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Horace McCool was a serious-minded junior tycoon, and he was suddenly and wildly infatuated with Yum-Yum, a trip-tape entertainer with a rock-group called The Trippers. He'd never met her, but Horace vowed to follow her to the moon if he had to, just to find out who she was.

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THE PROXIMA PROJECT

John Rackham

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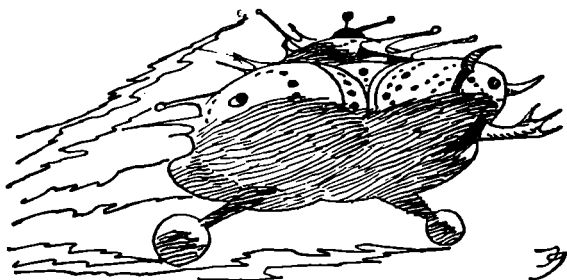
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I

THE HEAVY conference room door sighed shut after the last of the departing council members. Alexander McCool, Managing Director of McCool Financing, reached into his pocket, produced a pale lemon-colored envelope, slid it onto the table surface where his son could see it.

"Since you saw fit," he said, "to pass this memo to me sealed I assume you want it kept private."

Horace McCool sighed. The old man looked as implacable as ever, as if composed of flesh-colored plastic and cash-register mechanisms. This was not going to be easy. He nodded and the old man went on.

"So you want to quit the firm. Tell me why."

"Quit?" Horace's shocked surprise brought his voice out in a shrill squeak. "Who said anything about quitting?"

"What else does this mean, damn it?"

"Oh Lord!" Horace sagged, tried to reorganize his mind into the carefully prepared persuasion he had rehearsed, abandoned the effort, let it come out in a flat blurt. "I want to get married!"

The room filled with a tiptoe silence. The old man's face became more mask-like than ever as he peered at his son under down-drawn brows.

"Get married, eh? Just like that?"

"I've done this all wrong—"

"Don't back down now. You're thirty and your own master in a lot of things, including this. I don't recall asking my father's permission when I got married, either. But I didn't spring it on him cold!"

"Look!" Horace felt red-faced and juvenile. "Let me explain. I've not even met her yet, don't even know her name. Her real name, that is. That's why I need time off. I've got a lot to do."

"Taking a lot for granted, too. How d'you know she's going to give you a second look?"

"I refuse to think about that. I intend to meet her, get to know her, and then—then—"

"All right," the old man gruffed in his throat. "That'll do. No need to tell me any more. Here"—he grabbed the memo, scribbled on it—"that's the simple bit. Made provision for your office work?"

"My secretary can handle anything routine. I've instructed her to pass anything unusual along to Forbes, or even to you."

"All right, go ahead and make a fool of yourself. Come back when you're ready to invite me to the wedding. There's a lot more I could say, and you know it, but we'll leave it there."

Horace went thankfully. He knew only too well there was a lot more that might have been said. For all its democratic appearance, McCool Financing was very much the property and possession of one man, old Alexander, and he, Horace, was the only son and heir. He knew the business inside and out, had brought to it a flair for being able to pick those lines of new endeavor that would benefit most from an injection of capital, and was in many ways indispensable by now. But, for the first time in his life, his eye and mind were full of a certain lithe and lively shape, with snapping rhythm and fluid grace, flame-red curls, blazing blue eyes and a voice that brought cold shivers to a nervous system hitherto under complete self-control. How to explain all that to his father? He was glad to escape without having to.

Left alone in the conference room the old man scowled into space. "Damn young fool," he muttered. "That's no way to do it." His wrist-phone bleated at him and he answered it snappishly.

"Forbes here," it said briskly. "Those up-to-date figures on the new hovercraft development—"

"Forget them. Listen. Who is Mr. Horace's personal secretary right now?"

After a ten-second pause the voice stated, "A Miss Horne."

"I want her full dossier in my office at once, and I'll see her as soon as Mr. Horace has left the building."

Fifteen minutes later he looked up from the dossier as she entered his office and waited. The stare did not reassure him. She was butter-blond beautiful, twenty-four, and even her silver-gray hip-length smock and matching skintights—her formal office wear—could do little to diminish her outrageous curves. And, from her dossier, she was the only daughter of a Midwest sanitary engineering millionaire. He prepared to do battle with her.

"Sit down," he invited. "I've been looking you up. You've come up in the business fast. Ability. Good record. A worker."

"Thank you, sir."

"I'm curious. With your background and looks, why work at all?"

"That's easy." Her smile went away. "My mother didn't want me to do anything at all. My father didn't think I knew how. Nobody would believe I was any good for anything except to be looked at, and someday get married to some suitable man. So I decided to show them!"

"Why not in your father's business?"

"That wouldn't have proved anything, would it?"

"I see." The old man concealed his wince at this personal shot. He revised his first estimate swiftly. This girl was not the object of his son's amours, though she might well have been. And she had backbone, some initiative. He nodded to himself.

"My son has warned you that he will be far away from business for some time, I take it? Very well, I have a commission for you. I'll be frank. I've reason to believe some woman has got her hooks into Horace. I want you to find out who, and then everything you can about her."

"But that is hardly my business, sir. A spy?"

"You're a McCool employee, Miss Horne. Your first loyalty is to the firm. You must see that this can be very important. The wrong kind of woman could ruin him, and do the business a great deal of harm."

"I suppose so—"

"That's settled, then. You'll be replaced. You'll have authority to command all our resources. Keep me informed."

She went away slightly confused, but with one conviction, one she had decided not to pass on. She felt sure she knew

who the woman was, and that knowledge, she felt equally certain, could be used to her own advantage. Back in her office she settled down to think out just how, to make plans, to check back, mentally, to a moment three weeks ago, in her official lunch hour.

Like so many more, she had her own portable Magic Box. The Trippers' latest tape had come in the mail that morning, direct from the publishers. So, in the security of her lunch hour, she had settled down to listen to it. And, of course, Horace McCool had come in unexpectedly and caught her at it. "Caught" was the operative word, because once you were tuned in to Magic Box you were out of this world altogether. The first she knew was when she lifted off the darkened goggles with a sigh of satisfaction and saw him standing there watching her.

"I'm surprised at you, Miss Horne," he said, with just the hint of emphasis on the "you," and a tone full of condescension.

"It is my lunch hour," she told him, rather tartly.

"I was not suggesting that you were wasting the firm's time, Miss Horne, only your own. On that rubbish."

"Rubbish?" Her indignation overcame her official discretion. There were *other* jobs to be had. "Rubbish? Have you ever heard a trip-tape?"

"Certainly not. I prefer to listen to real music properly played over quality equipment!"

"I see!" She knew she was too far gone now to back down, so let him have it completely. "In fact, then, you don't know what you are talking about, do you, Mr. McCool?" And she started replacing the equipment in its box, prepared for instant dismissal. But he had hesitated.

"One moment, Miss Horne. I like to think myself a reasonable person. Convince me that I am wrong and I will admit it."

She dwelt on that moment now. She had helped him into the gear, the mask-goggles that were blackened outside and inner-lined with three-dimensional full-color holograph screens, with the ear-hooks that carried solid-state micro-sized loudspeakers to feed the sounds right into your head by bone-conduction. Then the ear-plugs to shut off the outside world. And then plug in the current, drop in the cartridge, and he was off, wrapped in sound, movement, light and color. A psychedelic, out-of-this-world trip, but minus the dubious chemistry. And it had been a three-minute shock for him. She knew by the way his hands had clamped on to his chair.

Then, when it was over, she had helped him off with the goggles and waited a sympathetic moment before putting him to the question. After all, she thought, all he had ever heard previously was old-fashioned multi-track stuff from loud-speakers arranged about a room. This was different.

"Well?" she demanded, after he had done gasping and blinking. "You still think it's rubbish?"

"It's impressive." His voice sounded rusty, as if from disuse. "All that depth of sound. And the effects are almost hypnotic. But," and he struggled for recovery of stature, "hardly original, after all. What's the title? 'Some Far Star.' I see. Rather freely based on the first movement of Holst's 'Planet Suite.' Very ambitious for a bunch of youngsters. I don't wonder you were impressed, Miss Horne."

"Oh well." She started again to pack the gear away in the box lid. "We all have our own standards, I suppose."

"I have admitted to being impressed," he murmured. "What more do you want? Tell me, Miss Horne, are they all like that? Those tapes?"

"More or less. That was The Trippers, of course, and they are the utter most. The other groups—The Smash, The Golden Boys, the Mad Moonsters, lots of others—they aren't in the same class."

"And that girl? Is she part of that group?"

Something about his voice had alerted her ear. She had learned to be sensitive to nuances like that.

"Yum-Yum? She always sings and dances with The Trippers."

"What's her real name?"

"No one knows." At his snort of disbelief she retorted sharply, "That's the truth. The Trippers are Jim, Jem, and Johnny, and she is just Yum-Yum, and that's all. That's the way they like it."

"But someone must know their real identities, surely?"

"No, they don't," she assured him. "Look, they have only once ever been interviewed on TV, over a year ago, and it was Johnny who said then, for all of them, 'We're just performers. If the kids like what we do in public, that's fine. But what we do in private stays private. That's the way we want it.' And that's the way it is."

"But surely," he argued, "these people thrive on publicity?"

"Professionally, yes. But I have a private life, Mr. McCool. So do you. Why shouldn't they?" She was tempted to refer him to the Beatles of ancient fame, and what publicity had done to their private lives, but there was a glint in his eye that kept her quiet and curious.

"I'm intrigued," he admitted. "I wish to know more. After all, McCool Financing is communication, and this is a form of communication, too. So, you will procure for me some equipment like this, and a supply of recordings. Particularly of this group and that girl."

That nuance again. *That* girl. Miss Horne nodded to herself. So far, so good. The old man, of course, would be horrified if and when he found out. His only son falling for a go-go girl! But that was his problem. Miss Horne had one of her own. Although twenty-four and hardly a teeny-bopper any longer, nevertheless she had never outgrown her first and soul-consuming infatuation for Jim. Right from the very first moment, long before the hot group had stormed their way to the top of the charts, she had been utterly lost to Jim. As she had told McCool, she knew only that brief monosyllable to identify him, but she also knew every trick of his tall, lean, restless style, his red-blond curly hair, gorgeous green eyes, his deft daring with guitar strings—and she choked up all over again every time she met his devilish grin. Five years of devotion in hopelessness.

But now the slow burn of hope. Millions of other girls were just as crazy about The Trippers as she was. But they didn't have Horace McCool on their side. And she knew McCool well enough. Stiff-stilted and aloof he might be, but he was a go-getter when he got his sights on something. And if he was setting his sights on Yum-Yum, then there was hope, hope that she, camping on Horace's trail, with the full resources of McCool Financing backing her, might get within touching, speaking, personal contact distance of her precious Jim. The thought was enough to make her head swim, but she thrust the emotions sternly aside and settled herself to make plans.

The atmosphere in the little boutique was just a shade more frantic than usual this morning, salesgirls scurrying eagerly to advise the clientele on color and texture, smiling their nicest smiles, and praying that the presence in the back room would find everything just so. This was Boutique Elegante, the original mother-store from which a whole thriving chain had fissioned off, each carrying with it the Midas touch of Miss Eleanor Grant, owner and founder. She was in the back room now, closeted with the store manageress.

Perched on a stool, wrapped in a black fur cape, with black close-hugging hat, darkened glasses, and dark veil, she looked like some frail bird, yet managed without moving to radiate room-filling tension. All her attention was on the

book opened in her lap as she scanned the neat rows of figures. When she closed the book, put it aside and slipped down from the stool, one realized all over again just how tall she was, and not at all frail.

"The accounts are fine, Alice," she said, very quietly. "You're doing fine here. Ever get ambitions about a place of your own?"

"I've thought about it, of course. But it would be a gamble, and I haven't the capital to invest in the best machines. Then there's the real estate problem. And—loyalty, too, Miss Grant. After all, you've taught me all I know."

"With a reason, nothing to do with loyalty. It's a poor business that can't stand a bit of competition. Believe me, you're free any time to set up on your own, and no hard feelings. But there's maybe a better way. Like this." She clicked open her bag and produced a folded sheet. "This is a list of promising areas, surveyed and worked out by my lawyers, indicated by research as the best places for a new store. Take it, look it over, and when you see an area you fancy, go and take a look at it in person."

"You mean you're opening a new store?"

"No. You are opening it for me. This way. First you select your spot, make up your mind about it. Then you take on a new girl here to keep up the strength. Pick a good one, using your own experience. Start training up Yvonne to take over from you when the time comes. Right? Then, when *you* are all set, contact the lawyers mentioned here. Drew and Meredith. They'll handle the finances for you. You'll be supplied with the site, the establishment, stock and new machines, the very latest up-to-date tapes. You'll have to hire and train your own staff. Do not try to lure away staff from my other stores, please. Apart from that, you'll be in complete charge."

"But—" Alice struggled for breath. "I'll never be able to pay off the debt to you!"

"You will. You'll have my machines, materials and designs. You'll be on the same salary you're getting now, which will come out of profits, the balance going to repay the debt. On previous form you should be clear in about six months, unless I am very much mistaken in you. From then on you take fifty percent of everything the store makes, after expenses."

"Fifty percent?"

"Right. Even split. Partnership. There'll be a formal contract for that, when the time comes. All my other boutiques

work the same way. Use your head and in a couple of years or so you'll be rich."

Miss Grant chuckled, and just for a moment Alice had the uncanny feeling that here was a girl, rather than the enigmatic middle-aged owner of the most thriving fashion business in the country. Then the quiet, slightly acid voice came again and the illusion vanished.

"Think it over. Let the lawyers know when you've decided."

"I don't know how to thank you, Miss Grant."

"No need. Just make it a success, make lots of money for both of us. Goodbye now." And Miss Grant stalked off through the store and went out to hail a cab.

At about that same moment, in another part of the city, Mr. James Nelson rose to address an informal gathering in the inner office of Magic Box Incorporated. On the table sat a current model Magic Box portable, outwardly indistinguishable from any on sale anywhere. Ranged around the table were various employees from all sections of the business. On Nelson's right sat Herbert Wilby, in charge of sales; on his left were Peter Jacks and Sam Crossley, responsible for production. The rest were from assembly, show-room, packing and other places.

"We agree then," Nelson said, "that the new circuitry is a distinct improvement, is better on the red values, imposes no additional battery load, and no extra problems on replacement and maintenance?"

There were nods and murmurs all around the table, except from Wilby. Ignoring him for the moment, Nelson went on: "All right, we incorporate the modification into all models as soon as Mr. Jacks and Mr. Crossley can set it up. Thank you for your trouble. What, Herbert?"

"Look!" Wilby pleaded. "Can't we just run a little two-line puff on it, let the customers know they are getting something extra?"

"No, Herbert." Nelson was quiet but firm. "I've told you before, we are selling all we can make right now. No point in building up a bigger demand than we already have."

"But we can increase production. Expand!"

"No, Herbert." Nelson sat, almost slumping. "You don't seem to get it, even after all this time. You're stuck in this notion that we have to grow all the time. It's a myth, a dangerous myth, this spending more money to make more money to have more money to spend making more money. You just forget it. We will go on making our quota per month. and selling them, and improving them, and keeping the

price as it is—or I will get somebody else to take charge of sales, all right?”

Wilby went away glumly. Crossley grinned and followed him. Jacks lingered, also grinning. “He can’t help it, Mr. Nelson. It’s just the way his mind works.”

“What’s on your mind, Peter?”

“New stuff coming up. Block-circuit designs. And that acoustic oscillator technique looks like it might be something.”

“And I’m going off on my vacation; I know. So what? You know the form just as well as I do, Peter. And you’re in charge.”

“All right.” Jacks shrugged uncomfortably. “I guess I shouldn’t have asked. Hey!” He started suddenly and stuck a hand into his inside pocket. “I almost forgot this. Radiogram from the Lunar assignment. Everything complete and in GO order as per instructions.”

Nelson snatched for the memo, to scan it intently, and in that moment Jacks had the strange sensation that his boss was choking back a shout of childish glee. He grinned in embarrassed sympathy. “That’s a good one to have over,” he commented. “We get some wild ones for our special section but that beats all. Now all we have to do is collect.”

“Hmm?” Nelson looked up from his reading. “Collect?”

“Sure. Anybody who is crazy enough to acquire an old abandoned star-shot ship in the first place must be a bit bent-headed. But wanting it all fixed up as if it were actually going out to wherever—I only hope he has the loot to back his notes, that’s all.”

“It’ll be paid.” Nelson folded the memo and tucked it away. “I’ll see to that part of it. You just see to it that the boys get the bonus as arranged when they get back from Lunar Base. And don’t worry if my vacation runs a bit longer than usual this time. This calls for a celebration.”

Jacks went out slowly, warmed by the confidence in his ability, but intrigued all over again by the peculiar personality of his boss. Peter Jacks had been in electronics all his thirty years of working life, and was man enough to admit to anybody that James Nelson was one very smart man. A genius, with an intuitive grasp of techniques and principles and a way of seeing new twists and making them look obvious afterward. But an oddball.

Five years ago, no one had heard of him. Now here he was, manager-owner of Magic Box Incorporated, outselling all the competition in sight, constantly refining and improving his products, branching out on all sides into every possible

field of electronic gadgetry, gilding everything, yet treating all his working staff as equals and partners. And, with all that, so self-effacing and mild that still no one had heard of him, apart from a select few high in the same field. A queer one, but a good guy to work for, beyond all doubt.

In yet another part of the city, three men sat in a dim-lit luxurious salon, two listening while the third played his most recent composition on a piano. The man at the piano, Benny Green, delivered everything he had to the savage beat and dancing trills, knowing that he had something good, and determined to sell it. Over the piano top he could see Farrel Tillet, the man he was trying to sell to, the head buyer for Howard Music Incorporated. It was said that if you couldn't get it from HMI, either on tape, wire, disc or in print, it wasn't music. It was also said that if you could sell to HMI you were in. Benny played as never before. Tillet seemed to be half asleep. The third man sat away to the far left, in a corner, and said nothing.

As the last crashing chords shivered into silence Benny let himself relax by stages, keeping his eye on Tillet. After several seconds he ventured, "Of course, Mr. Tillet, you don't get the full effect on an ordinary piano. That's just the frame, you might say. With a rhythm backing, some brass even, and then the action—"

"That's all taken into account." Tillet stirred and sat up. "It seems to me I've heard it, or something like it, before."

"Oh no!" Benny was aghast and emphatic. "That's original, Mr. Tillet."

"I'm sure you think so, but that's no guarantee. One of my functions, Mr. Green, is to remember anything and everything I've heard. Play me the basic theme again, please!"

"A moment, Tillet." The third man stirred now and came forward. He was tall, lean, catlike in movement and with a set smile and oddly bright eyes. He went to stand by the keyboard, leaned over, whistled soundlessly a moment, then nodded. "It's almost Mozart. This, Tillet?" and he whistled a string of notes not quite what Green had played. Tillet snapped his fingers.

"Of course. Almost note for note. What do you think, sir?"

"I think we can try this. Excuse me, Mr Green." The sheet of music came back to the stand and Benny stared at it.

"Upside down?"

"Right. Try playing it that way, just to see."

Benny hesitated, but both men seemed serious. He peered,

studied the new shape, fingered a key or two, then played. After a bar or two he opened his eyes wide, settled into the rhythm, sketched in a left-hand variation to match and began to enjoy himself. At the conclusion he stared up at the third man and shook his head. "That's quite a trick. What made you think of it? That's a whole new piece!"

