidence was everything, put in new orders, permitted a leak of Burrell's arrival in Australia, and refused to deny rumors that what he had found there exceeded their wildest expectations. The fact that he could not possibly have received any news from Earth yet had no more effect on the rumors than facts ever had in the past.

And then came a stroke of luck, another rumor that Thomas hadn't started because he hadn't thought of it.

Starways was desperately trying to hold on to Earth, the rumor ran. This, if true, meant that Starways needed Earth. That without Earth, Starways profits would plummet.

The story went that Starways agents working from the seven bases on Earth were campaigning hard for Terran support, trying to buy it, trying to force it. And there was a fact along with all the speculation, a fact that was given considerable weight—Starways was now finding it difficult to fill

the vacancies on the existing Terran Tours.

At first, naturally, all publicity about Earth, including ABE's competitive publicity, had sent people rushing to book for the only currently available Terran tours, those of Starways. But there had been a backlash; the first of these people were now returning, not just to Paradiso but to all the other new departure points, and were talking, and the mass media were reporting what they said.

The Starways tour was a fiasco. You never met a single Terran. You were free to see Earth only within the confines of seven small prisons. You might never have left your own world. Sahara wasn't Sahara, Babylon wasn't Babylon and Bagdad wasn't Bagdad.

So would-be tourists were starting to clamor for the new ABE tours. When were they going to start? Was there a guarantee that you would meet Terrans?

Alvin Thomas freely gave the guarantee, knowing Burrell would have done the same thing.

Starways shares began to drop. Those who had started the drop by selling some of their interest wondered uneasily how far it would go. ABE went up to 300, a dizzy figure for shares that had started at 10. Starways dropped from 513 to 499, held there for a time and then climbed above the 500 mark briefly. Then when a statement came from Paradiso in the name of Olaf Fennel, a ringing rallying call, Starways climbed to 514... and thousands of shareholders who had bitten down to the second joints of their fingers thankfully sold.

Starways crashed to 313, whereupon Alvin Thomas, a realist, bought considerably, not only for himself but for Burrell too. And when Starways dropped to 285, instead of regretting his action, he bought more.

At this point Alvin Thomas, a moderately honest young man, got a final last ultimate offer from Starways.

It came direct from Olaf Fennel, and in addition to incalculable cash, which was of less interest to Thomas now he had become a multimillionaire, it offered:

Ironclad life contracts for Burrell and himself as Starways

directors;

Full legal coverage for any of the personal consequences of acceptance;

The post of deputy controller, Terran Tours, for Burrell.

The post of general manager, Paradiso, for Thomas.

And Thomas wanted to say yes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

As Burrell neared Tanya's house he became cautious.

There could be, probably were, Starways infiltrators in Edinburgh. If he and Roberta could pass as Terrans, so could Starways agents. And Starways agents were automatically enemies of ABE.

How far they were prepared to go he had no idea. Starways traditionally was cautious, not so much scrupulously correct and law-abiding as careful never to be caught in anything. The unproven deaths of certain tourists who tried to get away from Terran Tours were a case in point. Probably Starways never deliberately murdered any of these; on the other hand, probably Starways could have saved the lives of many of these people and hadn't moved a finger.

It was by no means impossible that a special case would be made of Ram Burrell. His death would not snuff out ABE, but no doubt Starways would consider it a step in the right direction.

For this reason, when he heard a swift step behind him he sidestepped into a doorway and caught his pursuer firmly.

It was Roberta: a breathless Roberta in a blue shirt and the now fashionable yellow shorts.

He released her. There was no one else about, which had been one of his reasons for suspecting danger. She was flushed and her heaving bosom, as he had noticed more than once before, made her maddeningly attractive to anyone as susceptible as himself.

"Hello again, Cindy," he said.

"You can't leave like that. Leave if you like, but not like that. Not without talking."

"I was prepared to talk, too."

"And I was prepared to listen. Now I'm not so sure."

"But you came after me. In a hurry."

"You were going to Tanya. Don't. Let's go the other way."