"Oldest trick in the business. Mozart himself did it, also Beethoven, Bach, many of the old-time composers. I think we have something there now, eh, Tillet?"

"Oh yes, undoubtedly. This could be one for The Golden Boys."

"Just as you say, Tillet. Carry on with it."

"But," Benny put in, hesitantly, "how about The Trippers?"

"Afraid not." Tillet shook his head. "They very seldom touch outside numbers. They write their own. The Golden Boys are well up in the charts, Green. They will carry this very well for you."

"All right." Benny shrugged, then beamed. "What am I saying? This is great, Mr. Tillet. I've sold! But"—he shifted his gaze to the stranger—"you practically wrote this for me."

"That's all right. You'll work on it a lot yet." The stranger shot his arm out, glanced at his wrist, nodded to Tillet. "Well, that's it. You have the recording session all fixed for Wednesday, for The Trippers?"

"Yes, it's all set up. I have booked the Irving Dancers this time, and we have some new Colortron sequences to try out. You won't be here?"

"No, sorry. I shall be away for some time. You'll be able to carry on, Tillet. You know what to do."

"Who *was* that?" Benny demanded, as the tall stranger disappeared through a far door. "Some highbrow composer or something?"

"That," Tillet said gravely, "was Mr. Howard himself. He sometimes comes in on a listening session. I don't think he's a composer, but he certainly knows music. You're very fortunate even to have seen him. He doesn't show very often."

"The boss himself!"

"Yes. And, you know, he loathes this kind of stuff. So do I, come to that. But, as he himself says, if it sells . . . Now then, when can you be free to work out a session with The Golden Boys?"

If there was some doubt as to whether the manager-owner of HMI was a composer, there was no possible shadow

of doubt whatever about John York. In the eyes of the avante-garde, the lunatic fringe, the far-out followers of everything "new" and "significant" in the arts, John York was famous as the everything-composer. It follows as the night the day that to the remaining ninety-nine point nine percent of the general public he was utterly unknown. Neither aspect bothered him just now. At the keyboard of his limitlessly versatile electronic organ, his whole attention was on the flickering images on the curved screen in front and away to his left, on the wall. By his elbow was a button that would stop the spinning video-tape if necessary. All the rest of him, fingers, feet, eyes and mind, worked in gestalt.

The studio, a vast low-ceilinged barn of a room, was deserted. Foam-paneled walls absorbed the oceanic sounds that flooded the room, miming the effect of a close-packed audience in a theater. The air reverberated to a cornucopia of sound, but none of it escaped to trouble the outside world. In this enclave, this barn that comprised the entire ground floor of an outwardly dingy and neglected old building, York was in a world of his own, helping to create a world of novelty.

In the small, tastefully furnished outer office sat Miss Threep, receptionist and guardian of the creator's privacy. A helmet suspended from the ceiling enveloped her head, rendered her the in-the-round pictures York was working from, brought her the magic sounds he was creating to fit. For this privilege alone she would have freely devoted her working life. The fact that she was paid, also a handsome salary, merely to keep the world out, added bliss to her status, made her the happiest woman alive, and ensured her utter devotion to the muse.

The screen shimmered with movement and color, galloping symbols, hot conflict and fervent harmony all interlaced in a pictorial version of the story of Mankind. In discussion, several months ago, Corby Lasher, ballet-master and choreographer extraordinaire, had complained of the need for a "big" theme, a master-work. Something timeless, as fundamental as the eternal conflict between good and evil. And York had commented, "With Man in the middle. Just intelligent enough to be a menace, fouling everything up."

It had caught Lasher's imagination. "Profound. Very profound! But could you get that into a melodic line?"

"I can try. I'll work on it."

So York had worked on it, a simple leitmotif with something of strut and swagger, something of the falling-down

clown, yet with distant and sinister hints of evil. He added a jerky swaggering sketch-background, and a steady drum-beat undertone, and sent it to Lasher. Now he was watching the completed visual that the choreographer had built up around that slender thread. He had done well. The symbolism was stark enough to strike the slowest intellect, yet loaded with subtle touches. The conflicting armies, for instance, were teams of skilled dancers, the men in skin-tight gold with trailing plumes and manes—the steeds; and the riders were women, nudes in spray-on skin tint, white for the super-ego, black for the id, and crazy rainbow tints for Man the stupid. They wore high boots and helmets bravely, they managed their prancing steeds, they marched and counter-marched, and fought, brute force guided by delicacy and emotion.

The white army showed steady discipline, relentless drive, dedication to the onward-and-upward aims of logic and intelligence. The army of the dark id was sinister, cunning, curving and distracting, breaking up and hampering the march of progress by employing the as-yet unfathomed powers of the unconscious and the void. And running between, underfoot to dislocate and confuse, to make nonsense of everything and strut in clownish ape-like conceit, was Man the problem-child. Leering, stopping to hog the limelight, falling over his own feet, pouncing gleefully on the wrong side and hastening his own undoing, then arguing belligerently with his own leaders. Cruel, stupid, brutish—yet occasionally brilliant and inspired, almost inadvertently. It was all there in the exquisite movements of the dancers and the swirling colors. Lasher had done well. His camera team had done wonders. It would be even better on holograph-round, and with the full score that York was now pulling out of his instrument.

The keys yielded trumpet-blasts and the clash of steel, the growl of hard-pressed man and beast, the shrill scream of agony and death over the steadily driving tramp of onward progress, but here and there through it all the shivering approach to the very edge of discord, the sniggering neigh of moronic glee as Man the cosmic clown inserted his monkey-like finger and pushed the wrong button. The final fade-in scene showed a solitary rainbow figure standing flat-footed and apparently unaware of the onrushing armies to either side. From somewhere it had acquired a tinsel crown. Now it took off the bauble and stared at it admiringly, using its other hand to scratch its belly. Darkening, the screen showed the black and white forces charging in.

York hit the cut-off button with his elbow, swept a hand to clear his keyboard, leaned back and mopped at his brow with a tissue. Lasher had set him a devil of a standard to match, but that was fine, was a challenge, a chance to really stretch himself.

"How many people will ever see it?" he asked the silence around him. "And of them, how many will understand? And who cares, anyway?" A small green light winked at him for attention, and he grinned. Here was one who did. He touched the accept button.

"You heard, Threep?"

"Oh yes!" Her reply shook with emotion. "It was marvelous, the best thing you've ever done."

"And the last, for a while anyway. I daren't do anything more to it—I'll only spoil it—so I'm leaving it just as is. And I'm taking a rest for a while, a few weeks. One can't keep on, you know."

"Quite right, Mr. York. You just leave everything to me."

"I know I can do that safely, Threep. I can trust you."

"Shall I send the master-tape to Mr. Lasher?"

"Certainly not. Let him worry. Keep it until he asks about it and then tell him I am working like a slave on the final touches; wait a day or two, and *then* send it."

"I will. I'm sure nobody realizes just how hard you work, Mr. York. You deserve a rest."

"Thank you, my faithful. That's it, then. I'll see you again, some time. Goodbye now."

He broke the link and let his shoulders sag for a moment. Then he put a slim hand to his sleek fair hair, grinned a grin that was ten years younger than his apparent age, and peeled off the wig, the pale eyebrows, the fine wisp of affected beard, and shook his head to free a thick mop of jet black hair. Those trimmings, and his loose amber smock, went into a drawer, and with them went the eccentric, the notorious John York. In slacks and a white sweatshirt he went away from his instrument across the echoing silence of the studio to a far corner, to open a door and step into a tiny elevator. Seconds later he was stepping out into another room, every bit as big and barn-like as the one he had left far below. But this one was cluttered with every imaginable kind of popular musical instrument; from the center of the ceiling dangled the orb of a Colortron, spinning slowly now and bathing the room with swirling colors; over in one corner an auto-drum shivered the air with a heady combination of tango and cha-cha, rendered by bass drum, snare drum, cymbal and tom-tom. Over, under and through the beat came

the rush and tremble of plucked strings. Two intent people squatted on the glossy floor opposite each other, each intent on his guitar-like instrument. They seemed to toss the burgeoning melody to and fro between them, each adding and modifying a note or a phrase, improving, polishing, creating.

York went on past them with no more than a casual gesture of his hand, to the percussion set which filled one corner alongside the auto-drum. He sat, took up sticks, wriggled a time or two to get comfortable, cocked his head to listen, to get the timing; then, simultaneously, he trod on the switch to cut out the machine and caught the effect with his sticks.

To the left of the group a distant door slid open and a slim figure came through and straight on into the room, shedding black wrap and hat, veil, glasses, skirt and blouse, so that by the time she reached the center, under the Color-tron globe, she had on only an all-over sheer black body-stocking. Snapping her fingers, shaking her vivid ginger mop of curls, she took two to get the beat, then launched herself into a twisting, stamping, writhing interpretation of the music. The Trippers were in session, complete with Yum-Yum.

II

As THE big cymbal's shattering vibrations quivered away into silence, ending the number, Yum-Yum held her arm-upthrust pose for a single breath, then seemed to melt, and dwindle, and folded to the floor in a squatting heap. To Johnny she said, breathlessly, "That was great. New, isn't it? Any words?"

"Don't look at me." The drummer racked his sticks and spun once on his stool slowly. "These two were working it out as I came in. Better ask them which one stole it from old Wolfgang Amadeus."

Jem the golden-haired raised a confessional palm and said in a shrill piping voice, "I cannot lie. It was I." In his normal tones he added, "It *was* Mozart, too. No matter how you

cut it, you can't disguise the maestro. But I didn't steal it. That was Benny Green."

"Bit advanced, for him?"

"No. Pure accident, Yummy. He thought it was original."

"Nice music anyway," Jim commented, tickling his strings and listening to the delicate sprays of harmony. "For us?"

"I gave it to The Golden Boys. They can do with a new number." Jem laid his instrument aside, slid forward. Jim did the same. Johnny came to join them, and, by unspoken intent, all four were squatting in a circle on the floor facing each other. Yum-Yum flexed her shoulders, then slumped.

"Roll on vacation. This double life is aging me fast. Three more shows, isn't it?" This to Jem, who was the businesslike one of the group, for all his irrepressible clowning.

"Right!" he told her, dropping his voice deep. "Tonight; Wednesday, with a recording session in the afternoon; and Friday. Then it's up, up and away to where yonder moon gleams silver in the sky of blue."

Jim objected instantly. "You can't have a silvery moon *and* a blue sky at the same time. Not that it matters. We'll be going a lot further than the moon, this time."

As he spoke there came an instant of crackling tension; then Johnny looked at him, pale face serious, brown eyes glowing. "You mean, it's all set, at last?"

"Right. Everything is GO. I had the word just as I was coming here. We are going to make our first deadline."

"Ugh!" Jem grunted. "That heap good news. Chief Hot-Wire in Pants. Big feather in cap!"

"Wow!" Yum-Yum let out all her breath in a heart-felt shout. "We made it! We made it, at last!"

"What d'you mean, *we* made it?" Jim challenged her. "I'm the one who made it work and don't you forget it."

"Oh you!" she scorned. "Just wait till something goes wrong with the drains or something, we'll remind you!"

"Drains?" he yelled, and without warning brought his hand around in level palm-chop at her middle. She saw it coming barely in time to hurl herself away, but not fast enough to avoid the blow entirely. The thud brought a yell. She rolled over, came up cat-like and launched herself at him. Jim sprang away to one side and pounced on her as she skidded by. The pair of them went rolling over and over on the floor like two sparring puppies.

"We're all cleared to leave?" Johnny queried of Jem. "No last minute snags in the financial side?"

"Shouldn't be any trouble. Drew and Meredith will han-

dle it. I'll check with old Buzz though, just to make sure. Won't take a minute."

He rose and went away to a far corner of the studio, carefully stepping over the struggling Jim and Yum-Yum as he moved. There, on a visor-phone that was not listed in any directory, and which the telephone companies themselves knew nothing about, he managed to get through to his older brother, financial advisor to the firm of Drew and Meredith. Alastair Howard knew very little about the brother who was fifteen years his junior, and almost nothing about anything else, but he did know money. In some not-understood fashion he had a gift for knowing what it was doing and what it was going to do next. Drew and Meredith paid him a large salary to keep them advised, and he was worth ten times that in terms of their solid reputation for integrity.

Left alone for a moment, Johnny sat quite still, his lean ascetic face calm, his memory turning inward and back ten years. In a room something like this, equally big but falling into decay, the last abandoned fabric of a disused grain-silo out on the edge of the small town where they lived, four children gathered, three boys and a girl. The year was nineteen seventy-one, and they were eleven years old, all four. Already their differences had culled them from the main crop of village children, had brought them together as odd ones, not like the rest. It had been hardest of all for Nell, he mused, to realize that she was different from ordinary. Yet it was she who had put the difference into words, not long after the four had begun to find satisfaction in their grouping.

"We're different," she had said. "Either we're bright, or they're stupid." And her *they* had included, instantly, all the rest of the world. So they had learned to appreciate each other, to value each other, to guard and treasure, jealously, this strange association where they could speak and be understood, where they could match powers, spark ideas, argue ferociously, and try to understand the strange substandard world into which fate had dropped them. They had learned a lot of hard things fast. That grown-ups would not understand, not even affectionate parents—was one. That to let anyone else in on the charmed circle was to invite destruction—was another. And that there was no hope whatever of changing the way things were—was the hardest of the lot. Johnny himself had laid that one down.

"You can't make people more intelligent—even if you knew how—if they just don't want to be!"

Those had been marvelous, magical, wonderful days, weeks

and months. But now he thought of that one crucial day when it had all come to a head. Again it had been Nell, with her characteristic courage, saying the thing straight out.

"We've gotta do something, gotta have a goal, an aim of some kind."

"Something we can do," Jem cautioned. "It has to be possible."

"Yes." Johnny had grabbed at it, Johnny the dreamer, the planner of worlds. "Something possible, but only just. Something so far out that we will have to go like crazy to make it."

"Something," Jim agreed, "that will be fun, even if we fail."

So they agreed that far, but then had come the frustrating silence, the puzzled search for a worthwhile objective. And then Nell, again.

"I know!" she said. "We'll go to the stars!"

He could remember, even now, the first stunned shock, the almost instant urge to object, to mock—and then the slow-spreading glow of excitement, the fervor. Because it was possible—just. That was in nineteen seventy-one. There was the tiny moonbase. There was a space-drive, a nightmare contraption that gobbled power and strained technology to snapping point, but a drive, nevertheless, such that you could ride to the moon, or Mars, or even the Jovian satellites, if you could wait out the travel time. And there had been talk of a star-drive, and a starship, and there was a base on the moon, in a crater wall, that had been intended to launch the first ship to the stars.

But research was fantastically expensive, and the space-drive incredibly balky and maddening. The moon was barren, the payoff after all the hooraw of getting there had been virtually nil, and the problems of sinful Man here on Earth kept right on growing more and more urgent. So, although it was never said outright, everyone knew that Man had quietly let drop all his bright and shining notions about leaping into the Void and was instead engrossed in just staying alive on his own planet. The four of them knew all that, and scorned it, deplored the abandonment of a vision—and saw, now, that here was a goal well worthy of them.

Ten years, and now, if Jim was right, they had made it. Johnny looked up as Jem came back and sank into a squat by his side, made a circle with his finger and thumb.

"Nothing to it. The usual vacation arrangements, only extended a bit. Buzz will take care of everything. He's a great guy, old Buzz. Doesn't even ask questions."

"Wouldn't believe it if you told him the answers," Johnny said. "He would say we were crazy."

"True, true!" Jem nodded his head sadly. "Poor crazy mixed-up kids, that's us. Hey!" He raised his voice to a sudden bellow at the couple who were now locked in a straining grip on the floor. "Don't you harm him now, you hear? We need him to make the gadgets work!"

"You must be joking!" Yum-Yum panted, firmly grasping the foot she had captured and twisting it. Under her, Jim, squirming, seemed helpless. "For once, my lad I've got you. Confess defeat, loudly, or I'll tear your foot off and beat you to death with it!"

Jim slumped, then with an impossibly serpentine wriggle seemed to revolve around his own ankle, out from under, and away into a rolling crouch that brought him back into attack position. She had leaped into a matching crouch almost as fast. For a crackling moment they held it; then both relaxed into a snort of amusement and came to squat once more in the circle.

"This is no time to celebrate," Johnny declared, always serious. "There's still work to do. We have an hour for rehearsals"—he shot a glance at his wrist—"then a couple of hours' recharge. Two new numbers to run over for the recording session Wednesday. All set?"

And with that they shifted into working rhythm, into a hard-driving, painstaking, note-by-note polishing of their repertoire that would have exhausted any one of their contemporary rival groups in the first ten minutes. In this, as in anything else they turned to, was the quality of total and ruthlessly impersonal dedication to a stated objective—in this case to catching and spinning a teenage audience into momentary exhilaration by the combined application of scientific techniques and hard-won experience. They had worked like this so long and so regularly that it came as second nature to them now and the working hour slipped away very fast. The final number, a new one called "What Is Tomorrow?" required a very careful and precise shift of emphasis on repetition of the terminal phrase. It took Yum-Yum three repeats to get it just right.

"Tomorrow—" full forte and then a two-beat dramatic silence—

"is *just* one more day!"

"is just *one* more day!"

"is just one *more* day!"

"is—just—one—more—*day!*"

With a jangling saw-edged string counterpoint and John-

ny blasting out sonorous chords on the electronic organ to add a funereal overtone, it hung the emotions on the ragged edge of disaster and panic for just a breath, then rescued everything with a switch into ridicule, a kind of musical black comedy that The Trippers had made one of their trademarks.

"I think that's it!" Johnny decided thankfully, killing his keyboards. "We'll hear that last ten minutes play back while we unwind." Again with one accord they came to squat, yoga-style, as the studio echoed to their own works. All four were in a glowing sweat, and this would happen all over again tonight as they performed for their adulatory followers. Johnny felt a wry twitch of amusement as he recalled, back in that same crucial day of decision, how Jem had declared, almost off hand, "First, we'll get rich."

They had got rich. They had never doubted their ability to do that much. But it had been hard work. Even though they had enjoyed every minute of it, because they were, each one of them, the type to enjoy being stretched to the utmost, even then it had been hard work. All that fool talk about easy money, overnight success, undeserved fame—his lean face curled in a rare grin, and Yum-Yum inched closer, watching him curiously.

Johnny-in-charge, Johnny the senior, the master-planner, who was three weeks older than Jem, who was two days older than Jim, who was one day older than Yum-Yum. Johnny the serious.

"I have a question," she said hesitantly. "Don't laugh—I know the answer, sort of, but I can't get it into words. Like, this is the big scene for us now, isn't it? I mean, ten years ago we said—I said—let's go to the stars. And it was great, but we were just kids then, face it. But we're of age now. We know the score better now. Why haven't we changed?"

"We have." Johnny dropped the words into a thoughtful silence. "The picture is something like this: there're these two kids, and all that green grass, woods, and sunshine out there. And they say, 'Some day, when I'm grown up, I won't do anything but play in the sun, all the time.' So they grow. One ends up down here, a wage-slave with rent to pay, wife and kids to keep, repayments to meet, and he gives up the dream because he can't make it. The other is now president of the company, with everything anybody could want—but he gives up the dream too, because to make it he would have to discard everything he has worked

all his life to get, and it's not worth that much to him. Not now."

"And us?" she urged him to go on.

"We've got everything, or what we haven't got we could buy. If we had been able to go when we first thought of it, like that"—and he snapped his fingers sharply—"it wouldn't have meant a thing. Now it does. Now we are willing to give away, to throw away, everything anybody could want, just to get our dream. Because that still means more to us than anything this world has to offer. Ten years ago we could say that easily, because we didn't have anything to lose. Now we have everything to lose, and we can still say it, and this time we really mean it. That's how we've changed."

"Sacrifice," she said very softly, and he nodded.

"That's it. Doesn't mean a thing until you have something to lose. Incidentally, if anybody wants to cry off, now is the time, and no hard feelings. Anybody?"

"You're all right on the deep-think," Jem growled, scrambling to his feet. "But as a comedian you just don't begin. I'll get the grog."

"Futons," Jim muttered and got up too, to go to a tall cupboard and haul out genuine Japanese padded, silk-covered bed-mats, one each. "Ten years I spend ironing the bugs out of that ship and he says does anybody want to cry off?"

Jem came with a tray and tall beakers of fortified plant-milk cool from the refrigerator, set it down in the middle. They had long ago worked out this way of making sure they got properly fed at least once every day, no matter how hectic life got otherwise. "Drink up, daddy-o," he said, handing a beaker to Johnny, "and leave the comical patter to me, huh? Cry off? Better we spent some hours working out our final top-of-the-bill show for Friday. Go out with a bang, hey?"

"Now there's a notion!" Yum-Yum endorsed eagerly, but spared a warm grin for the grave-faced Johnny. "Thanks, though. You had the right words."

Ten minutes later they were all soundly and blissfully asleep.

III

BARNEY SMITH stood in the wings and watched his four nest-eggs minting more lovely money for him: Jim and Jem grinning crazily, wheeling and heel-tapping, plucking magic from their strings; between them and back a pace or two Johnny, serious as Satan, pulling out tattoos and rim-shots, tramping out a solid beat, making the cymbals shatter, and in the focus, snapping and writhing as if each section of her lithe body was independently geared, Yum-Yum giving her dynamic all to the music. Out there beyond the footlights a vast gasping darkness of ecstasy punctuated by wails and shrill screams of ardor. Barney felt the music-magic too, felt the upper layers of his consciousness expanding and fragmenting, soaring away into dizzy dreams of incoherent bliss. In all the five years of constant exposure to this, ever since that first inspired moment when he had taken a chance on four bright-eyed and eager unknowns, he had not grown immune to the power. He still felt it, but he had acquired defenses. Broad-shouldered, thick-necked and balding prematurely, at thirty-five Barney was a little old for yielding to hysteria physically, and one or two healthy slugs from the flask on his hip helped to numb his mental responses just enough to keep him sane.

He needed something to keep him sane. Five years of pulling in a small fortune, twenty-five percent of everything The Trippers made, had made him rich, but had not helped him to accept the fact that it could all vanish as fast as it had come. Chart-ratings were like that. The fickle-minded mob! And the fact that he knew practically nothing more about those four money-making geniuses out there than did anybody else! His job was all he was permitted to know. "Just book us a week ahead, three shows—and keep the public off our backs!" Those were his instructions.

The brain-spinning music ceased for a breathing space and Barney came out of his reverie with a start, to see a stranger standing not far from him. A civilian, here backstage? He marched over.

"Don't believe I know you," he said, coming straight to the point. "How did you get backstage?"

The stranger started, turned, raised a dignified brow, then offered a card between finger and thumb. "I know you. Mr. Smith, isn't it? You manage that group out there?"

Barney nodded, inspected the card, identified the name, and the *how* question was settled. Old Eddie, the stage-doorman, was probably counting it right now. That gave rise to another question.

"Mr. McCool"—he handed the card back—"I've heard of you. Of your firm, anyway. What do you want here?"

"To talk to you." Horace extended his hand, applied a gracious and amiable smile. "I'm interested in your proteges. I'd like to meet them."

"So would, maybe, fifty million other people. Part of my job is to see that it doesn't happen. That's the way they want it."

"Yes." Mr. McCool maintained his smile. "I could make it worth your while to modify that charge just once."

"Forget it!" Barney advised. "You're loaded, McCool, but not that rich. The present administration probably takes more away from me in taxes-than you take home for wages. I aim to keep it that way."

McCool's aplomb blurred a little. "I could argue your figures," he retorted, "but that would get us nowhere. How do I convince you that my interest is purely personal, nothing to do with their profession?"

"I dunno. That's your problem. Go ahead and try."

"Very well!" McCool compressed his lips in irritation. "It's none of your buiness, but, if you must know, I intend to marry Miss Yum-Yum!"

"Hah!" Barney snorted and shook his head. "That line is straight from Gilbert and Sullivan. *The Mikado*. She gets around fifty a month."

"I beg your pardon!"

"Look, mister, Yummy gets proposals all the time. Hundreds!"

"Good Heavens! I had no idea—!"

"Thought you were unique, huh? They all do."

"But—" McCool struggled for appropriate words. "I'm completely serious. I mean to ask Miss Yum-Yum to be my wife. I think I have the right to speak to her, at least. I mean, I'm not just anyone!"

"I know." Barney shrugged. "You're McCool Junior. You meet her, sweep her off her feet, carry her to the altar—bust up the hottest act on the boards right now, and put me

out of a job! You ever hear that old standard about the goose and the golden eggs?"

"I see!" McCool glowered. "You're going to let financial gain—"

"You just stepped out of some glass case? Damn right I don't want to see you scuttle my income. Not that you have a prayer!" As McCool started to bristle, Barney raised a hand in caution. "You ask yourself, why'd she want to marry you, or anybody else? And what about the business boys who own The Trippers, what about them?"

"You mean those youngsters are owned by some corporation?"

"Well, now." Barney realized he had talked a little too freely. He knew, what no one else knew, that large lumps of The Trippers' income went away into limbo, and it was purely his guess that it became profits for some backing interests, but that was his own guess, not for publication. "So what difference does that make? You haven't a hope, Mr. McCool. Look, I'll do you a favor. Come on."

"Where?" McCool hung back suspiciously.

"Dressing room. I have to meet them there myself, in any case, and they'll be off in a minute. Come on!"

It was a box, perhaps a trifle larger and better equipped than other performers got, but a box nevertheless. McCool eyed it with some distaste, seeing the bare composition floor, the naked clothes-hangers fringing the walls, the garish strip-lights that mercilessly revealed the lack of gloss anywhere. There were three lamp-lit mirrors, the two wing ones complete with make-up tables, the center one reigning over a washbasin. There were tissues everywhere, a half-empty laundry-sack of clean towels, vast jars of cold-cream with finger-molded hollows, smears of many colors on the white walls. There were glossy pictures stuck at apparent random. Of wealth, taste, decorum or comfort there was no sign whatever. On a chrome and plastic coffee table in the middle of the clutter stood four frost-fogged Coke bottles beginning to make water rings on the glossy surface of the table. Irrelevantly, that final item caught McCool's eye, and he pointed.

"They drink that suff?"

"Nothing stronger than that while they're working. The way they sweat it out under those lights, anything with a kick in it would flatten them dead in minutes."

McCool went in, mentally contrasting those four bottles with his father's extensive cellar of mellow vintages, and

his own, not so large but thoughtful collection. This hideous little room, he thought, was an impersonal jumble, bearing no trace of the personalities using it. Transients. Those four must spend a considerable portion of their lives in just such places as this. The only referent to a musical group was the guitar leaning against the wall in one corner. He went over and picked it up curiously. It was surprisingly heavy. Careful inspection showed him that it was solid. No sounding belly, no cunning box here to amplify vibrations. This was done, he estimated, by electronics. The shape was odd, too, a curious hybrid of Spanish and Italian styles. There were control knobs whose functions he had to guess at. He tweaked a string experimentally and it gave a shallow tinkle he could barely hear. There should have been a cord, or at least somewhere to plug in a cord, from this thing to an amplifier, but he couldn't find it. He put down the thing and stood a moment thinking back, seeing again those grinning, swaying youths down there. No cord at all. His lean face twisted in sudden understanding and disdain.

Barney Smith had settled himself casually on the much scarred lid of a huge box in the opposite corner, his deep-sunk eyes watching McCool.

"Marry me," he murmured, "and I'll take you away from all this."

McCool started defensively, the murmured words coming uncannily close to what was in his mind. Before he could frame a fitting retort there came the distant clatter, growing rapidly louder, of booted feet and gabbling voices.

"Why don't you slow down the beat, she was puffing, you want to kill us? So drop dead, I told her, who needs chorus girls?" Jim came galloping up to the door and one step past to let Yum-Yum, at his heels, enter first. Jem followed, grinning at him.

"You be careful, boy. Next time they close in on us with that high-kick routine you might get hurt. Accidental, you know? Hi, Barney, what's new with the maestro?"

For McCool the rest of the cross-talk faded into momentary static as *she* came in and right up close to him, she of the blazing blue eyes and the fiery crown of flame-curls. Her forehead was level with his chin, her boyish slimness seeming to glide rather than walk. That slimness was clad, for this moment, in skin-close metallon mesh that had all the hues of the rainbow in it. And there was a controlled fire inside her that melted him into tongue-tied silence. Now, at this all-important moment, when he needed all his aplomb, it was vanished like a snowflake in a furnace. A moment of

stillness, one look that saw through him and everything that was his; then she turned her head.

"Who's your friend, Barney?"

"Hah!" Barney rose in a crackling silence that came with her quiet question. "Fellers, this is Horace McCool, Junior, of the McCool finance firm. You may have heard. Says he wants to have a chat with you. McCool, this is Yum-Yum, Johnny, Jim, Jem—The Trippers."

Like the projection of a badly-worn film, the action froze again, then moved, took on life and sound. Jim and Jem stood their instruments alongside the first one, in the corner, and grabbed for bottles. Johnny already had two and was cranking them open at the fitting by the doorpost. He handed one to the girl.

"What d'you want to talk to us about?" he asked mildly. Yum-Yum took a mouthful, swallowed, moved away to a flush-fitting door in the wall.

"You'll excuse me," she said, "but this shower I need, come whatever. If you speak up I can hear fine." She slid the door open, reached inside to deposit the bottle on a shelf, and touched unseen controls. There came the sibilant hiss of water under pressure. She snaked a slim arm around and up her spine to grab a zipper, heaved and the rainbow skin split and gaped all the way down—and McCool wheeled away hastily as he realized she was going to undress there and then, in full view. He met Johnny's deep dark brown gaze and had the irrational conviction that, just like the girl, this young man could see right through him. Without looking around he had also the feeling that the other two, although they were sprawled sloppily on chairs and guzzling at their bottles, were equally insightful. Three prickly people, all crazily clad in snug-fitting iridescent green velvety stuff, short jackets, high boots, tight pants, frilly-breasted white shirts—parodies of taste—yet dynamically alert and somehow hostile.

"I'm in rather an awkward position," he stammered, and cursed himself for his weakness, he who had addressed board meetings of eminent people with never a qualm. "I don't want to interfere with your much needed break for recuperation—"

"Like wow!" Jem murmured. "Please sir, Barney sir, does it talk English sometimes?"

"You're the one wasting the time, mister," Jim pointed out.

"Skip the verses and come to the chorus, huh?"

Johnny said nothing, just watched. McCool sensed inex-

orable patience. At his back he heard the flurry and hiss of water, a distraction.

"I'm sorry," he tried again, licking his lips. "The point is, really, that it is not you—you three—that I wish to talk to. It's—" And he made a delicate gesture backward, over his shoulder.

Johnny put his bottle to his lips, tilted his head back in a long chug-a-lug series, then came down again, breathed hard, and asked, "What about?"

"I don't see that that is any of your business!"

Again, just for a second, there was that broken-film effect; then Johnny nodded.

"Yes. You're so right. Overlook it, mister." And he moved away to find a chair alongside his companions. Which put the three boys and Barney Smith together in one corner of the little room, McCool standing alone and with his back to the shower cubicle, and the object of his attention in there, with the next move up to him.

"About next Monday"—Barney leaned across conversationally—"I got a string of possible—"

"Forget it!" the three spoke in unison. "Vacation! Starts Friday night. No more work!"

"Now just a minute!" Mr. Smith's voice took on an edge. "That's what I wanted to talk about. I wouldn't want to deprive you kids of the time off. You need it, I know that. But can you afford to take a break just now?"

"What d'you mean, can we afford it? We have loot we haven't even counted yet. We can afford it." Jem pitched his voice to a quaver. "We need it. Look, my nerves!" And his outstretched hand trembled dramatically.

"Not like that!" Barney strove to remain serious. "I mean chart-wise. The sound of skids. I hear them. It's my business, fellers, and I'm telling you, the downgrade is right ahead. No reflection on you, believe me, but there has to come an end sometime—"

"So what?" Jim countered. "If we're slipping, says you, what diff will a couple of weeks make?"

Barney drew breath for another plea, looked up to see McCool standing there waiting, and fell silent. Three other pairs of eyes followed his line, focused on the visitor in a chill barrage.

"Cat got your tongue, young man?" Jem demanded, in yet another voice. "You go right ahead and talk to our little Yum-Yum. We won't pay you no heed."

"Yummy!" Jim bellowed raucously. "It's you he wants. Got the soap out of your ears?"

Reluctantly, McCool swiveled and looked, saw a pale gray mist across the open cubicle-door and through it a blurred pink shape moved and turned, luxuriating in the spray. Raising his sights hastily, he met again her vivid blue stare. The mist cut her off just at her throat, but had been higher, because her red hair, now darkened, clung to her head in wet masses.

"Go ahead and talk," she invited.

"I can't. Not in this ridiculous set of circumstances. Isn't there somewhere private?"

Her expression changed subtly, dropped an invisible barrier between them. "Private time is my time. You want to talk to me, you have to do it this way, like it or not." She leaned partly out, shot a side-glance to a hook and ducked in again. "You're not show-biz, must come strange to you. I'm coming out now. You want to hand me that towel-robe, make it easy for yourself? Or not, I'm coming anyway."

McCool spurred out of paralysis just in time, turned and reached for the robe, and as he swung back he saw that she had killed the shower. Just for that one blinding instant she stood there quite nude—and he was to go over that picture many times in his mind and continually marvel that she was so lean, so boyish and yet so devastatingly fascinating. Then he choked, elevated his gaze, thrust the robe blindly at her and stood back.

"All right, Mr. McCool." She secured the plain white robe around her, took up her bottle and drifted to a chair. "Now will you get to whatever it is that's bothering you?"

"This isn't the place, or the time." He cleared his throat, glanced aside swiftly to be sure the others were still wrangling over their own gossip, then shrugged. "You leave me very little choice. Please take me seriously: I'm asking you to be my wife. Will you marry me?"

The anticlimax was shocking. With no change whatever in expression she sat, crossed one knee over the other, looked at him, uttered one word.

"Why?"

"Why?" He went shrill with astonishment. "What do you mean, why? Why do men usually propose to women, and get married?"

"I don't know about others, at all. I'm curious about you. Why you? Why me? I don't know you, and you don't know me, or anything about me. Why?"

"Ah, well," he rushed into the breach hastily, "you'll get to know me as we go along, meet my friends, my father.

There's no rush. And I know all I need to know about you. I've seen all your tapes."

"That's not me," she denied. "That's just a performance. For money. You still haven't answered my question. Why do you want to marry me?"

"Because—" he groped for an answer to a question he hadn't even asked himself yet. "Because I'm hopelessly in love with you. I know that is a dreadful thing to say in cold blood, like this, but it's true. Ever since the first time I saw you—I just can't think about anything or anyone else sanely. I've never been like this before." He felt the hot color staining his face, knew the urge to turn and run before this dreadful humiliation, but the magic of her presence held him, drove him to say the difficult words. "I don't mean to rush you. I mean—I don't want an answer on the instant; that would be ridiculous. But think about it. Give me the chance to prove myself, get to know me better. You can have my card, and check up on me as much as you want to. At least you'll find that I am a man of my word, not a fanatic juvenile."

She glanced at the card, then ignored it, finished her bottle, put it on the table, then looked at him again, with her head just a fraction tilted to one side.

"You're serious, of course. And infatuated, which is quite a compliment to me. You see, that too is all part of the act. The sexy image is something I turn on, to order." Quite suddenly he felt like a small boy being lectured by a schoolteacher. And he was aware that the room had gone silent, listening. "It's all an act, Mr. McCool, not me at all. Trouble is, how do I convince you of that? How do I tell you, and make it stick, that I have no intention, or need, to marry you or anyone else, not for a long long time yet? Any ideas?"

"But you can't have decided, just like that!"

"I can. I just did. Sorry."

"I refuse to accept this as your final decision. You don't know me."

"And you don't know me, Mr. McCool. You don't even know who I am." She shifted her gaze, shrugged ruefully and said, "Johnny—boys—what do I do now? I can't get near him. He's fixed!"

As McCool edged around Jem put up a finger and asked, "You a practical character, Mr. McCool? Realistic, I mean?"

"I like to think so. I have to be, in finance." McCool was cautious.

"It figures. So let's look at what kind of deal you're trying

to hand our Yummy. For her, what's in it with you that she hasn't got now?"

"Security." McCool gave it right back to him promptly.

"Poop!" Johnny retorted just as swiftly. "We could all retire the scene right now, cut it and blow—and live in plush for the rest of our lives on what we've stashed away."

"Rubbish! With taxes the way they are? And a lot of luxury living to catch up on? I mean, this isn't living, this fakery. You're all going to get older, get married, have children, need housing and all the rest of it. Money melts. I should know. Finance is my business. And investments can fail. On the other hand, you are going to be compelled to retire soon. As your manager was trying to tell you, times and tastes change and you can't go on being teenage idols forever with this fakery."

"But you can offer her security?"

"I certainly can. So long as there is business—and business uses money—McCool Financing will be in business. Can you say as much about this so-called music of yours, this hocus-pocus?"

As Johnny frowned, Jim gathered his long legs under him and sat forward, breaking a long silence. "You keep on about fakery and hocus-pocus, mister. What's the drift? You've vamped the tune, now come to the words."

"I mean"—McCool whirled, went and caught up one of the guitars and brought it back, to hold and shake—"these things. It is, I understand, an old dodge, miming to pre-arranged tapes. And you're very clever at it, I'll admit, but, can you deny that it is cheating?"

Johnny put up a quick hand to hold Jim back as he started to splutter. His lip curled in a rare smile. "You're a hard man to fool, McCool. That's quite an accusation you've made there, though. Who d'you suppose records all those tapes for us, now? I mean, whether you like it or not, they're good. Top of the box for the past five years!"

"That's strictly irrelevant. Oh, I dare say you do make them yourselves in the first place, but by dint of several repetitions, plus cutting and splicing and all the other technical aids. Not the seemingly effortless way you pretend to do it, out there on the platform."

"I see. And I suppose Yummy isn't really dancing, out there, either? Just going through the motions, huh?"

"I didn't say that! She's genuine. She's fine. She's the only real person among you!"

"Just a minute!" Jim exploded past Johnny's restraining hand to grab the brandished instrument out of McCool's

grasp. "Are you trying to tell me I can't play this thing?"

McCool stiffened, lifted his chin superciliously. "*That* thing—yes, I am saying just that. You may be a competent performer on a genuine guitar, but if you can produce more than a tinkle from that—that dummy—I will cheerfully eat it. I'm not blind. I've examined it. It is not even equipped to take a power-lead—a fake one. You are careless, gentlemen. Shoddy work."

"You won't eat this one," Jim assured him warmly. "It cost too much. You're a fool, McCool. I'm going to pin your ears back!"

"Jim!" the girl cried warningly. Johnny echoed her, put out his hand to restrain his impetuous colleague, but Jim shook it off.