"Certainly. Let's make for the sea."

They walked slowly. "Tanya?" he queried.

"Starways contacted her. She decided to appear to cooperate, after a decent period of reluctance. So that she'd have some information about the opposition. We agreed that she would never come near us until Starways suggested it, and apparently that hasn't happened yet."

"Dangerous?"

"We don't know. Starways has a few people here, not many."

"I guessed that."

"They haven't done anything yet but try to get information. We don't mind that. Scotland the Brave has made a lot of progress since you left. Exile is stopped, the birthrate is soaring, and the official councils are very uneasy."

"Don't you want Starways to go on underestimating you?"

"Not any more. If the Starways' top men think they're beaten, they'll surrender."

He nodded. "My idea, too. Cindy, you're coming to Australia."

She shook her head ruefully. "I have too much to do here."

He stopped and grasped her shoulders, not too gently. "Cindy, there's

been enough of this. You're twenty-three now. I'm forty-five. We're running out of time. I'm not letting you go again."

Suddenly she flashed that rare smile and replied, "All right."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm coming with you to Australia."

He wanted to kiss her. But there were people about again, and they were staring. You still didn't make love in public on Earth.

"I'll have to see somebody before I go," she said.

"A lover?"

She smiled slightly. "I'll make you a present of the information that there's been nothing like that for me since you left. I bet you can't say the same."

"If I told you how little there's been," he said, "you'd be surprised. Who do you have to see?"

"Somebody in the movement. Not Tanya. I think George Shirran would be best. You remember, the pianist at the Marimba. He'd better see you too. It does a lot for morale when we have an important visitor. How have you been making out?"

He told her and discovered that despite Ehrlich's visit, she knew very little of events beyond Paradiso. Of course, in Paradiso, the strength of the ABE challenge had been played down.

She wanted to return to the house for clothes and other things; literally all she had with her was what was visible.

"You couldn't have taken long to come to your senses," he said, deliberately controversial.

"You didn't,take long to lose yours," she retorted. "One thing we've got to get clear, Burrell. I will never be forced. Not even if I marry you."

"I hoped you wouldn't need to be forced."

"You can hope what you like. Don't do it, that's all." She added wickedly, "It will be unnecessary anyway."

* * *

They saw George Shirran, and while Roberta took the opportunity of washing her face, an action omitted in her rush, Burrell warned the man not to trust anything the group might hear about him and ABE through Starways.

"They won't let through a single thing that will boost your morale," Burrell said. "On the contrary, they'll tell you ABE is failing, that I'm selling out—"

"And are you going to sell out?" Shirran asked bluntly.

"My partner, Alvin Thomas, would like to. My guess is that at this moment he's sorely tempted. But he doesn't have Australia."

"Do you?"

"That's what we're going to find out."

"Don't sell out, Burrell. If you do, it'll be the end."

"Nonsense."

"You mean you're thinking about it?"

"I mean I'm not thinking about it. What the hell do you think I was doing here? I didn't need Scotland the Brave; I met Ehrlich before I even came to Earth. I might have swung the Australian deal without ever coming to Edinburgh, much less staying for months—"

"We know Cindy won't desert us," said Shirran steadily. "I'm not so sure about you. We need you, Burrell. We'll need you for a long time yet."

* * *

Burrell bought a sleeping bag, one sleeping bag, and then they called on a young minister, a Scotland the Brave adherent, and were married. There was no difficulty except residential qualification, which the young minister knew Roberta had. And in Burrell's case he ruled that Burrell's

previous stay made him a resident of the capital.

"Roberta Burrell," Roberta said, trying it for the feel of it, and made Burrell promise to call her Roberta, not Cindy. Half an hour later she reversed this and stopped calling him Ram, which she felt as ever was impossible, and went on calling him Burrell.

They were not cold, huddled in the sleeping bag on the beach under the ruined boat, and Roberta slept for several hours in his arms, though Burrell, not a nervous type, never did more than doze briefly. They had to make contact with the ship, which meant setting out in the dinghy at three a.m. Fortunately the sea was calm and the night clear.