"That's all right. I know what I'm doing. He's older than us, remember, and a different body-build. You just watch this." His lean fingers touched studs and switches swiftly but delicately and McCool watched him with sudden apprehension. There was still no power-cord, no supply, no amplifier. The thing couldn't work. But then it did. Jim brushed the strings, glared up at McCool, turned a knob, and the room flooded with sound, a deep reverberating chord that seemed to shiver the walls, the floor, the very air. McCool felt the bones of his skull sound in resonance.

Those fingers moved again, plucked a three-string overlay to the still echoing chord, then hit a shrill sharp in jarring contrast. McCool cried out, utterly helpless to stop himself. It felt as if every tooth in his head were squirming out of its socket and every bone in his body afire. The room grew red-dark with haze as blood roared in his ears and the world reeled around him. He staggered, put a hand to feel for solidity, grasped a shoulder and heard Barney Smith's chesty voice through the seesaw booming.

"Come on, Mr. McCool, lemme take you outside. You look like you need air."

He leaned on and followed the shoulder, utterly blind and lost as to direction, clenching his teeth to avoid howling from the jumbo-sized twinges of rheumatism that were racking his joints—and over it all the dreadful thrumming of giant strings shaking him right down to every innermost cell of his being. It was heaven to feel it cut off with the slamming of the door to the dressing room. He drew a long sobbing breath, squeezed his eyes tight shut, and then writhed all over again as he heard the smothered yell of laughter that came through the shut door.

"Just crazy kids." Barney apologized, and McCool manufactured a smile.

"Quite so. Kids. But not me, Mr. Smith. I have only begun!"

IV

McCOOL SPENT a bitter night salving his dignity from the rough handling it had taken, wrapping himself in sounds he could bear, moving from the moody blues of humiliation into the strident brass of Wagner as he began to plan a campaign. The lady had spurned him. Very well, he would show her. He had tradition on his side. He couldn't actually twirl his moustache and say "Aha! Me proud beauty, but I'll bring you to heel yet!" He could, however, perform the modern equivalent, and in order to do that he needed, first, information. All the data he could get.

Much to Miss Horne's surprise he was at the office and waiting for her when she arrived.

"Forget any other business you may have on hand, Miss Horne," he told her briskly. "I want you to get me a complete rundown on The Trippers, as a group and as individuals, who they are, where they come from, how much they earn, what they do with it, who is backing them—everything!"

"But"—she almost blurted out the fact that she had been trying to do most of that for some days now, with little success—"I don't know how to do that, sir!"

"Good Heavens! Miss Horne, we have a large and efficient research section. As you should know, McCool does not put capital into any venture without researching it thoroughly first."

"Oh! You mean *that* kind of thing?"

"Exactly. That's what the section is for. Use it. You have my authority. Make it priority and urgent. If you want me, I'll be in technical. Oh, by the way, they are taking a vacation soon. Find out when, and where, and for how long. Urgently, Miss Horne!"

He strode out, leaving her to think thoughts of her own,

thoughts that might have surprised him had he been able to read them.

McCool's technical section was large, well-equipped, generalized. The head of the electronics section was slightly baffled by McCool's questions.

"You say it looked just like a guitar, but heavy and solid, and had no external power-source, no amplifier leads?"

Hopkins shook his head slowly, then touched a button on his wrist-link and spoke briefly to a colleague. "Clow, you've handled most of the solid-state sound repro field, what d'you think of this?" and he retailed McCool's problem briefly. Clow, a large and gangling youth with a twitch and restless eyes, sucked his teeth at the description.

"Unclude me," he declared. "Sounds like something the Magic Box boys might have dreamed up, maybe."

"Magic Box!" McCool snapped at the name. "Yes. Perhaps a study of their file might help."

"File? We don't have any file on them."

"What?" McCool was shrill. "But we must have! As I understand it, they are among the leaders in solid-state sound-reproduction equipment. We must own part of them!"

"Won't take a minute to check." Hopkins touched another button, spoke briefly and precisely, waited two breaths for the reply, then looked up.

"Clow's right. They're independent of us."

McCool thought furiously. "Then," he said, "they come under the heading of competition, and we've investigated their stuff. Haven't we?"

Clow grinned sympathetically. "You should try it sometime, Mr. McCool. Those boxes don't come apart, not without destruct. They make 'em that way. What I mean, they build the circuits and connections and then pot the whole thing solid in some kind of epoxy-resin stuff. You have jack-sockets for video-audio output, and a slot for the battery renewal, but the rest is solid. You can't take it apart without busting it all to hell."

"Then how on earth do they repair them?"

"They don't. They have a twelve month guarantee stamped right into the material, date and everything. They replace anything that breaks down inside that date. They don't have to replace many, so I hear."

"But there must be some way of getting at the insides?"

"Not that I know of." Clow shook his head. "We can do a black box on them, but all that tells you is what ought to be there. Like I can do a black box on this guitar thing. Been thinking about that." He made gestures with knobble-

jointed fingers. "Like a guitar-shape is, you know, elliptical? So it's cut up a bit, but elliptical anyway. And solid? So treat the whole thing like an endless baffle with a long axis about eighteen inches, the short axis maybe six, seven. Or maybe it isn't solid at all, but with a skinny pressure-chamber inside, sealed. I would have to pump the specs through a comp to know for sure, but I reckon you'd have a mighty big response range with that configuration. And with the circuits built right into the body—power-pack batteries come pretty small these days—it could be like that."

"Yes." McCool eyed his employee with grudging respect. "That's good enough for me. As for the distressing symptoms on being exposed to the produced sound, I do know a little about that."

"White noise." Clow nodded profoundly. "You can do some queer things with that. Properly balanced you can completely load up all the auditory channels, so a guy becomes insensitive to pain, or goes blind. I've heard how they can turn on a psychedelic freak-out too, pitch it just right."

"Yes." McCool sighed, and felt glitter-eyed all over. "Gentlemen, I think we have just elucidated how The Trippers have managed to remain on top of the charts for so long."

"I didn't know you went for that kind of thing." Clow stared. "Trip-tapes and all that. Beats sugar-sucking, sure, but it's passive. Depersonalized, too. Not for me. I like—well, take a look at this, just came in. How do you like that?" And McCool stared, fascinated, at the inch diameter disc Clow held in his hand.

Miss Horne's own campaign was getting well underway. As soon as McCool had mentioned vacation she knew where. That was one item of news about The Trippers that every fan and fanzine knew. They were going to the moon, to one of the luxury villas there. Moonbase, a disastrous military and financial flop, maintained desperately and at great public expense as a prestige item, had eventually succumbed to the need to recoup at least some of the expense. So it had become the last resort, in more ways than one, of those with vast wealth and a craving to be exclusive and alone. The villas themselves were cheap and easy to build if one took advantage of cave-systems and fusion-techniques for sealing the underground spaces. The astronomical costs came in when the appropriate fittings had to be hoisted from Earth, and with the maintenance of life-support machinery. You could cut some of the expense if you were crafty enough, as Miss Eleanor Grant had been, to make a blanket bid for an

abandoned research site, and take it over just as it stood.

And that's where they were going. To the moon villa of the multimillionairess Miss Eleanor Grant, of Elegante, it being a well-known fact that she supplied the designs for Yum-Yum's dresses and the kinky gear the boys wore. Miss Horne knew that much offhand, and a priority call to Kennedy Moonport was enough to get her the date and time. And that was what McCool wanted. But Miss Horne wanted more, and she took it on herself, not without a faint thrill of apprehension, to take that further step. Then she got busy with his other demands.

The recording session at HMI was its usual hectic blend of controlled confusion and intense concentration: microphones everywhere jostling with beady-eyed holograph cameras; shirt-sleeved and cigarette-smoking musicians scowling over last-minute scribbled, almost indecipherable, thematic lines; the three faceted balls of a massive Colortron spinning lazily overhead under constant threat from three low-intensity prism-lasers mounted well back at the apexes of an equilateral triangle. In one reasonably clear space in the middle of the floor, four scantily-clad go-go dancers walked their movements to a plangent guide from Jim. Jem and Johnny were peacefully refreshing themselves from Coke bottles, while Yum-Yum was having controlled hysterics in one corner over her attempts to lip a trombone which one of the musicians had brought with him.

There came an interruption in the shape of Mr. Tillet himself, cat-footing across to the recording manager. Jem broke off his swallowing to watch, to murmur to Johnny.

"This is something. Tillet wouldn't break into a session without a damn good reason." His tension communicated itself to Johnny immediately, and only momentarily later to Jim and then Yum-Yum. Tillet went away as delicately as he had come. The recording manager approached the girl.

"Some people can't wait," he said. "Mr. Tillet gave me this. Seems one of your fans handed it in at the front, wanted it passed along to you right away."

It was a small box, gift-wrapped. The go-go girls clustered, eagerly guessing, as Yum-Yum tore the wrapper and revealed a simulated alligator-hide box.

"Jewelry, I betcha. Strings of diamonds, huh?"

"A ring! A ring, for sure!"

But it wasn't. It was, at first glance, rather disappointing, just a small disc, more like a lapel-button than anything,

complete with spring linkpin on the back, the surface a pearly sheen flatness. But as she lifted it out of the box for a better look, the pearly surface shimmered, became a precise miniature picture, in depth and color, of a girl dancing. Herself. And it moved. It gyrated through a full sequence of one of her better-known step routines, a performance of one minute which brought it back to the original picture, only to start all over again.

"Why, that's marvelous!" she exclaimed, staring at it. "Fascinating! Boys, just look, isn't that the cutest?"

Jim held her wrist and peered; Jem looked over his shoulder. Johnny, characteristically, took the box and looked within, drew out a card and made his rare and cold grin.

"Surprise, surprise," he murmured. "The McCool rides again!"

Jim looked up at the murmur, caught Johnny's eye, made a discreet head-movement to draw the three of them slightly apart while the dancing girls crowded around to express appropriate admiration and envy.

"Clever stuff," he muttered, "and new. Not too hard to figure. Superimposed thin-film transparencies triggered by photosynthetic action. Must've cost a packet."

"So?" said Jem. "He can afford it. And he's a trier, we know that."

"He's extremely clever," Johnny mused. "A smart man. I think I know exactly what Yummy is thinking right now. But not you, Jim boy. You don't like it?"

"I don't. This wouldn't be the first time that somebody has tried to pin a bug on one of us."

"Top of the class." Johnny nodded. "I missed that. Any way we can check up on it here?"

Jim shrugged, looked to Jem. "This is your home-ground; you can answer that one better than me. They have tunable radio-receivers in the booth over there, maybe?"

"Sure. We use them when we want to eliminate cables. For singers on the move, that kind of thing."

"Might do it. We can try. Yummy will have to put that thing down somewhere for the next number."

"I'll do it." Johnny moved over to her again, insinuating himself in between the girls. "It's pretty," he said. "It must have cost Mr. McCool a small fortune, having it specially made for you."

"McCool?" She stared in wonder. "Oh, I didn't know that. Do you think I ought to give it back to him?"

"We can talk about it later. For now, maybe you'd better

put it somewhere safe; it's probably delicate. Let me have it—I'll stash it with the control-box crew."

Jim bobbed up on cue to volunteer for the chore. They saw him go into the glass-walled enclosure and talk earnestly to the headphoned men therein, with much nodding and emphasis. Then the gift-box went away in a corner and one of the men approached it carefully with a pencil microphone while he twisted dials on a small console. At one point he winced, nodded, and there was more chat with Jim, and the small package eventually went away into a massive strong-box that was used to store valuable master-tapes.

"What was all that?" Yum-Yum whispered, as the recording manager snapped his fingers and called for attention.

"Later." Johnny put up a palm. "No harm done. Let's work, gang!"

Not until they were once more safely within the confines of their own barn-like studio-home did she come back to it. Showered, stripped down to loose robes, and squatting on the floor sipping at their plant-milk, they were unwinding as usual, before their recharging nap, in readiness for the show that evening.

"So," she said quietly, "will somebody tell me just what's with the McCool jewel? Where is it, anyway?"

"I'll get it." Jim scrambled up and went away to his wardrobe, brought back the alligator-skin box, sat himself, and held it for them all to see.

"Imitation hide. Cheap fake, but nothing cheap, or fake, about the gadget. Does that smell, to you? But now the gadget itself. A series of frames, like the old-time movie films, but this is done on a special thin-film semiconductor only about fifty mols thick, sensitive to light frequencies, with a build-up and discharge cyclic sequence about one minute long; it's fully transparent until the charge builds up to breaking point, then it fires the picture and relapses into the uncharged state again, and starts all over. You now stack about a thousand of those frames one on top of the other, with a thread-sized photoelectric cell for a rim, and as soon as you expose the thing to light—bingo! Neat, no? And hand-crafted by an expert. You just can't mass-produce anything like this. Not yet, anyway."

"It was very thoughtful of him," she said firmly. "And sweet, to give me the only thing I could possibly accept, myself. That's rather symbolic, don't you think?"

"That's the way I figured it." Johnny nodded his satisfaction. "He's no fool, McCool. Play the rest of it, Jim."

"Under all that delicacy, using some of the spare juice—and body heat—is a very simple and unmodulated beep-beep. A transmitter, effective up to about half a mile."

"Like wow!" she breathed, eyes blazing. "Why, the crafty old tycoon, he put a finger on me!" She stared at the box with renewed interest.

"So what now?" Johnny asked. "You're the expert in this."

"I think," Jim mused slowly, "that I can gimmick this so that it has hiccups, stutters, goes off for a while and then comes on again, at random. That way, he'll think it's faulty—but he won't suspect us. Okay?"

On their grinning assent he went away to get his "box of tricks" and returned to join them in council, where he delicately painted odd patches of the bottom surface with nichrome solution, then painstakingly drilled needle-thin holes here and there and inserted hair-fine wires therein.

"We shouldn't have counted our chickens," she sighed. "This would have to happen, right at the last moment."

"Can't see any harm," Jem objected. "What can he do? In his place I would be combing the financial undergrowth for leads, some way to bring an arm-lock to bear. For him, that's natural. But he can't find anything on us at all."

Johnny caressed his jaw. "You're probably right," he said. "But isn't it just possible that he could stir enough dust between now and Friday night that we might be held pending an investigation? We have nothing to lose, except that deadline date."

"Not that!" Jim was emphatic. "We miss this one, we'll have to wait another eleven months or more. What do we do, Jem?"

"Hmml!" Jem the financial wizard took thought. "I just said he can't find anything on us. But he's smart. That very fact will turn on his suspicions. Like Jim said, when you find the door locked, you wonder why."

"I did not say that!"

"Should have, then. Remember that old stunt we cooked up a long time ago, about spreading controlled rumors that we were being masterminded by a Japanese firm, or a Russian combine? We never did get to use them, but old Buzz still has them on file, and where better to start a discreet leak than a corporation law firm?"

"But that won't fool McCool," she objected.

"Not for long, no, but long enough to let us get away. I'll fix it."

While he was gone, Yum-Yum frowned unhappily over her drink. "This is the bit I have never liked, the deception. Why can't we be just ourselves? What's wrong with this world?"

Jem had come back in time to catch the tail end of her words. "What's bugged me a long time, Yummy," he put in, "is why we try so hard in the deceiving. Nine-tenths of the stuff we put on tape is missed by the ravers. Why do we bother?"

"Because we're us. Because we are setting our own standards, and only feeling satisfied if we do it right, by *us*! Because we're different. Not unique, though. There are others. Some under cover, like us. Some latent, don't know they have it, never been pushed. Like McCool."

"McCool?" Jim howled. "You have to be joking!"

"I'm not. Look, out of nowhere he walked right in among us, straight through the barriers. He has this notion he wants Yummy, so that's what he goes for. She turns him down. We laugh him off. And what? He's right back in there with a smart trick. Money won't work here, and he has learned that, fast. So he gives Yummy a present, the only present she could possibly fall for, to quote her own words, a moving picture of herself. And it's bugged. That, my children, is thinking!"

"A pity it is all going to be wasted." Jem chuckled. "Just wait until he gets to the office in the morning!"

Miss Horne handed him the data-folders reluctantly. "I'm afraid there isn't very much, sir," she murmured, and waited apprehensively.

He scanned the sheet eagerly at first and then with mounting wrath. "This is ridiculous. Trippers first public appearance of record Dallas, June 1976! And their subsequent exhibitions? That's not what I want, Miss Horne. Yum-Yum, first recorded platform appearance Springfield, Mass., June 1976! Hmm!" He traveled rapidly down the columns. "First cooperative appearance with The Trippers, overseas tours! Penang! Bah!"

She thought he was the only real live person she had ever heard say "Bah!" just like that. There was something other-worldly about it. But not about his rage. "And they call themselves a research department! It's time a few heads rolled. What about business links, hmm?"

He tweaked back the top sheet and read avidly. "Declared income of group is twenty-five percent of gross after taxes, is administered by Drew and Meredith on behalf of

group. Disbursement made also by Drew and Meredith. No further information available, but rumors that D & M are intermediaries for banking syndicate of Zurich.' Zurich?" he cried incredulously. "This is fantastical Foreign capital backing an American trip-tape group?"

"They have an international following, sir," she offered humbly.

"They have smart lawyers," he retorted through his teeth. "Getting anything out of Drew and Meredith is like carrying on a conversation in a Trappist monastery. If it were D & M I'd say this smells like tax-evasion on a grand scale. Let's see what they did with my tip about Magic Box. They get their musical equipment there, I bet. Hmm!" He turned another sheet, glared, and almost choked. " 'No direct information on M-B available, but it is believed that this firm is backed by powerful Japanese interests.' Oh, this is insane! Japanese? 'James Nelson, ostensible owner-manager of M-B, is little known elusive figure, frequently absent on unspecified business.' Bah!"

McCool turned another page and read, " 'Trippers published exclusively by Howard Music Inc., and all royalty payments handled by D & M. We have no financial interests in HMI, so no further hard information available, but it is believed that HMI is cover for a Soviet-owned mass publication concern. Royalty payments on USSR sales are made in rubles, constituting a considerable dollar-exchange in favor of Soviets.' And that's the end of that!" he growled. "We can't go poking our nose into foreign trade agreements without some good reason." He sagged a moment, then: "What about that tip on their vacation?"

"On the next page, sir."

"Oh. Yes." He turned and read, read again. "On the moon? 'Reservations on the Lunar Shuttle as of oh-one-fifteen hours Saturday morning, Miss Eleanor Grant and guests.' Eleanor Grant?"

"That's the famous boutique, Elegante, sir," Miss Horne explained, and he stared at her uncomprehendingly. Boutiques were something outside his frames of reference. "She makes with-it gear for happiness. Mod-clothing. Dresses!" Miss Horne groped for words that would click in his mind.

"You mean she runs a fashionable dress store?"

"Not one, sir. Thousands. All over the country, and in Britain, Europe too. She's fabulously wealthy. She's the whole scene as far as it's threadsville. I mean she's the far-end! Everybody wears Elegante for kicks. I've had one this month, so far—"

McCool halted her with an unsteady hand. "Let me try, Miss Horne. You are saying that this Eleanor Grant owns several stores which retail the very latest styles in modern dress, and that she is extremely wealthy. So far I follow you. But you also infer that you have purchased one such dress this month, so far! Do take that to mean that you buy several, regularly, each month? On your salary? And why so many?"

"Forever more!" Miss Horne eyed him in amazement. "Where have you been? Nobody wears a rag more than a week or so. Why, that would be some kind of uniform, a groove! Like this"—she touched the silver-gray skintights and short smock deprecatingly—"is a drag, but it's for bread, so who cares? But when I'm being me, I need something different when I'm different, don't I? Doesn't everybody?"

McCool, who had worn the same sharp suit, or a facsimile thereof, for the past seven years, shuddered inwardly. "And you can afford this?"

"What's to afford? With the Auto-Fab—"

He halted her again. "Auto-Fab?"

"You don't know? There's this machine, see, with a cubicle. Outside is a dial-screen and code numbers. You dial a color combo, and a material, then you pick a style. Then you lock-on and step in, strip down, pull the switch, and the machine does the rest. It weighs, takes a profile all around. Some kind of echo system, I think. Anyway, it's all over—zip—that fast. The bell rings, you dress up again and step out, count to three slowly, and there it is, fresh out of the works. Cost of material synthesis, power, ten percent surcharge for the machine hire—comes out around seven fifty. Mine are usually a bit more because—er—there's rather a lot of me. You know?" A millionaire business, and McCool Financing didn't even know about it, much less own any of it. Incredible.

"And how does this shrewd Miss Grant come to be tied up with The Trippers, may I ask?"

"Because she dresses them, always. Every show they do, every tape, all the dancers even—dressed by Elegante. It's good business for her."

"I see! And so she invites them to take a vacation in her moon villa. Yes. At last something makes sense." Then he remembered, and scowled. It made sense so far as the three youths were concerned, but what about *her*?

"What about the girl?"

"Hmm?" Miss Horne was momentarily puzzled. "Oh. Well, I would assume she goes with them, wouldn't you?" Latent

puritanism roused itself in his breast and he glared at her.

"I would never assume anything of the kind. Do you realize what you are saying, Miss Horne?"

"But why not?" she queried, astonished. "They work together!"

"As far as I have been able to discover, on my own, not a breath of scandalous irregularity has touched that girl's name!"

Again there was a communication break while she digested this further evidence of his cubical outlook. Scandal? None had been hinted at, truly, but only because the fans simply assumed that Yum-Yum lived with the boys. And why not? What was wrong with that? Her mind, spinning through bewilderment, turned up a misplaced datum.

"Incidentally," she said, "there's a bit about her on the last sheet."

He flipped the pages eagerly and read, "There have been numerous rumors as to the identity of the singer professionally named Yum-Yum. Analysis seems to indicate a general agreement that she is the daughter of some European—possibly British—noble family, possibly illegitimate, more probably in some disgrace or other and compelled to seek anonymity and asylum in the U. S. The rumor has several variants but no hard evidence available."

"There you are!" he said loudly. "European nobility. Can you imagine a girl like that living with a group of fly-by-night musicians?"

Why not? she wanted to retort, but thought better of it. "It does sort of hint at some kind of disgrace," she pointed out. "And anyway, what does it matter? They are probably just good friends!"

"Hmm. Yes, it's possible. *Honi soit qui mal y pense*, and all that. You may be right, Miss Horne. Even if she does travel to the moon with them, I'm sure it will be in utter innocence."

"Yes, sir."

"In which case I think it would be a prudent gesture if you reserved passage on that shuttle, just in case it becomes necessary for me to pursue her—I mean, them." He said it firmly, but the very thought of boosting off into cis-lunar space sent chills up his spine. She kept a straight face.

"I have already seen to that, sir."

"You have? My word, Miss Horne, that was very far-seeing of you."

"I thought it best to cover all the eventualities, sir." She

took up her vocoder and the files and departed, carefully omitting to tell him that she had, indeed, booked passage—for two.

V

McCool stood again in the wings and watched his beloved. It was drawing near to interval time, and the ebullient youngsters were on stage to do a pair of quick numbers before the curtain, as preliminary to the rest of the show. Tonight was it, the last throw. He was prepared to dog her steps, to the moon if need be, or anywhere on Earth she chose to go. Meanwhile, he watched.

Right on cue to the second, all three guitars twanked a crazy chord and she started, at breakneck speed:

“Coconut ice; a dozen blind mice; the man on the flying trapeze.

A hanging man’s rope; a hole full of soap, and too many housemaid’s knees.

Doubling, troubling, detergent bubbling; the stain of invisible ink. . . .”

The words rattled and pattered glibly out, words with only tenuous, if any, linking associations, no discernible sense, full of tongue-tangling oppositions, and the very devil to learn on the fly. It was that challenge, and the tendency on the part of the would-be learner to fall about in hysterics while trying to gather it up, that had kept the ridiculous number well up in the popularity charts for several weeks. It was now beginning to slip, but good for one more hilarious run-through.

McCool refused to laugh. Perhaps it had started out as a bad case of infatuation, but the frustrations put in his way had unlocked an unsuspected vein of determination. This was to be a challenge, was it? He waited, quite oblivious of the crowd of near-naked chorus girls who began to press in on him in the wings, ready for the last number preceding the curtain. He knew why they were there—the contrast. The Trippers were four lean, almost epicene youngsters, swaying and shaking with controlled energy, but not moving

their feet—surrounded by a hand-picked chorus line of generously full and rounded flesh maximally revealed and in gross motion. Contrast. Almost a period-piece of kick and step, bump-and-grind, but the number itself was as incisive as a razor-edge.

Yum-Yum, cradling a mike, spoke liltings into it from deep in her throat. "You hear me sing? So what, it's just noise. Noise with a shape, that is music; noise with tears in it, that's a heartbeat. Like the wind, and the waves, and the storm. Noise!" Controlled fireworks from the boys while she rippled sinuously. Then: "But you take a noise and cut it, chop it, put it into a kind of pattern, and you have words! I throw you some word-noises; you throw some back to me. We're talking. Communicating. What'd I say? What'd I say? What's that you say?" More frantic reverberations from the boys and she spun, leveled a finger at Johnny.

"Gimme a word! A good word!"

"Maturity!" he shouted, and the audience gathered itself to roar, "All in pieces, bits and pieces, shattered, scattered, war-and-pieces, nonsense noises, words—words—WORDS!"

It went on, growing louder steadily, the stamp-and-kick chorus line looking weirdly unreal, like a cluster of mechanical dolls, against the full-throated enthusiasm of the teenage mass out there. When it came time to level her finger again, she chose Jim, and he bellowed, "Security!"

Jem in his turn growled out in basso, "Destiny!"

And always there came back the rebel chant, "Words—words—WORDS!"

McCool had not heard this number before. It had not been taped, for obvious reasons. He was horrified. The whole thing was an underhand blow at everything McCool stood for. But he stood fast and watched the girl of his dreams as she gyrated and writhed and interpreted the wildness of the underlying emotional rejection of the accepted ways of society. In sympathy with her efforts, he could feel himself starting to sweat, so he was not surprised, as she came running off at the conclusion, to see that she was glowing in a fine sheen of perspiration. Oblivious to him, she stood and panted while the chorus kick-stamped off into the other wing, then ran back to accept her ovation as the curtain fell. This time she came off more slowly, relaxing. He stepped to intercept her, to touch her arm.

"A moment!" he said crisply, and she stared blankly for a second until it registered. Then she sighed.

"Oh, it's you again."

"I see you're wearing my small gift. Thank you for that."

"You were very clever with that Mr. McCool." She put fingers to her breast and unfastened the pin. "I should have returned it to you." She held it out now, on her palm. "To avoid misunderstanding."

"Misunderstanding?" He took it into his fingers momentarily but kept his eyes on her, deliberately steeling himself against the melting power of her nearness. "How could there be any misunderstanding? I offered it as a gift, an appreciation, my wish to bring you pleasure. Nothing more than that. I have more sense than to try to buy you with gifts. And I couldn't give it to anyone else, could I? Please accept it in that spirit. It will only be thrown away otherwise. Wasted."

"Very well." She took it back quickly. "I'll accept that much, but you really should give up, Mr. McCool. You're wasting your time."

"Perhaps. I *am* wasting yours, and you need to change and rest. I won't keep you any longer. But I am not giving up, my lady."

The quietly added honorific earned him a dazzling smile, from which he was still tingling as she ran off to the dressing room. He leaned against an upright spar alternately shivering with delight and reviling himself for doing what he had to do. In that state he was off guard. Barney Smith caught sight of him from a distance, scowled thoughtfully, then went heavily back to the dressing room with the news.

"We just heard," Johnny said. "Yummy had words with him. Old death-grip McCool."

"Look," Barney declared, "I reckon he's found out about your vacation plans. What I mean, that's common knowledge. I reckon he's all set to follow you."

"To the ends of the Earth!" Jem intoned in melodramatic baritone. "Through sleet and snow, fire and water. Mush! Mush!"

"He's just liable to follow you all the way to the moon!"

"So what?" Johnny queried idly. "He can afford the fare, and he can't do anything to us when he gets there. He'll be worse off than he is here. Think. We're the house guests of a very gracious lady, Miss Grant. McCool may be a fool in lots of ways, but one thing he definitely is, a gentleman. Of the old school, McCool!" Yum-Yum flashed a glance at him, just a flicker, but he caught it, and his brown eyes gleamed.

"You could be reading him wrong," she murmured. "Try another cliché. All's fair in love and war?"

"Oh!" Johnny said it very softly, hesitated a moment, then

swung on their manager. "Thanks for the tip anyway, Barney. We can try to slip him a bit, give him a run. How about the old taxi-dodge, from the front?"

"Anything to oblige." Barney nodded. "But if he knows you're heading for Lunar he might just make straight for the rocket-port and get in ahead of you."

"Can't hurt to try, and it'll be a bit of fun anyway. Go fix it up, will you? We're on in a couple of minutes."

As the door closed after him Johnny wheeled on her. "What?"

"This." She took off the jewel again, but handed it to Jim. "Look it over, genius. Closely."

Jim frowned, inspected the animated button, turned it over, looked hard, then whistled through his teeth. "This ain't it, lady. He pulled a switch on you."

"That's what I figured. I couldn't see any reason why he should wait just there, and stop me, and spout a lot of woof about giving me pleasure, with no strings. Except that." She retold, briefly, exactly what had been done, and Johnny shook his head.

"I take it back. He probably would gate-crash, if he would do a thing like that. But what's happened to you? What happened to the old 'fluence?"

"I don't know," she wailed. "He scares me, for some reason. I've never had any trouble convincing anybody else."

Three keen minds seized on this and subjected it to hard, dispassionate scrutiny. Early on in their odd association they had learned to evaluate their talents, many and various as they were. Jem was the business head, the money-maker; Jim the hardware genius, the one who knew how to make things work; and Johnny the planner, the architect, the strategist. But it had been harder with Yummy because her talents were diffuse. She could inspire, and coordinate. She could always ask the problem-cracking question. But most of all, as they eventually discovered, she was a convincer. She asked people, and they answered. She told them, and they believed. She could get her own way with anyone, individual or mass. But not McCool. Why? Then Johnny got it and said, very softly, "Physician, heal thyself." As she glared at him he gave her a crooked grin. "Face it, Yummy, that's the answer. Look, you sing a sentimental ballad to bring a lump to the throat. Of the audience. But not your own. You can sing, with a lumpy throat?"

"Detachment." Jem nodded his agreement at once. "That's got to be it. Like gambling. If you have to win on the next throw, because your whole future is hanging on it, don't

throw. You'll lose. Any hard gambler will tell you the same. McCool has got you emotionally involved, lady."

"Don't be ridiculous!" She flared up defiantly. "I'm not soft on him!"

"Don't need to be," Johnny told her. "You respect him a little, even admire him for being persistent. That's enough to make the difference."

McCool sat out in the dark, in the rear of a cushion-limousine, and waited. His chauffeur had an intent eye on the tracker-screen.

"Working fine now, Mr. McCool," he muttered. "What d'you want me to do with the other one, find out what went wrong with it?"

"It doesn't matter. Get rid of it later. For now, just keep your eye glued to that marker. You're sure the plane is all ready?"

"All taken care of, and we have enough fuel, here and on the plane, to travel halfway around the world if necessary."

Novak, the reluctant chauffeur ordinarily an electronics engineer, was excusably grim. He had labored over that beeper-button, and even longer and harder over the rush-job duplicate that McCool had demanded. He was still smarting over implications that his gadget had developed a defect, and the cold threat that McCool had handed him: "If I lose track of that young woman through any fault of yours, Novak, you had better start looking for a hole to hide in. *And* another job!"

He kept a bleak eye on the winking green spot.

On stage Yum-Yum had emptied her mind of all external things, was giving her considerable all to the song, a special. Every once in a while The Trippers slipped in what they called a "think-piece." This one was shrill wail and grumbling portent, laced through with near-discord strings to catch the breath. The words might have meant little to adults or intellectuals, but their sense, carried on sobbing tones, struck right into the inchoate feelings of their audience. To deliver them, Yum-Yum stood quite still, ringed in one yellow-green spotlight, and let her throat do all the acrobatics.

"You can't—go home again.

When the circuit has learned your job, what will you do?

When living has happened to you, and you, right through, what to do?
Because you can't—go home—again.
There's possible, probable, likely, unlikely, but no more false or true,
And you can't go home again.
It's now—right now—if you're happy, be happy.
It's now—right now—if you're awfully sad, so sad.
It's all together.
Oh sister, oh brother, oh mother, oh dad.
But you can't—and we can't—most certainly can't—
Not ever—go home—again!"

The angular lilt poured out of the speaker in the cab where Barney sat at the wheel, and he felt a sudden pricking at his eyes as the boys built up a barrage of backing and the girl's voice soared into vibrant anguish over the counterpoint. He fumbled for a handkerchief and dabbed awkwardly.

"Got a platinum one there," he muttered. "And I thought they were on the skids? It's me that's getting old, not them!" And he touched the speaker in unspoken apology.

In a few minutes Barney tooled away cheerfully, deliberately striking a roundabout course to the airport. Four very ordinary looking youngsters in the back were peacefully relaxed. Handy wigs, a quick brush-over with gray powder, and zip-up plastic clothes, and it had been simplicity itself for them to mingle with the out-crowding audience, wander away, around a corner, and then into the waiting cab.

"They liked that new number," Yum-Yum said. "You never can tell sometimes, just how deep you can go and have them follow."

"Truth without tears," Johnny replied. "You can't go back, only forward. Time's arrow points only one way."

"That bugs me," Jim objected. "Time's arrow? More like an inchworm!"

"Your trouble," Jem put in, "is that you're a genius."

"I can't help that. It's the way I'm made. My genes!"

"There you go again. Normal people get swelled at the head end with conceit, but not you!"

"Not *blue* jeans, knothead!" Jim retorted hotly, as Yum-Yum sniggered. "Genes as in chromosomes, like little string-beads. Forty-six."

"I would have said you were smaller than that. Thirty-four, maybe?"

"I'm deceptive, too. It's the way I walk."

"Yeah, with both feet. We've noticed—"

The cab purred on. Far behind, glaring at the tracker screen and urging Novak to feats of navigation, McCool was on the trail.

The Lunar Shuttle was an ugly looking thing. McCool stared at it through the picture window of the deserted passenger lounge.

In outline it looked like nothing so much as an old-fashioned candlestick, minus the rim-loop where you hooked your finger in for carrying, and the whole immensely magnified. The upright tubular body, blunt-nosed, carried passengers and/or freight, plus the control bubble nose. Like a stumpy candle it stood upright from the center of a monstrous metal-covered doughnut. In there, as far as McCool understood the basic theory, massive weights were caused to move in one direction fast, halted abruptly, then returned slowly, the whole complex somehow achieving an unbalance of inertial surge in one desired direction. It was gross, complicated, ravenous for power, but, in Galileo's famous words, it moved. And it could keep on moving, steadily, in any given direction, in this case straight up. The storage batteries were just completing their charge, while ground-power takeoff assistance was even now running up the weight system to speed. Soon the entire improbable contraption would be trying to billow away from the ground like a captive balloon.

"Any sign on the marker yet?" McCool demanded of Novak, who stood by his side holding the instrument.

"I think—yes, sir, that's her, and strengthening up fast."

"Ah well, I suppose I had better go and see about my seat reservation, just in case." McCool stirred reluctantly, cringing from the very thought of boarding the ungainly thing. Aircraft were bad enough, although he didn't mind his own private charter. There, at least, you had some semblance of being in charge. But that thing!

He nerved himself, wheeled away, and almost cannoned into Miss Horne. Backing off he stared at her for a moment unbelievably.

"I have the tickets, sir," she said brightly. "Hadn't we better get down there ready to go aboard?"

"Miss Horne! What on earth are you doing here?"

"Isn't it rather obvious, Mr. McCool? After all, I was the one who thought of reserving seats on this flight, just in case. And I thought, if you really do intend to pursue—er—

your researches on The Trippers—and if they are going to the moon on vacation, as they usually do, then this would be the obvious spot to wait for them. Isn't that what you're doing?"

"Hmm? Oh! Yes. Yes, of course. But what are *you* doing here?" He swept an eye over her startling trouser-suit and eager face and groped for the right words. "I mean, why aren't you in the office?"

"Oh! That!" She put on a confidence she was far from feeling. "I've arranged a sub to take over for me. I thought that in this extremity you'd need someone handy, to take notes and so on."

"You mean"—he goggled at the folded slips in her hand—"you've arranged to come along? With me? Even to the moon?" Such selfless devotion to duty was too much for him to accept all at once.

"Why not?" she retorted. "After all, I am your personal secretary. And I really do think we ought to be getting down. Look, the flight passengers are already going aboard." The stridently metal tones of a loudspeaker sounded through the lounge, reinforcing her suggestion. McCool wavered, desperately seeking some refuge.

"But we mustn't be precipitate. This may not be necessary. Novak, what does it say?"

Novak held out the marker mutely and McCool peered. There was the bright green spot, blipping steadily away, and lined up with it was the direction-indicator, pointing inflexibly at the shuttle.

From the foot of the ramp the shuttle-ship looked overpoweringly huge. McCool plodded upward on rubbery legs, stood aside as Miss Horne presented their authorizations to the stewardess. Something of her blasé indifference fell away as she took in the name.

"Right this way, Mr. McCool," she cooed, with the deference proper to a big wheel, "and just sit here, please. You'll want the porthole berth, of course. And a very good seat, right at the top of the column. Hold on now while I do your belt." She fussed over him, making the most of her chance, and her ebullient curves. McCool, already qualmish, couldn't have cared less, but Miss Horne, with an eye for style, had a question as she settled into the seat beside her boss.

"Isn't that what they call an anti-radiation suit?"

"That's right." The stewardess inflated herself self-consciously, but a side-glance showed her it was wasted on

McCool. "Rather sleek, don't you think? We call 'em skints."

"You can't get anything like *that* from Elegante." Miss Horne strove to contain her envy of the silver-foil film that looked as if it had been sprayed on everywhere except hands and head. "Such a perfect fit!"

"Maybe I shouldn't tell you"—the stewardess leaned confidentially close—"but these *are* from Elegante. That's right! Special contract, just for us. You see, it's all to do with radiation, and the Van Allen belts and like that. Passengers just get a wisp of it, not enough to hurt, but we have to pass it four times a week, and it could mount up. So they designed this stuff. It carries some kind of magnetic field or something. Anyway, the radiation just bounces right off! And that's why we can't wear anything over it, because *that* would accumulate radioactivity. Not that we want to—cover it, I mean. I mean, would you?" She finished securing the belts and stood back, posing archly. Miss Horne sighed.

"I could never get a skin-suit to fit that good."