At three it was dark but already the sky was beginning to lighten. In order to keep warm, Roberta did all the heavy work, succeeding so well that she was glowing by the time they were under way. In Edinburgh the days were not nearly as hot as in Babylon, but the nights not nearly as cold.

Their earlier voyage was recalled as Roberta said: "I'm not complaining, Burrell, of course, but I wish as captain of this boat you'd take steps to provide breakfast and scalding hot coffee."

"I thought of it, but breakfast will be far better on a luxury sundeck in the *Triple Crown* after a quick bath."

"If we get to the *Triple Crown*. I wish I were as confident as you of making contact. You've got a decent compass this time and a motor, but how you can be sure of being in a precise spot—"

"See that?" he pointed. "The lights of Edinburgh. That's why I was praying there wouldn't be a fog. Over there, lights on the other side of the firth. Burntisland—remember, we held a meeting there. We'll be picked up on a line between them. The engine bleeps a signal every ten seconds."

She relaxed. "You might have told me that before."

"You didn't ask."

"I was scared to ask."

"Cindy, I don't think you're scared of very much."

"Burrell, it's time you knew at least one thing about your wife. I'm often scared. I'm often scared stiff."

"You're not boasting, Cindy," he said quietly, "but you could be. If you can be scared stiff and nobody knows it, you've got twice as much courage as some dope like me who hasn't the sense to be scared."

The pickup was made without any trouble. By eight o'clock, to the relief of Captain Wagner, they were speeding toward Australia and Mr. and Mrs. Burrell were eating grapefruit and drinking hot coffee.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The tender landed on the sea and hovered there, not off the formerly populous east coast of Australia, but in a bay in Western Australia.

"What happens now?" Captain Wagner asked.

Burrell said: "We wait."

Wagner wanted to know more, with good reason, but as Burrell told Roberta when he had left them: "The less I tell him that turns out to be wrong, the better."

"You haven't told me very much."

"Cindy, Ehrlich fixed this, not me, and he fixed it in Vienna, which is a lot nearer Edinburgh then Vienna is to Australia. There were a few Australians in Vienna, and they were supposed to come back here and fix something. With luck, they succeeded."

"So all this has been a colossal gamble? If the people here don't know anything about any deal, we're sunk?"

"Not necessarily. I never got a written agreement, but I got a list of names I memorized—Singer, Sprott, Holly, Campbell, Timson, Smith, Mackay, Wilier, Raeper, Brock, Savage, Jensen. I get them together and I'll be able to do some sort of deal. So Ehrlich said."

Within an hour a small boat came out, and five minutes later Burrell and Roberta were in the tender's tiny bar with Ian Wilier and Denis Jensen. Both were tall and bronzed, the best physical specimens they had

seen among Terrans.

"Yes, we've heard of you, Burrell," said Wilier, drinking whisky. "What do you want?"

Jensen, drinking beer, couldn't keep his eyes off Roberta.

"First," said Burrell briskly, "what do *you* want?"

They fenced for several minutes, Wilier knocking back whisky with great rapidity and no perceptible effect, and Jensen, mesmerized, staring at Roberta.

She was dressed cautiously in a white suit with a Iongish skirt. Her brief was to listen, not say too much, and come in if Burrell needed her, in any of her several capacities.

Presently Wilier admitted that they wanted people.

"Australia has always needed people," he said, the whisky loosening his tongue at last. "Except for the Hundred Years. We started off with rabbits, kangaroos, and convicts. Now there are no rabbits, no kangaroos, and no convicts. The Aborigines got integrated, which was the worst thing that ever happened to them. If they hadn't got integrated, they'd have had the whole of Australia now. Instead, nobody has it."

Now that Wilier was speaking freely, Burrell didn't understand much of what he said.

Fortunately, Wilier went back to it. "That was the bad time, the Hundred Years," he said. "Crook for everybody. We still had a big, empty country. The whole world, but especially the whites, overflowed on us. We didn't put up the barriers until it was far too late..."