"It's the material, dear. I mean, it's electric. You wait till we shoot the belts, you'll see. It scintillates. And it clings, by itself. Now, just hold tight and I'll run you up to your berth. Remember, once we jump out of orbit the craft will switch attitudes, and then you'll be facing forward, so don't be alarmed. Up you go!"

A loudspeaker hummed into life. "Your attention please. This is the captain speaking. We will be lifting off in one minute. You will be aware, at the moment, of a degree of vibration throughout the hull. I must warn you that this will increase until it is quite severe. This is due to the inherent nature of the drive and in no way indicates any fault or defect. The unpleasantness will not be of long duration, but will decrease to slightly less than it is now once we are fully underway. Your patience is requested. Anyone desiring sedatives please inform your stewardess, who will take care of it, and of anything else you may require. As soon as we are out of orbit and into flight-path the signal will be given to release safety-belts, if you so wish. At no time may you leave your seat except in extreme emergency. I repeat, do not leave your seat except in extreme emergency and, if possible, after consultation with a crew member. This precaution must be observed, as we shall be under diminished gravitational force, and it is quite easy to misjudge inertial forces and thus run the risk of injury. I repeat, if you need anything at all please summon the stewardess. You may do

this by pressing the button situated under your right arm rest. Thank you."

Miss Horne cast a critical glance at her employer and touched the button. Seconds later the silver-glitter stewardess came sailing up the hoistshaft, clinging negligently by one hand.

"I think Mr. McCool had better have something to calm him. Would you, please, right away?"

"Right you are, dear. Won't be a minute."

She vanished on up through an oval hatch and was back within seconds bearing a paper cup and two golden capsules. The ship was really rattling now, and Miss Horne had difficulty grabbing the cup. She nudged McCool briskly, popped the dosage into his mouth as he turned, then said, "Here, sir, drink this. You'll feel better."

Glassy-eyed, McCool drank obediently. The shaking worsened, became a body-aching blur. Then, just when it seemed impossible to withstand it any longer, it began to ease. Miss Horne craned over and peered, but the landing-field was already far away below and there was no way to tell where the dark earth ended and the equally dark sky began. The trembling was now no more than a drowsy buzz. The stewardess emerged from her overhead cubicle, sailing down dramatically on the hoist until she was halfway. She halted. The captain spoke again:

"In a moment or two we shall be shooting the radiation belts, ladies and gentlemen. If you will observe your stewardess—not a difficult task—you will be able to see the life-preserving effect of the anti-radiation suit she is wearing, which all crew members must wear. . . ." The voice went on to explain, but Miss Horne ignored it, fascinated vastly by the now-visible halo of flickering blue fire that lapped those extravagant curves. It came to her that, with a little pull, by discreet application of the influence she could bring to bear as secretary to Mr. McCool, she might just be able to wangle herself into a stewardess job.

The ship shuddered under the flaring nudge of steering jets, and changed attitude. Now the seats were all facing forward and the hoist channel became a gangway. The stewardess came drifting by, curves subtly modified and emphasized by the almost free-fall conditions, bright eyes alert for the first signs of fall-sickness.

"Is he going to be all right?" she whispered, glancing at the glassy-eyed McCool. Miss Horne looked, shrugged, clutched the seat-arms quickly.

"I think so. You must get a lot of VIPs on this run?"

"All the time. Scientists and millionaires, we see them all. Got one extra special right now. You know who?"

Miss Horne wanted to guess, but the silver-glitter stewardess didn't wait. "Remember I said this skint was an Elegante special? Well, she's with us this trip. The lady herself, four rows back from you."

"Oh!" Miss Horne blinked, then said again, with emphasis, "Oh! But I thought—I mean—I heard that The Trippers were catching this flight, to vacation at her moon villa. Aren't they?"

"You don't want to believe everything you hear, dear." The stewardess assumed a delicate sneer. "I've heard that one, but I've never seen those clowns on any of my trips, nor have any of the other girls that I've asked. You believe me, dear, it's just a publicity gag."

"But it can't be! I mean—surely she would have denied it?"

"I don't suppose she even knows, dear. Don't quote me, but she's a bit—you know—peculiar? All in black fur. Furl I ask you. But anyway, she's there, large as life, and with three business associates. Queer lot they are, too; if you ask me. But you see some oddballs on this job, I'm telling you. Anyway, I had better float along and give her a bit of attention!"

And she glided away expertly in slow-motion ballet steps, leaving Miss Horne the prey to all kinds of anxieties.

VI

McCool didn't emerge from his coma until the hair-raising moment of turnover. They had been coasting the last few hundred miles uphill to the gravi-null point with the drive merely rumbling. The captain gave due warning; seat-belts were checked; then the steering jets cut in to flip the cumbersome ship end for end, and the inertial investment immediately set up an emphatic argument. This shuddering racket was totally unlike the earlier experience in that everything was now weightless. McCool snapped out of his tranquilized calm with starting eyes and a feverish clutch at Miss Horne.

"We're just turning over." She tried to soothe him, grabbing him in turn to keep his fuzzy outline reasonably visible. "So that we can back down. To the moon. You know!" He let go, tried to control his shakes, and offered her a choked apology.

"I'm sorry. I've never done this before. I dislike being in large machines of any kind. I suppose"—he struggled with the words, then said them firmly—"I must be grateful to you for coming along, Miss Horne. I shudder to think what it would have been like had I been alone."

"That's all right," she said, smiling faintly, "but there's something you need to know. There's been a mistake somewhere. They aren't aboard."

"Who? What are you talking about?"

"The Trippers. And that girl. They're not on the ship!"

"But they must be! I'm certain—" He surged as if to rise, was checked by his seat-belt, and gulped at the sensation. "They *must* be!"

"Please listen, Mr. McCool," she implored. "I've checked with the stewardess. I mean, she knows all the important people by sight, and she told me. Miss Eleanor Grant is aboard, with three of her business associates, that's for sure, but no Trippers. They must have dodged you, somehow."

"But that's impossible," he cried. Then he caught himself. Miss Grant! "You say Miss Grant is aboard?"

"Yes. The stewardess knows her by sight."

"And"—McCool ground his teeth—"she and that group are thick as thieves, aren't they? Business associates, eh? I see!"

She watched his grim face with apprehension. "What are we going to do, Mr. McCool? We're almost there!"

"Let me think. Miss Horne, I am going to have to take you into my confidence a little more than is customary. Somehow, probably as the result of the inquiries we have been making, there seems to have arisen a definite plot to block me from discovering things about that group. I mean, you've seen some of the peculiar stuff we have been turning up. Now"—he took a reckless breath and began to fabricate—"it's my belief that we are on the edge of some gigantic swindle or other, involving The Trippers, and that woman—and her business associates. Business, hah!" He glared at her; then, as he tasted the flavor of his own words, it came to him that it might not be fabrication at all. Perhaps, all unwittingly, he had hit on the truth!

"But what are we going to do?" she repeated, staring past him out of the port at the gray-white lunar landscape

now frighteningly near. The captain's tinny warning came before McCool could reply.

"We will touch down in fifteen minutes from now, ladies and gentlemen. Please secure your seat-belts. Please remain seated until the clear is given, at which time the exit-tunnel will be secured. Do not hurry. Do not make any violent movements. You may find the reduced lunar gravity disconcerting at first, but it is quite easy to adjust to, with care. You will find a considerable degree of vibration once more, as we touch down. This is quite in order and there is no cause for alarm. I hope you have had a quick and comfortable journey, and that I may have the pleasure of your company on your return flight. Thank you and out."

"Fifteen minutes! What are we going to do?"

"Stop saying that! Miss Horne, I had a trace device planted on—a member of that group. That device came aboard this craft. Therefore it must have been discovered and transferred, and most probably to Miss Grant. Probably they thought that I would hesitate to follow this far, that they would throw me off the scent. But they were mistaken."

"What does that mean?"

"It means, Miss Horne, that I intend to follow Miss Grant, if possible, to this villa of hers, and then confront her with the facts. She is obviously involved in some way with this whole plot, this gigantic tax-evasion ring, or whatever it is. Japanese, or Soviet, or something. Anyway," he declared, "she's in on it, and I intend to get it out of her somehow."

"How can you do that? I mean, she might just refuse!"

"Publicity, Miss Horne. I don't think she would care for that. And I shall need you as a witness to everything that happens. I am very glad you came, Miss Horne. Very glad."

The ship started to shudder and shake. What had been horizontal once more became up-and-down. The bleak and jagged landscape grew on either side until it acquired a concavity, was a horizon, then a distance. The vibration grew to a tooth-jarring climax, and then dwindled swiftly away to a murmur.

Miss Horne had once tried her luck on a trampoline. Walking in this gravity was a very similar sensation. The solid underfoot seemed to bounce one's steps. Fortunately there was little walking to do, only to the exit-port and then on to the slide-walk of the airtight debarkation tube. That brought them out on to a polished floor and under a great glow-dome where silver-clad people with brassards went gliding about their business, and the travelers were con-

spicuous by the hesitant way in which they tried to copy that effortless dancing glide. McCool read off the luminescent signs in a whisper.

"Bar and Grill. Rest rooms. Lounge. News room. Reception. Ah! That's the one. After me, Miss Horne. Let me do the talking, please."

Slithering to an unsteady stop by the counter he hooked one of the attendant girls with an imperious forefinger while fumbling out his glow-card to exhibit to her.

"Mr. McCool," she said, with just the right amount of respect. "What can I do for you?"

"With my secretary, Miss Horne, I am Miss Grant's house guest. Miss Eleanor Grant?"

"Oh yes, sir. But Miss Grant's party just went through—"

"I know. I was held up a few minutes. Would you direct me, please?"

"Certainly." She leaned back to consult a chart over her head, then forward again obligingly. "You take Number Three Tube, over there, see? If this is your first time, be careful how you go down the slope."

"Oh!" He faltered a moment. "We have to walk?"

"I'm afraid—no, wait a bit. Look, if you don't mind riding the baggage trolley, here it comes now. Let me help you." She ducked out from the counter, took his arm and steered him across the glassy floor to where a series of low beetle-like crawlers were debouching from the landing tube, each one laden with assorted luggage. She put her palm on the action-eye of one which bore the mark 3, and it stopped.

"Jump on," she said, "and just sit tight. Well, stand, anyway. It's programmed for Tube Three. Remember, when it stops again, hop off quickly, and you've only a few more yards to go for the passenger platform. All right, now?"

She saw them to the tube-way entrance, then halted, and the trolley crawled on into a brightly lit, glaze-walled tunnel.

"Now what?" Miss Horne demanded. "I mean, one'll kick up a fuss as soon as she sees us on the platform, whatever that is."

"She won't see us. Pay attention. I know a little about this system, even if I have never been here before. The tube is just that, a pipeline to carry passenger and freight capsules. Each villa has its own. This one will go to Miss Grant's. But we will be riding in the luggage section."

"What?" She stared at him.

"You heard me. When this thing stops, it will be to deposit this luggage somehow. We will endeavor to go with it."

Be on the alert, Miss Horne; we won't have time to fiddle around."

The trolley crawled steadily on and down in a slow spiral. McCool, peering ahead, touched her arm suddenly. "This looks like something coming now. Ready?"

She couldn't think of anything to say. Ready for what?

Set into the tunnel wall was a red-glow marker alongside a steely trapdoor. The crawler drew level with it and halted. McCool tensed.

"We must watch what happens, and be—"

He got no further. Without warning the floorboard of the trolley heaved and canted steeply sideways at the same time as the trapdoor slid aside. Both of them, together with a jumbled mass of bags and boxes, were shot into a dark hole, to slide and tumble, ungracefully but not painfully, down a long slide. McCool, speechless, fetched up with a bump against something hard and unyielding. In the next second something heavy and wriggling descended on top of him, discharging the last of his breath in a gasp. There came the hiss of a broken vacuum, a slither and click, and then sudden sideward movement. Rumbling. Then an equally sudden stop, so that the heavy weight pinning him down shrieked, and he realized it was Miss Horne.

"Are you all right?" he whispered, trying to ease out from under. "We seem to be within the baggage section quite safely."

"Forever more!" she wailed, and thrust out, putting her palm flat on his face and snatching it away again quickly. "It's dark in here!"

"Well, naturally!" he snapped. "What did you expect?"

"But I can't see!" she cried, moving again and bringing a knee to bear on his diaphragm. "I can't see what's happening!"

"Keep still and be quiet! I think I can feel them getting in. Yes, I'm sure that's them. Hear that?"

That was another hiss and click of something closing. Seconds later there came again the sensation of sudden sideward acceleration and the subdued rumble of wheels. The pressure of acceleration kept up for several seconds; then, blindingly, two rectangular transparencies blazed into light immediately above him and he saw that he was flat on his back looking up, with Miss Horne sprawled angularly across him, her shoulder up against a curved metal wall and her arm, where she was supporting herself, just clear of his chin. Leaning against her arm was a rectangular suitcase. As she shifted abruptly in the light the suitcase fell, and he twisted

his head aside just in time, so that it impacted on his jaw rather than his nose.

"I'm sorry!" she gasped, and leaned on him to push it away. He bore it patiently, even with a momentary and guilty sense of pleasure at the warmth of her shape resting on him. Then, abruptly, he wriggled himself to a crouch, edged clear, and knelt.

"Now then," he said, "we can see what we're doing. Are you all right?"

"I think so," she quavered. "I don't think I've broken anything. But," and her lip trembled as she hesitated, "I'm so scared. What's going to happen to us?"

"Steady now," he said, catching the ragged edge of panic in her voice. "It's quite all right. Everything is going to be all right. There's nothing to be worried about, Miss Horne."

His soothing tone, so different from his habitual office-tailored impersonality, had a strange effect on her. Like the touch of a sympathetic hand, it released in a flood all the bottled up fears, worries, disappointments and distresses of the past hours.

"Oh, Mr. McCool!" she wailed, her eyes flooding, thrusting herself blindly forward to clutch and huddle close to him.

"Now, now!" he mumbled, putting one arm around her and patting her shoulder awkwardly with the other hand. "I expect you're hungry, or tired, or something. But there's nothing to cry about, really."

"But what are we going to do?" she insisted. "There's the moon, out there!" she gestured blindly back over her shoulder somewhere. "All cold and lifeless. And we're miles away from the base by now. And Miss Grant will be furious—I mean—we've no right to be here!"

"You let me worry about that," he declared firmly. "Here, dry up and at least look at the scenery while it's there. Come on, now!"

She took his handkerchief, dabbed at her eyes, and looked up at him with some awe. "You're so strong. So determined!"

"I make it a habit to get what I set out to get," he told her, not displeased by the admiration so openly and closely revealed. "And I intend to get to the bottom of this mysterious business. And you're going to help me."

"Yes, sir," she said obediently but without fervor.

"And I think you can stop calling me sir. Can't you?" He became aware of his arm's clasp, and started to remove it, but she stiffened toward him at once in fear, and he re-

affirmed his hold. "We're in this together, you know. Just you and I. And I don't even know your first name."

"It's Lucia."

"Very well. Lucia. And I'm Horace. There now, come and look at the moon, and be one of the relatively few people who have ever seen it like this."

She let him tug her around until they were both able to look out of the transparent sections on to the lunar landscape hurtling by. The capsule train was up to speed now, sizzling along on its overhead rail and heading at high speed for the great towering crater wall of Tycho's northern side.

What with the subdued sizzling of the train, the swaying, cradle-like motion of the capsule, and McCool's rather monotonous voice, Lucia found it easy to slip into fantasy, to imagine herself here with Jim—and then the alien quality of the moon helped. She sighed, snuggled tight, and McCool's measured delivery faltered for a word or two. It stopped altogether as the train leaped headlong at the rock-wall side of the crater, plunged into a tunnel cut especially to accept it, and everything fell dark. Caught out of her fantasy, she clung to him in terror. He did his best to soothe her and found the exercise not unpleasing. Within brief minutes they were out into the glare again. Now they were aimed directly for the distant scree-wall edge of Nubium, a course that would take them past the jagged right-hand crater edge of Pictatus.

McCool knew this much, but the words lay unspoken on his tongue. Novel thoughts arose in his mind and flowered strangely: *I've never done anything like this before. Why not? I'm in love with 'that girl' (even in thought he found difficulty framing the ridiculous sounds of her professional name) yet here I am hugging Miss Horne—Lucia—and it is a pleasant sensation.* He shifted his thoughts hastily away to a different level. *But why am I doing this? This impulsive excursion across the face of the moon, why? I'm intelligent. And the whole point of intelligence, surely, is to plan? Surely? And yet here I am, skulking on the trail of a wealthy lady dress-designer, across the face of the moon, without so much as an overnight bag! And no idea what I am going to do at the other end, either!*

The scurrying train swung past Pictatus and launched itself over the rim-wall of the dry sea. For a moment the whole sweep of the southern reaches of Mare Nubium lay spread out to view. And there, as the track took a slow curve to diminish the drop, lay their destination: six glassite domes

enclosing a central squat tower complete with antennagirders. The ubiquitous gray-brown dust had drifted to bury the outer edges of the domes, so that from this distance one was reminded forcibly of some multi-lensed insect emerging from the dust. This was the long-deserted starship base. Over to the right of it, and quite close, was the construction and launch facility. It looked as if someone had driven a long, slanting drift into a mountainside and then covered the whole thing with a cupro-nickel cage. It caught Miss Horne's attention away from her comfortable reverie.

"Whatever is that?" she whispered, her arm tightening around him.

"Once upon a time," he said softly, "Mankind dreamed of going to the stars. That's the gravestone of that dream."

"Whatever for?"

"Exactly. Lord knows, we have enough problems to overcome, right where we are. But that's the way it is, Miss Horne. Lucia. We can barely exist here, and I understand conditions are even worse on the Mars Colony project."

"It does seem a pointless waste," she agreed, "and then just to leave it lying here."

"I believe they salvaged the more delicate instrumentation equipment. But the rest, why, it would have cost more than it was worth to employ labor to demolish it. I imagine the Scientific Advancement Bureau was quite relieved to be able to sell the whole thing to Miss Grant. Quite cheaply, I would guess. After all, it was a dead loss otherwise."

"Miss Grant? You mean that's her place?"

"Oh yes." He looked down at her as the villa swung out of their sight and the train began to slow its rush. "She's a very shrewd businesswoman. But then, we already knew that. We are about to find out just how shrewd. Are you ready for more emergencies, Miss—I mean, Lucia?"

"Whatever you say . . . Horace."

"Good. Now, I don't know too much about this transport system, but it must, obviously, enter some kind of air lock when it stops. They will want to unload this baggage. Somehow we must dodge them and gain entrance to the living space for long enough . . . until they send this thing back. Then it won't matter when we are discovered, because they won't be able to throw us out."

"Suppose they turn violent? I mean—there's just us!" She shivered as she looked up at him. He managed a smile.

"I don't think you need have any fear, my dear. Financial swindlers do not go in for violence. They prefer dealing and compromise, preserving the appearances. In any case,

they dare not threaten me. Unlike those others on Gilbert's list, I definitely would be missed."

Before she could wonder, audibly, what on earth he was talking about, sudden deceleration gripped the capsule, propelling its contents forward. For a confused moment the two clung helplessly to each other and cringed from the impact of rolling baggage. Then all was still. He scrambled up to a crouch, which was all the capsule shape would permit, helped her to her knees, and they peered anxiously through a pane. Out there was the garishly lit inside of a curved enclosure that looked like the same glassy walls they had recently left. Something had rumbled shut, shaking the capsule.