This was interesting, and though it didn't appear to be getting them anywhere, Burrell let it flow.

Australia, always a land of pioneers, was the first to decant. The world's problems ran their course in Australia faster than anywhere else. A vast sparsely-populated country suddenly became a frantically-overcrowded country, with natural resources strained to the limit. Equally suddenly, it emptied again, with nobody to work the machines or the land... a sheep

country again, with nobody to buy the wool or mutton.

"We need people," said Wilier simply.

The Australians did not want, as Burrell had been led to believe, money, assistance, transportation elsewhere. They wanted, once again, not tourists, but people to come in and work, build houses, get the country started again.

"The idea was to bring in tourists," Burrell said slowly, "but many will stay, if you want them. Many Terran Exiles would come back."

Speaking for almost the first time, Jensen said: "They'd have to bring tools, machines, labor—"

Roberta rewarded him with a smile and entered the conversation too. "They'll bring everything, Denis."

"Girls like you, Mrs. Burrell?"

"Not so much among the settlers. They'll be older. Among the tourists, yes." She kept on her prim white jacket. Perhaps it was time to start acting like a wife. She didn't know how Burrell would act if she gave him good cause for jealousy, but she strongly suspected he would quite simply hit her.

Poor Jensen. Were the Aussie girls really so awful? (She soon found out they were not awful at all; indeed they were magnificent creatures. Jensen, like many another man, was bowled over by the different, the exotic.)

When they went ashore they saw something of the ruin of Australia.

Burrell had feared Starways propaganda, knowing that Starways was in touch with many Terran communities through radio. But Hawaii was a long way from Eastern Australia; the whole of the continent lay between Sydney, Brisbane, Canberra and his new friends. There was no inter-continental communication at all.

The area round the bay was lush and friendly, with trees and flowers and shrubs and plenty of fresh water. But the conditions in which the small community of Bindarra (population 970) lived made Edinburgh seem more than ever like the Athens of the North.

The Bindarrans had not gone back to nature. They could all read and write. From a generator adapted to run on wood, they had electric light. They used knives and forks. They had cattle and vegetables and fruit.

But as supplies failed, skills lost had not been redeveloped. Roberta soon discovered that one of the main reasons why she had created such a sensation with Denis Jensen was that Bindarra lacked cloth. There were sheep and they had wool, but very little skill in manufacturing. There was no cotton, no linen, of course no nylon. Some of the girls wore grass skirts, a practical and sensible idea. Evidently nobody knew how to weave wool into tweed.

The golden amazons of Bindarra strode proudly in brief woollen clothes and grass skirts, but they had nothing to wear to compete with Roberta's elegant dresses and suits of fine cloth, some from Edinburgh. And Roberta stressed the difference. Instead of wearing the shorts and suntops she had been inclined to favor in other warm and not so warm places, she left them to the amazons and appeared instead in a succession of cool whites and pastels, rarely showed her legs or her midriff, and when she did feel like making eyes pop, chose plunging necklines or see-through blouses, which were not in the Australian girls' repertoire.

Bindarra was the only known settlement in a radius of five hundred miles. The nearest town was Perth, nearly a thousand miles away.

"You know, of course," Roberta whispered, "that agreement with this lot doesn't mean a damn thing. I haven't got my slide rule handy, but I'd say you've got about 0.0001 percent of an Australian mandate."

"It's good enough," Burrell said. "It bloody well has to be."

CHAPTER THIRTY

"I sometimes wonder," said Wilier thickly, two months later, "if all you've brought us is corruption. We used to make spirits that seemed fiery enough, but this whisky of yours is three times as strong. You've set up a brewery; your men have fixed the generator, and with more power to play with we've started making washing machines. Now everybody has to have a washing machine. We're weaving cloth again; the women all want new clothes. We're canning food; soon we're going to need somebody to sell it to. Money scarcely mattered. Some of us never bothered with it. Now

everybody has to make money."