"Air locks of some kind," he hissed, and as he spoke the roof of their prison shuddered and slid back into slots. Greatly daring, he extended his neck and head to peer cautiously forward. There, ahead, were oval doors set in the rock. And then a head appeared, and another, as the authorized passengers rose to step out of the train. McCool watched them as long as he dared, then ducked back, peered out the other side, seized Lucia's arm.

"They're coming along here to collect the stuff. Come on, out the other side, quick and quiet!"

She scrambled up and out on to glossy slag, pressing herself to the side of the capsule as he did. They heard voices, cringed back. He looked around and past her, then touched her arm in soundless indication. She followed his gaze, saw one figure going away on this side, to another armored door. He brought his mouth close to her ear.

"One of them has gone on ahead, to start up the various devices. The others are dealing with the baggage. This could be our chance. Come on."

She followed him in stealthy tread, crouched to keep the bulk of the train between them and the three who were hauling out the boxes and bags. The lone figure ahead had shut himself into a cubicle. McCool had watched the lights change to red—and then, after a few seconds—to green. Guessing, he put his thumb on a button and the lights switched once more.

"Coming back down," he whispered. "Be ready to jump in, quick. It looks as if this is the personnel elevator. The other will be for freight and heavy stuff. Here it is. Quickly!"

There was barely room for both of them to squeeze in. He clutched her close, guessed at another button, pushed it, and the sensation of real weight came for a brief while. Then stop, and another button to make the door open.

They staggered out. Holding her arm, he glanced around rapidly, spotted a nook and dragged her to it. Then there was time to take breath, to stare and see where they had so precipitately landed.

VII

THEY LOOKED out on a large dome-roofed room that might once have been used for technical conferences, or possibly assemblies, or briefings. Now it seemed to an all-purpose lounge, aglow with indirect lighting and strewn liberally with transparent blow-up furniture and throw rugs. And musical instruments. McCool eyed those with a twinge of apprehension, then expanded his attention to the generalities again. This dome had to be under the central antenna, and all around were curved archways leading off into the lesser domes. Where he and Lucia were now cowering was a small recess in one of the upright supports. Even as he wondered where the lone person ahead of them had gone, there came a click and stir and figures moved out of a door a little way around the arc of the main dome. They busied themselves hauling out boxes and cases, just sliding them randomly into the main room.

"That must be Miss Grant," he whispered, studying the lean, black-clad figure in dark lenses. The other two looked like no one he could place, with their pallid gray faces, sleek black hair and clipped moustaches.

"That takes care of it for the moment," said one of them, dusting his hands. "Clean up and eat is my program just now."

"Too right!" the other declared, and McCool started at the heavy Australian drawl. "Ain't it a relief to know we'll never have to ride that flaming rattle-bucket again?"

"Imagine what it must do to the crew," the dark lady said, in a voice that made McCool start again, "having to bear that twice or three times a week! It must porridge their brains! I'll go set up the auto-chef. What's your fancy?"

McCool started forward, incoherencies struggling on his lips. The nearest man, the one with the Aussie twang, half-

turned to stare, held it a moment, then swung back to the other man and jerked his arm up in a mock salute.

"Sir!" he snapped, in a completely different voice. "I have to report a stowaway. *Two* stowaways." The other man stood quite still, just looking. Miss Grant came forward a step, smiled, held out a hand.

"Congratulations, Mr. McCool. Frankly, I never thought you'd make it this far. But who's your companion?"

McCool felt Lucia shivering, felt her hand gripping his like a vise. He couldn't blame her. His own thought-processes were in chaos, his tongue frozen to his palate. Miss Grant came forward more, ignoring him now.

"My dear, you don't look at all well. Come and sit down. If this is your first trip I don't wonder you're a bit scrambled. But you'll be all right in a moment or two. Come on, now, it's all right!"

"Miss Horne is my personal secretary." McCool got the words out somehow. "And she takes orders only from me. Miss Horne!" His desperate blare had no effect whatever. Lucia weaved unsteadily to a bubble-couch and slumped into it. The silent, serious faced one had gone skating swiftly away across the room, came back now with a glass of golden-tinted liquid to hold out.

"Try this," he suggested mildly. "It'll make you feel better."

"Now see here—I"

"Oh shut up!" Miss Grant wheeled, the dark lenses giving her a sudden authority. "You may have the power of life and death over this young woman in *your* world, but not here. This is our world, not yours."

"Miss Horne is my responsibility. She is my employee. I brought her here." In desperation McCool had to fall back on well-worn phrases.

"Poop!" Miss Grant retorted irreverently. "Responsible? You? For what, invasion of privacy? Espionage? Or attempted kidnapping? She didn't know she was coming here, nor was she asked. And she's of age. You could be in bad trouble, McCool."

Before McCool could absorb this unexpected attack the vocally acrobatic one made a gun of his right fist and aimed it at McCool's middle.

"Talk fast, hombre. We ain't got no use for your kind in this here town. Give us one good reason why we don't toss you and the dame right on the next stage outta town, huh?"

Completely bewildered, McCool drew back, cast a desperate glance at the dark glasses, and blurted, "This is

farcical. You're not Miss Eleanor Grant, at all. You've no more right here than I have!"

Miss Grant chuckled, made an elaborate bow, and with one sweep took off the glasses and dark wig; with another movement away went the black fur, and she stood arrogantly in her skintight black body-stocking, shaking free her fiery curls and grinning at him. . . . Yum-Yum.

"So much for that!" She laughed. "Now what are you going to do about it?" Again McCool had to struggle with words and before he could find good ones Miss Horne half-rose, staring. Then she wailed helplessly and sank back into her seat.

"I want to go home! Please, I want to go home!"

"I'm afraid that's not possible," the serious one said, still mild. "The shuttle train is on its way back to base right now. It will take all of an hour to get it back. And anyway, the shuttle-ship won't be leaving for a long time. Fourteen hours, I think."

"Boss-man here can buy her a room in the hotel, can't he? Buy himself one too at the same time. We don't want any master-slave routines here!"

"Can't do that either, Jem," the redhead objected. "This poor girl needs a meal, a rest, and time to adjust. Besides, we send her back with him, he'll be so furious that he'll take it out on her. Job, references, character, the lot. She'll be ruined!"

"How dare you suggest such a thing!" McCool roared, and she shrugged.

"See what I mean? Look, why don't we all unwind, have a fresh-up and eat, and talk this whole thing out sensibly, eh? There's no need for anybody to shout anything at anybody else, and it won't do any good. McCool?"

"You *know* why I'm here," he blurted, and she sighed.

"Yes. I know. Because you're too thickheaded to be told. Come along, Miss Horne, I'll show you the bathroom. Johnny, fix the auto-chef, huh?"

Jem glowered frightfully. "Jest a minute, daughter. What's this man mean to you? Him and his painted-type women from the sinful city, they ain't our kind. Cain't trust him as fer as I can spit!"

"It's all right, Paw!" the grinning girl replied in kind. "I ain't about to take any chances with him but I'm kinda curious to see what he'll do next. Might be a lot of laughs!"

To her own vast astonishment Miss Horne found herself giggling, and encountered a glorious smile from the other girl. She giggled again.

"That's more like it," her hostess approved. "Did you bring any gear with you, Miss—look, what's your name?"

"Lucia. Please, I don't care for Lucy. And I haven't a thing, never had the chance to. It all happened so suddenly!"

"Impulsive, our McCool. Still, that's all right, I have loads of stuff. Maybe not your size, but we'll manage. Call me Yummy, if you like. The boys do, mostly. . . ."

McCool watched the pair of them drift away and struggled to organize his thoughts into some kind of sense. This whole thing had somehow dissolved in his fingers, into frank unreality. The one she had called Johnny was out of sight.

Jem, of the variable accent, hefted a bag or two and said, "This way, m'lord, to the guest chamber. The royal suite is all ready for you."

"What's the point?" he demanded wildly, trailing unsteadily along. "You know I've nothing with me." It was coming home to him with emphasis that he was trapped, the butt of the warped humor of these lunatics.

"Plenty of rooms." Jem halted, waved an expansive hand. "This one's mine. You help yourself. You find one that's empty, it's yours. Bathroom's down the end there. Take a shower, if nothing else. Freshen you up a bit. Then we'll eat. Keep your strength up, you'll need it!"

That ominous hint lingered as McCool investigated the small well-appointed cubicles and chose one at random. Then he made for the toiletry department. Despite his confusion on almost every other level, his trained eyes were impressed by the standards here. The fittings were ultra-modern, the cold water icy, the hot boiling, the fragrance-injector, ultraviolet nook and supersonic skin-freshner all worked perfectly, which was more than one could say for many hotels. An enterprising hotelier, now, could have made a little gold mine out of a place like this.

That train of thought, however, led him straight back into the morass. Miss Grant, fashion-tycoon. She was masquerading as Miss Grant! And the business associates were, of course, those guitar-plucking boys! The telltale bauble had not betrayed him, after all. So much he could cling to, but the rest was even more inexplicable than ever. Somebody, he thought, as he reknotted his genuine silk tie before tracking down the faint but appetite-provoking smells that were drifting his way, somebody was going to have a lot of explaining to do.

Out of the bathroom he heard a noise, music in the distance. Tracking that, he got back to the main room, to a bewildering amount of controlled confusion. Seated at a

four-manual keyboard the serious faced one was fingering out with immense concentration an involved and interlaced melodic line with one hand and furiously counterpointing with the other. He looked younger, more like the stage appearance, except that he was stripped down to no more than a pair of white shorts. By his side Jem of the flexible voice was similarly unclad, was dexterously and furiously treading out a percussion beat that matched the music, his face a broad grin of intense concentration. McCool stared in silence, in reluctant admiration, because, now that he had placed the piece, this was Bach. But it was Bach played faster and much more exquisitely exact than the composer himself could ever have imagined. It was as delicate as lace, as precise as a watch-movement, and utterly alien to the slam-bam crash-bash noise that The Trippers usually served up.

Why the devil, he mused resentfully, *don't they put that kind of thing on tape? That I would go for!* He looked away angrily, to see Yum-Yum over in a far bay, standing in front of what he recognized as an automatic cooker panel. She too had changed, was now wearing a loose, almost shapeless garment of creamy silken stuff with flapping half-sleeves and a hem that ended just below her hips. As she jigged and swayed, snapping her fingers in time to the basic beat, he saw that the blouse—or was it a cheong-sam?—was slit up the sides to her waist. As he drifted unsteadily across to her the soul-shaking fascination of her flared up in him stronger than ever. She was long, lean, leggy, and bonelessly boyish of contour, yet there was something about her that caught his breath and made his heart hammer.

"Hi!" She caught sight of him and beamed. "Coffee in a minute. Oven's all hot now, so dial what you fancy. Right there, look."

"I do know," he retorted, casting his eye down the list of available dishes. "That's quite a selection, though!"

"Nothing but the best for Space Service! Hah, there's mine and Jem's. Johnny's having casserole. Takes longer. And that's Jim's. I'll put that to wait. He'll be back soon." She turned away from the observation window, put fingers in her mouth and created an ear-hurting whistle. "Come and get it!" she called, as the racing music halted in mid-chord.

"Yours will take a minute," she said, as the two musicians came and took away their containers. "What about Lucia? What's her taste?"

"Miss Horne? I'm afraid I don't know that."

"You mean you've never taken that dishy girl out to dinner?"

"Certainly not! What ever gave you an idea like that?"

"Just looking at her, which is obviously something you've never done. Hah, here she comes now. Time to remedy your omission, believe me."

He turned to stare where she was looking, where Lucia had appeared in an archway. She had discarded her travel-weary suit and was now wearing the exact duplicate of the shapeless blouse-thing her hostess wore. On the dancing red-head it looked shapeless. On Lucia's much more ample curves it clung and amplified subtly. McCool stared, and felt uncomfortable. The composed mask that was her office face was gone. Now she looked soft and helpless, and her butter-blond hair, no longer orderly sleek, spun out like a frothy gold halo about her head. Clearing his throat awkwardly, he turned again to contemplate the container that was passing through the high-frequency cooking zone.

"Please understand," he mumbled, "that Miss Horne is only my personal secretary. There is no relationship otherwise."

Lucia came unsteadily, brushing the creamy stuff with her fingers, wide-eyed in awe. "This is real silk!"

"Right. It wears forever, and thrives on washing. Perfect for relaxing in. Suits you, too. Have it if you like. I have lots more."

"But I couldn't—it must cost crazy!"

"Forget it. You just dial your meal. I want to go talk to the boys. Mr. McCool will help you. One of you bring the coffeepot, huh?"

She slid away. McCool felt burningly uncomfortable, as if this transformed Miss Horne were radiating heat at him.

"I'll take that coffee," he muttered, grabbing his meal and the drink carrier and turning away. He had moved only three steps when movement to his right made him halt and turn, to see the third male member of the group make an appearance in another archway. By elimination, this was Jim. McCool watched the new arrival skate his way to the cook-corner, saw Miss Horne turn, and stare as if struck.

"Hi!" he hailed cheerfully, circling her to get at the selection-dial. "I don't know you, do I?"

"Oh!" Her voice shook. "Oh my lord! You're Jim!"

"Right first time. Who're you?"

"Oh!" Her agitation was splendidly visible. "I'm Lucia Horne." She extended a fluttering hand. "Is it really you? May I touch you?"

Jim frowned, looked around helplessly for guidance, caught sight of McCool's stare, shrugged, and said, "I don't see why not, if that's what you want, Lucia."

The trembling hand moved, touched his shoulder, stroked it and withdrew. Miss Horne shut her eyes, drew a deep breath. Her face flushed rosy, then went deathly pale, and she began to collapse.

"One of those, huh?" Jim sounded disgusted as he swooped expertly to catch her. Green eyes flashed at McCool. "Gimme a hand here, can't you?"

McCool put his burdens on the floor hurriedly and stumbled forward to help. Between them they dragged the swooning girl to a balloon couch and laid her out.

"You brought her here." It was an accusation.

"She came with me. My personal secretary."

"So you say. She is also a lunatic fan!" Jim rose, strode back to get his meal. Humiliated and furious, McCool collected his food and settled himself as part of the circle around the low table.

"Nutty fan!" Jim growled. "How did they get here anyway?"

"A good question," Johnny said quietly. "McCool?"

"We concealed ourselves in the baggage section of your train." McCool stated it as flatly as possible. Jem laughed.

"No kidding? What d'you know, a new one! We've seen and tried most of the stunts, them trying to track us, us trying to dodge them—but that's a new one on me."

"I told you"—Johnny's voice was still quiet but with an edge—"that McCool was no fool. Like Yummy said, Mr. McCool, congratulations. But your gallop stops right here, all right? Now, Sunny Jim, what's the good word so far?"

"What d'you mean, so far? It's okay, all GO. What else?"

"You mean you've checked it all out already?" The girl was shrill.

"Sure, why not? Look, that's all part of the design, see. It's broken down into sections, like power-supply, control-module, drive-system, support-system and all that. Each system has an interlock. That's just a Christmas tree array with a green light at the top. If there's anything, anything at all, that is not one hundred percent on line, the green does not go on. That's all standard practice. No green? You start checking down that section until you find the fault. Simple. So there are seven sections, each with its master switch. So what's to take time? Switch one—green. Two—green, three—green, and like that." He made gestures of switching

rapidly. "Seven out of seven, so hit the integrator switch and all is well. Nothing to it!"

"So the next thing is, how long have we got?"

"I left her switched on, won't hurt, and will help get that little bit extra charge in the power-cells." Jim shot a glance at his wrist. "We have a few minutes over eleven hours from now. All right?"

"Right!" Johnny's voice took on a keener edge still. "How do we play this, gang? I suggest we load up everything right away, get that done. Then we can sleep."

"Sleep on the ship, huh?" the girl suggested, and he nodded.

"That's what I meant."

"Sleep all you want," Jim put in. "She's all programmed to take off by herself anyway, whether we're awake or not, at the precise time."

"Clown!" she cried. "You'll set an alarm, you hear? Think we want to be asleep and miss the most exciting moment?"

"Yeah!" Jem broke in with an affected growl. "That's fine, but what about our prisoners here?"

There was a moment of silence in which could be heard the first gasps and stirrings from Miss Horne. She sat up, found five pairs of eyes on her, and flushed a boiling red. Yum-Yum raised a hand in greeting.

"Come on, honey, sit by me. We are just about to discuss your future. Come on!" On long and lovely but very unsteady legs Lucia came to join the gathering, settling into the corner of a couch by Jim.

"What's happened? Did I faint, or something?"

Jim rose hastily, went and got her meal-container, broke the seal-lid and set it on the table where she could reach. He poured a carton delicately, the coffee flowing like thick syrup in the low-gravity environment.

"You just have some of this," he urged, "and listen. Careful how you pick up and drink. Go slow. All right? Now, you said—Jem?"

"I didn't. I was just asking. Johnny, you're the planner!"

"Nothing to plan. Mr. McCool, there's a radio-phone link with Tycho, so you can find out when the next shuttle is going back to Earth. It's all yours."

"I have no intention of leaving," McCool said between his teeth, "until I have some satisfactory answers to some questions."

"That's up to you. No reason why you shouldn't stay here, in the villa, as long as you want. There are plenty of supplies for a month or two. Help yourself. Of course,

you might have a little trouble explaining it later, when you get back home. Miss Horne might not like that."

"I will ignore that infamous remark, and your blithe assumption that you can write me off. You're not very consistent, are you? One minute you credit me with being something better than a fool, the next you try to treat me like a child. You can't have it both ways. You have spoken of a deadline of some kind, eleven hours from now. Explain that!"

"Let me tell him, huh?" Yum-Yum was all on edge now, her blue eyes blazing with fervor. "Can I, gang?"

McCool stared at her in wonder. "Tell me what?"

"Out there"—she waved a hand—"is a starship. You know that much, don't you? Don't you?"

"Of course! This entire extravagance, this whole establishment—"

"All right. All right!" she interrupted him impatiently. "Ride your hobby horse some other time. Right now we are riding ours. In eleven hours from now that ship will take off. For the stars! For Proximal!"

"Oh, rubbish!" he snorted as soon as he could get the words out. "What do you take me for? Why, it's common knowledge that the whole idea was a fiasco, a washout!"

"Will you listen?" she demanded. "You really can be thick, sometimes. Listen! That ship *will* fly. It's been fixed. We fixed it. Well, Jim did, with our help. You just heard him say it was all in GO condition!"

McCool glared at her, and then at Jim. "Is this some elaborate joke? My dear young man, that ship, even if you knew how to reassemble it the way it was, won't fly. I imagine every schoolchild knows by now that the entire venture was—as I have said—a fiasco! You saw, you experienced on the way here in the Lunar Shuttle, the ultimate in space-drive. After years of experiment and refinement, that is the best that can be done, and a very poor best it is. Even if you could duplicate that—which I doubt—it hasn't a hope of getting to any star!"

"I'll go along with you there," Jim said easily, sipping at his coffee. "That rattletrap contraption has its work cut out just to get this far. And you're right again, the original design was a flop. But I've improved on it a lot. It's very simple, really. You know anything about inertial-drive calculus at all?"

Despite himself, McCool couldn't keep his voice from climbing into shrill incredibility. "Are you trying to tell me

you have succeeded where all our leading technologists and engineers have failed?"

Jim finished off his drink, put the carton down carefully, then leaned back and grinned a broad grin. "No," he said. "I guess not. Nobody can tell you anything you don't want to know, can they? Better give up, Yummy, it is not going to work on him."