"It's the start of what you wanted, Ian," said Roberta patiently. "Soon tourists will come. And they'll spend money, lots of it."

"These 'native crafts' you've started," Wilier sneered. "We're making artificial ersatz substitute native carvings of fertility gods and boomerangs we never heard about before. We're sticking fancy stones on boxes—"

"The tourists will snap them up. Tourists want to spend money. If there's nothing to spend it on, they're frustrated."

Roberta and Burrell had proved a good team to get such projects going, she with her zero practical rating and vast theoretical knowledge, he with immense practicality and a vast store of ignorance. The crew of the *Triple Crown*—the tender had brought them all down, leaving only a skeleton maintenance section on the orbiting ship—worked willingly and enthusiastically on different projects, doing it for fun though they would have resented being ordered to do things so different from their normal skills.

Wilier sighed. "Things go crook for me when I drink. Maybe you and Burrell are the best thing that ever happened to us. Only it's not like I expected."

"Things never are," she said.

She liked the Aussies, finding in them an individuality which had been lacking in Edinburgh. She found it rather sad that the ABE expedition was already eroding their individuality.

"One thing I got to admit," Wilier said. "You certainly made the women better to look at."

Roberta smiled but did not point out that it went deeper than that. Arguably, the big tanned Bindarran girls had seemed more naturally attractive before the *Triple Crown* came. But the Bindarran men didn't think so. Vital ingredients had been lacking... elegance, daintiness, mystery, deliberate provocation.

"You know everything," said Wilier, pouring more whisky. "Why've we got more women than men?"

Roberta answered, "We've found that in small isolated communities in the galaxy—where a group gets lost for a century or two until galactic exploration links up with them again—more girls are born. Nature's idea seems to be that in a small group the more childbearers the better. One male can impregnate umpteen females. Only it doesn't often work out that way. Monogamy is seldom abandoned. In fact, there's a lot of evidence that small isolated groups tend to die out rather than get bigger. They cling to non-survival customs, whatever nature is trying to do, and the tribe gets smaller, not bigger."

Wilier nodded. "Like us," he said gloomily.

A door crashed open, and Quillon, the *Triple Crown's* third radio man, dashed out on the veranda. "Where's Mr. Burrell?" he asked breathlessly.

"Away in the jeep somewhere. He won't be back for hours. What's the matter?"

Quillon was tall, thin, red-haired, impulsive and very young. He looked at Wilier, and Roberta could see him belatedly coming to the conclusion he should have spoken to her quietly and privately instead of virtually making a public announcement that something had happened.

"It's a message," he said lamely. "For Mr. Burrell, and it's personal."

"A message? A radio message? From the *Triple Crown*?"

"Relayed by the *Triple Crown*."

"But that can't be. There's nothing and nobody in space near enough to—"

"Spit it out, man," said Wilier. "Or I'll start to think you've got secrets from us."

"Go ahead," said Roberta. It might have been better if Quillon hadn't given Wilier a hint. Now that he had, it was too late.

"It's from Hawaii. In the name of Starways. Picked up by the *Triple Crown* and passed on. They want to speak to Burrell. Only Burrell."

"You didn't acknowledge?"

"No."

"Quite right. So they don't know where we are?"

"They know it's Australia. But they seemed to think *Eastern* Australia."

"That's fine. If they think that, they don't know much. Keep listening, but don't answer."

"What does that mean?" Wilier asked, when Quillon had gone.

"I haven't the slightest idea. "But they'll call again."

They did. Four hours later. Burrell and Roberta waited in the radio hut with Quillon. Hawaii had promised to come on the air at 18.30 hours with a message for Burrell.

"Total surrender?" Roberta said, raising a quizzical eyebrow.

"Hardly. They wouldn't surrender this way, but in the boardroom."

There were preliminary crackles. Then a clear voice said: "Burrell, you're probably hearing this. We want you to answer, but we don't suppose you will until we give you good reason. Is the fact that Alvin Thomas is in Paradiso now good enough?"

Burrell nodded to Quillon and took the microphone. "You just want to know where we are," he said. "Well, this won't help you, because we're relaying through the

Triple Crown and we don't mind your knowing where she is."

There was new interest in the clear voice when it replied: "I'm Nathan, remember me? I took you back to Shetland. We talked. My employers don't expect you to trust me, but they think you'll trust me more than anybody else."

"Fair enough. What am I to trust you about?"

"We know you were in Edinburgh. We know you married Roberta Murdock there. We assume, frankly, that you haven't totally failed in Australia. I'm putting our cards on the table, Burrell. We don't know exactly where you are, but we can track the *Triple Crown* and we know

you've been somewhere in Australia for two months. How are you doing?"

"All right."

"You'd say that anyway, but I believe you. You wouldn't have stayed three weeks unless you were working on something. Burrell, Starways wants you in Paradise To do a deal. Alvin Thomas is there; Olaf Fennel and Harry Negus are there. It has to be possible to work something out."

"On what lines?"

"Well, I wouldn't know, would I?"

No, he wouldn't. Burrell toyed with the idea of insisting that any deal about Earth should be made on Earth. He could make Fennel and Negus come to Australia, bringing Alvin Thomas with them. It would give him a psychological advantage and more time to consolidate.

His eyes met Roberta's, and he knew she had guessed what he was thinking. First, there was no harm in talking. She nodded her head. He had deliberately brushed Starways off at the beginning, making an offer Negus would refuse. And later he had virtually ignored Starways approaches. But this time...

He made stabbing motions at the ground and looked a question at Roberta. This time she shook her head and he nodded. One big disadvantage of getting the others here was that they would know too much. They'd have a chance to see how tiny a toehold Burrell had, and talk to Jensen and Wilier and all the other Bindarrans.

"All right," he said. "I'll go to Paradiso. But you'll have to take me. My wife and me. The *Triple Crown* stays here meantime."

Roberta's eyes widened at that, and she looked doubtful. To leave Wagner and his men in charge at Bindarra didn't seem a very good idea. Also, it would make Burrell and Roberta dependent on Starways for transport.

Burrell said casually: "We'll only trouble you for a oneway trip. Astrogo ships are calling at Paradiso all the time. If we do reach agreement, it will be important enough to make it worthwhile diverting a ship; either back here or to Atlas."

"You'd have to get to one of our bases, and go back with the next batch of tourists."

"Fine. Let's make it Hawaii, I can be there in three hours."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The conference was most select. Just six people were present—no stenographer, no tape recorder.

There was a certain amount of maneuvering before they started, Fennel and Negus trying under pretense of extreme urgency to get the conference under way the moment Burrell arrived, to prevent him conferring with Alvin Thomas. Burrell went along with this outrageous piece of finagling because Starways wanted to exclude Roberta; he wanted her in. Faced with a straight though unspoken deal, that Burrell would give up conferring if Roberta was in, Negus, left holding the baby, said that would mean three to two. Then, still with no help from his boss, he suggested calling in John Ehrlich as a Terran observer.

"Fine, that'll be three-three," said Burrell, and they let him get away with that, though they must know that Ehrlich's allegiance was, to say the least, equivocal.

The impatience of the Starways pair to get started made Burrell wonder... stock market news, maybe? A complete surrender by Alvin Thomas? Thomas looked guilty and uneasy, but he evidently wanted to talk to Burrell first, which didn't look like a sellout. No, probably Fennel merely felt as many businessmen felt that rushing the other side meant he kept the initiative.

Burrell was prepared to let him go on thinking so.

Fennel was a tall man with an egg head and an egghead manner. He looked and sounded like a professor.

"Mr. Burrell," he said, "I will not attempt to conceal from you the fact that your operations have caused us considerable financial anxiety. Starways doesn't like conflict—"

"Garbage," said Burrell deliberately.

"Please do not be offensive."

"Then don't talk garbage. What do you want?"

"A settlement."

"Easy. You move out of Earth."

"We may, perhaps, do that."

This was news to Ehrlich. Despite the need for him to remain apparently a friend of Starways, he sat up sharply and stared incredulously at Fennel.

It was not news to Alvin Thomas; he was tugging Burrell's jacket under the table.

Burrell needed no warnings.

"That would be very friendly of you."

"We might be prepared to sell you our entire interest in Earth, with all the fittings, as it were." He laughed at his joke. "As I said, we don't like conflict. And this matter of Earth, an infinitesimal affair among Starways' myriad enterprises, of virtually no importance whatever, cannot be allowed to—"

"More garbage. You didn't build Paradiso on Earth's doorstep for nothing. Not one in a thousand of Paradiso visitors goes on to Earth... *now*. But you've got plans for the future about that, haven't you?"

This time Fennel was equal to the occasion. "We are prepared to sell Paradiso to you. In fact, we insist on it."

"I begin to see. Paradiso's about twenty years old now. Has it started to make a profit yet?"

Fennel looked at Negus, bringing him in. Negus coughed, shot an anxious glance at his chief, decided he was supposed to answer and answer truthfully, and said: "Last year the capital costs were paid off. Paradiso was the biggest investment ever made in tourism—"

"I know about that. What's all this going to cost?"

"It would be a matter for prolonged negotiation, naturally," said Fennel blandly. "But if we agree in principle—"

"If we agree in principle," retorted Burrell grimly, "ABE will be saddled with a burden calculated to break its back. Then Starways, that patient dragon, will devour the dying victim."

Fennel, who had thought he was gaining the ascendancy, was taken aback by Burrell's succinct analysis.

"There is an attractive alternative," he said hurriedly, before he was quite ready. "Your partner, Mr. Thomas, finds it most tempting."

He explained the offer Alvin Thomas had found tempting.

"Burrell," said Thomas deliberately, "he's told you the truth. I do find it tempting. I'd like to say yes. But I haven't said yes. We're totally uncompromised."

"Of course," Burrell murmured, slightly surprised, as if nothing else had ever crossed his mind.

"In other words," said Roberta, "sell Earth out."

"At a very considerable profit," said Fennel.

"As an ex-Terran," Ehrlich intervened smoothly, "I am slightly baffled by the necessity for either of you to have everything... why must it be complete control for Starways or ABE—a monopoly? If Earth is going to benefit—and surely that's part of the idea—won't Earth benefit more by having two friends instead of one?"

Neither Fennel nor Negus rushed to answer that one.

Roberta picked it up: "I've been on Earth, as you know. Earth will benefit greatly from ABE development. Earth has been suffering, in fact dying, under Starways control. Any takeover by Starways would be a sellout."

"It's quite wrong," said Fennel quietly, "to think we've been oppressing Earth. On the contrary—"

"On the contrary," Roberta retorted, "you've been cooperating

wholeheartedly in the Terrans' policy of bleeding themselves to death."

Burrell said: "Nevertheless, the Starways offer, if modified slightly, is far more interesting than this nonsense about ABE taking over Earth and Paradise Or even Earth without Paradise"

"It is?" said Harry Negus, slightly dazed.

Roberta said nothing, looking steadily at Burrell.

"We understood," Fennel added, "that you are a very obstinate man, Mr. Burrell. However, if you're prepared to talk about this—"

Burrell said directly to Fennel: "I said, if modified slightly. I want control on Earth. Policy control. For life."

Fennel shook his head. "Starways never gives anything as far-reaching as policy control of an entire planet to a single man. You could become a dictator, a tyrant. Besides, the effect on Starways—"

"Because I don't look like one and don't act like one, a lot of people seem to have difficulty in seeing that *I'm a businessman*. I can make a lot of money for you."

"Living on Earth?"

"Partly. Mostly. But with occasional trips to Paradiso and Atlas."

"Let's have some straight talking," said Fennel, at which Burrell nearly laughed aloud, and Alvin Thomas did. "Aren't you some sort of messiah? Haven't you promised the Terrans you'll lead them to freedom?"

"Yes," said Roberta. "He is and he has."

Fennel looked at Ehrlich. "As you sent him to Earth hoping he'd be."

So they had rumbled Ehrlich.

"Perhaps," Ehrlich admitted. "But I'm interested in this. Starways redeveloping Earth. With Burrell in charge. I'd be prepared to help him."

"But not just to make money," said Roberta.

Burrell spoke to her directly. "Yes, to make money. I told you long ago that was the only way it could be done. Campaigns founded on love and kindness and charity flop. Campaigns on a firm commercial basis succeed."

Ehrlich nodded.

Burrell turned back to Fennel. "All you want is to make money from Earth, without risk, without trouble. How it's done you don't really care. I'm offering you a way."

"We take over ABE but you retain control?"

"Of Earth. You get ABE."

"I can't agree to that," said Alvin Thomas.

"I thought you very nearly agreed to less?"

Thomas hesitated, and then said: "I guess I never saw you selling out, Burrell. Anything I said or thought was against that background."

Burrell grinned. "So it's you that's the idealist, not me."

"What bothers me about this," said Negus, since Fennel stayed silent, thoughtful, "is that we'd be changing our entire policy—"

Fennel interrupted impatiently: "Starways has always been prepared to change its policy. Selling ABE Paradiso and the Earth interests would have been a bigger policy turnabout than appointing Burrell controller on Earth. What bothers me is the responsibility we'd be giving you. I suppose we can take it for granted that you'd want ironclad contracts—"

"Including strong protection against your contesting my sanity," Burrell agreed. "Also, I want my wife as deputy."

"Not Thomas here?"

"He wants to run Paradiso. Let him."

There was a great deal more talk. But in the end, guarded general agreement was reached.

Without Roberta. She didn't say another word.

* * *

They went back to the pool where they had first met, and this time, browned by the Australian sun, Roberta didn't need a sunfilter dress but wore it just the same, trying to make a last fleeting contact with the Roberta Murdock who had never met Ram Burrell.

"You spoke very plainly, Cindy," he said, "and then you suddenly stopped."

"I don't like it. To me it's still a sellout. Was it really impossible to buy Paradiso and the Earth interests?"

"Yes. I'd die in debt. That was the idea. When you reckon that Paradiso—and look at the money being spent in it—has taken twenty years to pay off the capital cost, and that I'd have to pay all that back, plus a stiff valuation of Earth interests, plus our own development costs—"

"I see. But this way—can you tell me honestly that you haven't been bought?"

He had indeed been bought, for far more than any sports' ace or movie star. However, he had no difficulty in understanding what she meant.

"I may have sold myself," he admitted, "but I haven't sold anybody else. The shareholders will be perfectly happy. So will Astrogo."

"But, the Terrans. You'll have to milk them to make Starways rich."

"Sure. And they'll love it."

"They'll only have changed one servitude for another."

"Cindy, you know what Bindarra needs. Tourists. Money. New blood. Settlers. Life. Then the Aussies on the east coast will want the same."

"I know. But I'm disappointed. This wasn't what *I* was working for."

"I told you more than a year ago. The only way to beat Starways was in the boardroom. In the stock market. Well, I've done it."

"You haven't beaten Starways."

"I've got Earth."

She nodded. "Far more than Alexander, Napoleon, Genghis Khan, Hitler, Caesar ever possessed; you've got Earth. I wonder if you can be trusted wtih it?"

"You'll be with me."

"I've never been able to sway you. You know that."

"Sahara."

"That was only pointing out what you didn't see."

"Are you going to stop pointing out things I don't see?"

"Is this what you really want?" she asked doubtfully.

"Cindy, I never wanted anything more. It's a big job, a tough job. I'll have to be tough—"

"You'll find that easy."

His hand moved gently up her thigh, over her hip. The sundress was a filter and little more. She smiled at him.

She would have to give this man a child, perhaps more than one. He was someone very special, to her and many millions of other human beings, and she had to do her best for him.

For Ram Burrell was ruler of the world.