"Of course it isn't going to work, as you put it, on me." McCool sat up straighter. "You're a clever lot, in your own shallow way. You've achieved some measure of success in a tawdry field, largely by deceiving people. You're all here, even, under false pretenses, carrying out some silly charade on behalf of the faceless people who are backing you. But you are skipping around on the very thin edges of shady finance, that much I know. And that is one subject I happen to be expert on, so you can stop trying to fool me the way you have bamboozled everyone else. What happens eleven hours from now? And why are you trying to get rid of Miss Horne and myself?"

"Who's trying to get rid of you?" Johnny demanded mildly. "Yummy tried to tell you. Jim tried. All I can do is repeat it. At the appointed time, that ship out there will take off for Proxima, whether you like it or not."

"So?" McCool challenged him belligerently. "Suppose I humor your fantasy so far. Very well. The ship takes off. Then what? What has that to do with anything concerning you? Or me?"

"You still don't get it, do you?" Johnny let his tensely serious face slip into his rare smile. "We call this villa the Mare's Nest, for reasons that will be obvious to you if you think about it. The Mare Nubium? We call the ship—just for kicks—the *Ellis Dee*. Get that one? Because it's all set for a trip. To the stars. Out of this world, McCool. Get it yet? Because, oh mighty tycoon, it *will* take off, and when it does, we will be on it. On our way. Taking a trip! We're outward bound, McCool. You still think you're going to stay with us?"

There was something about his quiet, coldly sardonic delivery that put icy chills along McCool's spine, that compelled belief even though his every instinct rejected the fantastic notion.

"You're insane! All of you! Stark raving mad!"

"Now there," Johnny said, rising lazily, "I wouldn't care to argue. Depends on what you mean by sane, doesn't it? Anyway, have yourself a time. Come on, gang, packing to do!"

VIII

McCOOL STRUGGLED to make sense of his hashed-up impressions. It helped not at all that Lucia sat opposite him, deep in the pneumatic grip of a balloon-chair, so posed that she seemed to be all extravagantly lovely legs and wide eyes.

"What are we going to do?" she asked anxiously. "D'you think they really are going to fly away to the stars?"

"That much," he stated firmly, "is rubbish. They mentioned Proxima, our nearest stellar neighbor, which is four and one-third light-years distant." Her baby blue eyes registered only wonder, and he added, fretfully, "That means that even at the speed of light, which is equally impossible, the journey would take over four years! Then, too, imagine the finance, the resources required. Impossible. Ricrous! Why, I doubt if there even is a ship out there."

"We could go and look."

"Why not?" He caught at her suggestion instantly and went to the archway through which the others had vanished. This led to a lesser dome, and, on the far side, a door stood open. Returning voices warned him to duck and take cover, Lucia huddling with him behind an empty packing case.

"That's all the big stuff," the girl declared. "We'll leave this door open for the personal oddments later. Now, Johnny and I will see to the stores. What about you two?"

"Jem gives me a hand with the water-hose. Fuel's in. Nothing else. We leaving enough for the guests?"

"We won't need to touch the ready-use bins at all. Enough there to hold them for weeks. Come on!"

The voices went away and down to some cellar-basement. McCool led the way back to the door. It gave to a connecting tube, sloping down. A long walk brought them to light, and a platform, and astonishment. There was a ship, bigger by a factor of ten than he had imagined it could be. It lay on a ramp-slope that was a vast hole drilled deep into the lunar crust. This gave a view like the interior of a huge chimney, with reflected sunlight bouncing from the chased

hull of the ship itself. Where they stood staring there was a fragile gangway leading to an air lock that was about one-third the way down from the nose. Looking down made him giddy. Lucia grabbed his arm and gasped, not helping.

"My Lord! It's huge!"

"It's a fake," he muttered, clinging to his convictions desperately. "No drive mechanism, see? Remember the shuttle-ship? This thing is no more than a straight tube! My God! It's a missile of some kind!"

"It can't be," she argued. "Why would they take stores and water on board a missile?"

"Hmml" He faced that difficulty, and shook his head. "Well, anyway, I'm going to investigate." He stepped out onto the girder-bridge.

"Don't leave me!" She clutched his arm.

"I can't order you, Lucia, one way or the other. Come or stay, as you please. I'm going." He took care not to look down, made his way to the air lock, across it to the corresponding inner lock, into a passage where deflated spacesuits hung in a row, and then into a large circular space with a smooth floor, cushioned seats around the walls, small tables that were bolted down—and the whole thing gave him vertigo because it was all tilted at almost forty-five degrees from the horizontal. At the lower end of the slope was a pile of stuff that had obviously just been carried in from the base: drums, guitars, organ. Lucia came to crowd him at the door and peer over his shoulder.

"There!" she said. "It is a ship, and there's all their stuff!"

"But it can't possibly fly," he insisted.

"Now what do we do?" she wanted to know, and he snarled.

"Kindly do not keep on saying that!" His emphasis was such that he lost his balance on the door's edge, tottered over the coaming, grabbed frantically at her, and the pair of them went skidding and slithering into a heap among the piled musical instruments. The clamor was hideous. He struggled to a precarious stand, feeling fit to breathe flames.

"You," he said, "will go back to the villa and stay there. You may tell them I have returned to Tycho. I shall secrete myself on this ship, and discover just what is going on."

"I won't!" She shook her golden-blond hair into a disorderly cascade about her face, tugged futilely at her brief dress. "I'm not going to be left all alone."

"You'll be perfectly safe!"

"I will *not* be left alone!"

"Very well." He bit off the words like bullets. "You will have to join me in hiding. There is no other choice!"

"Where?" she demanded, swaying and clinging to him. He looked about, then indicated the ladders which dangled close by.

"Up there. Downward will be toward the engines, upward will be cabins and so on. If any." He caught the nearest ladder and held it. "Go ahead, I'll follow." It was logical, but a mistake on his part. To cling to the lower rung of the ladder while she clambered up offered him a spectacle he could have well done without. But it had to be done, and when he had followed her up the ladder they found cabins, ten of them, with only four that showed signs of occupancy.

"Those others are spares," he concluded. "This was designed, if I recall, as a ten-man expedition. Very well, we will take one spare cabin each, and remain within—"

She interrupted with an objection. "I am not," she declared, "going to sit all by myself in a cabin and wait!"

"But, my dear girl"—he was grimly patient—"you can see for yourself that there isn't room for two people!"

"I am not going to be left alone!" she repeated, in a tone which made him breathe violently and then submit.

"Very well. It will only be for a few hours anyway. But we must be silent, and in the dark, you understand?"

They managed, after a fashion. The bunk bed, intended for one big man, was not wide enough for two, but it served for Miss Horne. And, with him seated on one end, and her head in his lap, they managed.

"Mr. McCool. Horace?" She whispered it in the dark.

"Yes. What?"

"Suppose they really are going to the stars?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Lucia."

That ended that. In a moment or two he was astonished to hear her regular breathing and there was no doubt she had gone off to sleep! His mind was too full of impossible questions to permit the same easy escape. So many impossibilities.

A strident weep-weep-weep noise brought him out of dreamland with the agony of a stiff neck and paralyzed thighs. He moved fractionally, winced at the pain, then winced again as quick footsteps came to a halt by the door, which opened a crack to admit light from outside. There came a click, the cabin light flared, and he squinted to see Yum-Yum standing in the doorway, grinning at him.

"Just making a scratch meal. Come and join us?"

"You knew we were here all the time?" His voice was rusty.

"Of course. We have built-in telltales for that. You'd have been better off in the villa."

Lucia stirred, lifted her head. "What's the time?" she mumbled.

"An hour before takeoff. Come and eat."

She went away, leaving the unhappy two no choice but to groan and follow. Below, the grinning four were huddled by one table, leaning back into the tilt as if used to it.

"You're a hard man to discourage," Johnny said, handing a platter and carton to each of them. "You still have forty-five minutes to kill."

"She said one hour," McCool retorted.

"To the actual lift-off, yes. But the ship seals itself fifteen minutes ahead of that. Access tube retracts, tube-cover slides back, air has to exhaust out, all sorts of things have to happen."

"And you really expect me to believe this thing will fly?"

"The other two did," Jim offered, cheerfully.

"Other two? What other two?"

"We flew the second one about a year ago, and the first one a year before that. No problems."

"And no drive, either!" McCool snapped, suddenly irritated. "Why try to keep up this farce? This thing was never intended to fly. If it is to move at all—and I doubt even that, and anything else you say—it will be fired. Like a missile. Like a bullet out of a gun barrel. And the jet-controls are merely for guidance. I'm not blind, remember!"

"That's pretty good." Jim nodded his appreciation. "Dead on the nose, too. Down at the butt end there is a ferrite cradle, and all the way up the launch tube are ring-magnets. Solenoids. Tucked away in the basement outside is a stack of storage batteries, fully charged. When the computer finally flips the switch, those magnets turn on in sequence and we go up, up and away! That part will be rugged, believe me. I calculate we will go from rest-zero to eight g's in about thirty seconds, up three hundred feet of boost. We will achieve escape-velocity plus right there. And then the drive cuts in, and we're on our way. You don't believe me, huh?" There was no need for McCool to say it, his face did it for him. Jim shrugged resignedly. "So it's your funeral, brother. We've had ours."

"What do you mean by that?" McCool demanded.

"He meant," Johnny said softly, "that The Trippers, and Yum-Yum, are dead. The announcement will be made on

Earth in just a little under one hour from now, by our lawyers."

"That which never was in the first place, no longer is now, and never will be again!" Jem intoned dramatically. "We have dropped our masks, disinherited all our alter egos, given all we have to the poor—whoops! wrong script. Anyway, we are now just us. The past is dead!"

Lucia surprised everybody by speaking up: "If you're just you now, who were you before?"

The shout of laughter that greeted her innocent remark brought a reluctant smile to McCool's lips, but not for long. The implication was too plain. The four were intending to vanish, and this ship was part of the plan.

"You still don't believe it, huh, McCool?" Jim's grin was derisory now.

"Oh yes, I believe you, up to a point." McCool stared at him grimly. "I'm prepared to accept that you will take off in this thing, be fired off in the way you've described it. There's no atmosphere to hinder, and the gravitational force is small. It will work. You'll achieve orbit. But as for the rest"—he shook his head scornfully—"do you really expect me to swallow the notion that you, you four, alone, are responsible for all this? A light-headed group of teenage jazzers?"

"Not jazz," Johnny contradicted quickly. "Jazz is a totally different musical idiom from that which we employ."

"I am aware of that!" McCool snapped at him irritably. "I have a large and valuable collection of genuine jazz. I used the word in default of anything more appropriate. 'Trippers,' then."

"And we're not teenagers," Jem put in. "Not any more. We're all of age, Dad. Officially adult."

"All right!" McCool's irritation overflowed into a shout. "So am I. Older and considerably more sensible than any of you give me credit for. I would remind you that I live, and work, and deal with and in the real world of facts and figures, not in some multicolored psychedelic dreamland. It may be fun, or kicks, for you to pretend that you are embarking on some wild adventure or other. Out of this world! But I think the cold reality will overtake you soon enough, just as soon as the power-masters who are using you decide that you are no longer of any value. Very soon, to judge by what you have just disclosed—that you are dropping out of the public eye."

He met four wide-eyed and astonished stares and felt

reassured that he had divined more than they wanted to reveal.

"You can stop trying to mislead me, trying to get rid of me. I'm not taken in. I stay. The only way you'll remove me is by force."

"That's out," Johnny said softly. "That's just one of the many ways in which we don't dig your world, McCool. We don't interfere with other people, and we don't like other people interfering with us. That's why we've decided to opt out."

"You are not unique in that. You're probably too young or too lazy to study history, or you'd know and compare yourself to the beatniks, and the pot-smokers, the acid-suckers, the flower-people. Opt out of work, yes, but grab all the benefits!"

"No, not us. We do know about the misfits of the past. We studied them for clues. Before you start criticizing them, ask yourself, where could they go that was free? Not like us. We found our place, and we're going."

"So you're determined to stick to that silly story about starfaring?"

"Because it happens to be true."

"I see." McCool pushed away his empty container and leaned back with a contemptuous grin. "Very well, I'll humor you. You've mentioned Proxima. You know just how far away it is, of course? And how long it will take you to get there?"

"We sure know how far it is," Jem declared in an exaggerated drawl, "but we kinda differ on how long a trip it is going to be. It's like the mortician said when they let the casket fall." As McCool stared at him blankly he explained with wide-eyed innocence: "Remains to be seen!"

"And the mortician's name was Phil Graves," Jim said in disgusted tones. "Where do you get your material, from the Smithsonian?"

"I have a collection, on tape," Jem declared proudly, "of the real old-fashioned radio shows. Some jazz too!" He returned eagerly to McCool. "We could compare sometime, maybe? Most of mine is Country and Folk but I do have some Armstrong and Monk!"

"He doesn't have his stuff along, clown! Now will you tune out a moment? What this slip-witted character is trying to say, McCool, is that he doesn't have the brains, or the math, to be able to follow my proof that Einstein slipped a cog or two in his theoretical approach to space-time dynamics. If you take the equations in which the cosmic constant, c , the speed of light in a vacuum, comes out as a lim-

iting velocity, and modify them in the right way, you find that that is only one special case out of many."

McCool felt his jaw slipping, clenched it, caught his voice back from somewhere in the soprano range, and said, "Are you now trying to tell me that you have rewritten Einstein? You?"

"Why not? I happened to think of a couple of things he missed, is all. Not so hard to do, once you get a line on the way his mind worked. Like for instance, he never did take kindly to the quantum idea. Even after Max Planck virtually derived the whole of quantum theory from his original observations and theories—the photoelectric effect, remember? Even then, Albert never liked it. He favored the idea of a continuum. The space-time continuum, you know? So everybody has just followed that. We all know, now, that energy is quantized. Physicists are still chasing the ultimate particles of that when it becomes matter. But nobody seems to have realized that space—and time, too—are also quantized. Get it? And once you introduce that pair of values into your relativity calculus you find, like I say, that c is limited only in one special case, is not an absolute. At all!" Jim glanced around restlessly as if seeking something to scribble on. "I can show you, if you have enough math to follow . . . ?"

"Not now!" Jem waved him down. "That's the story, McCool. *He* reckons we can do it in maybe three months at constant acceleration, but we don't pay too much heed to him. Even if it takes six-seven years though, so what? We're not worried. This ship was designed to support ten men for that long. We'll get by all right."

For the first time McCool felt the vague touch of uncertainty, the first frightening intimation that he could be wrong, that these four were serious. Screamingly insane, but serious.

"You expect me to believe," he muttered, getting to his feet, "that you four, with fame and fortune in your pockets, are deliberately throwing it all away on this—this suicide notion?"

"I don't expect you to believe it," Johnny said unexpectedly. "Not you. You're a card-carrying member of the cashocracy down there. That's your world. You fit. You like it. We don't. We don't have your wall-to-wall mediocrity, your credit-card security, your drip-dry values. So we wouldn't expect you to believe that anyone would want out."

"But—but—you're rich! Successful!"

"Rich, in what? Money? That's true. And, unlike you, it's ours and we earned it. We didn't get it by manipulating other people's earnings. But we got rich with an object in mind. This is it. Successful? At what? At marketing and selling illusions for the masses? At being illusions ourselves? Call that success if you like." Johnny's words fell like acid-drips. "You've been told, McCool. You know it all. Whether you believe or not, better blow, brother, while there's still time, while your illusions are still intact. You've nothing here."

"Not even me!" The girl spoke now, icily firm. "Whether your stupid infatuation still burns, whether it ever did or was just frustration at not being able to get something you wanted, get this: I am not for you, or for anybody anything like you, ever. So, as Johnny said, better blow!"

McCool went back a step or two, unsteady on the sloping floor, feeling fear, feeling the combined taunting rejection of these four youngsters. Their level stares followed him dispassionately. The last ingrained traces of his upbringing stiffened him, made him stop and stand defiantly.

"It was a good try," he muttered, "but it won't work. I'm not going. I'm staying right here. I'm going to call your bluff!"

There was a silence, a long silence that crackled; then Johnny nodded, and smiled. "You're true to form, McCool. A real stupid. A primitive. What you can't understand you reject. And fear. And condemn. Think it over, and you'll see right there exactly why we don't fit in your world. So all right, stay, and be it on your own head. Don't say we didn't warn you!"

Then there was a stir, and a plaintive voice asked, "What about me?"

Four pairs of eyes swiveled to fix on Lucia, and she flushed. Then she who was no longer Yum-Yum said, quietly, "You're a free agent, Lucia, just like him. "We're advising you to leave, of course, but it's up to you to decide whatever you want to do. You have less than ten minutes."

IX

FOR LUCIA it was vastly simpler than it had been for McCool. She looked at him, then at the four, and fixed on Jim finally.

"You really wouldn't mind if I came along with you, wherever it is?"

"Sure you won't be bored? Six or seven years is a long time!"

"It's a long time anywhere, isn't it? Can I stay here?"

"If that's what you want."

"Will you mind, Yummy?"

"Me?" The red-haired girl raised her brows momentarily, then grinned in understanding. "You have the McCool syndrome too, huh? For young Jim, here? No skin off my nose, honey, but I fancy you're doomed to disappointment. Jim has already lost his heart to a lady, in a manner of speaking. Or is a spaceship feminine, like the seafaring kind? I don't know. Anyway, if you can get between him and technology, you'll be the first that ever did. Still want to stay? Yes? Good luck!"

"That's not enough," Johnny interrupted, glancing at his wrist. "You will need more than that. A few rules. You too, McCool. Any minute now you will hear the first alarm. That's the ship's sealing circuits. Then, five minutes before zero, there will be another. A bullhorn. When that sounds you have just five minutes to get into a bunk—in a cabin—and stay there. Eight g's is not pleasant. It won't last long, but unless you want to be scraped off the floor afterward, get into a bunk and stay there until we're on drive. You understand?"

Lucia nodded, and he looked to McCool. "You?"

"Keep it up!" McCool said savagely. "Play out the farcel!"

"We have only limited medical equipment and training. If you want to be a fool the hard way, that's up to you."

There came a rapid clamoring of bells to put a period to his words. Jim stood up easily and stretched.

"I'm going up to the control."

"I'd like to see that control room."

"Not on your life!" The change in Jim was dramatic. "I would as soon let you operate on my right eye!"

McCool's response was to turn and scramble for the nearest

of the two up ladders. He had reached it and was on the third rung when a hand grabbed his ankle. He hung on and lashed out savagely, his whole being burning with triumph at this, his first break through their armor. The hand clung doggedly and he slipped his other foot free to kick, glancing down. Jim grabbed and caught the second foot, wrenched hard, and McCool came down in a scramble, all in a heap on the floor. Furious, he bounced up and leaned into an awkward crouch facing his green-eyed opponent.

"So you don't want me to see the control room, eh? And you don't believe in violence?"

"Only when it's absolutely necessary. Like now. Think I'm going to give you five minutes to destroy what I've spent five years making? Get away from that ladder, Dad, or I'll wrap you up and put you away in a corner."

"Try it!" McCool invited grimly. "Just try it!" He shuffled into the nearest approximation of a boxing stance he could achieve on the tilted floor, and waited for the lean youth to come on. Part of him wondered how he had let himself be trapped into this ridiculous situation, this disgusting indignity of indulging in a brawl, but such hesitation was swamped by his sheer animal desire to lash out and let off some of the frustration and irritation that had been building up in him for so long. And he would show that haughty blue-eyed goddess that he, McCool, was all man, even in this.

But Jim had other ideas. Moving in with casual stance he reached out a hand. McCool struck it aside, and yelped as slim fingers closed on his wrist with a painful grip. Jerked off-balance, he yelled again, louder, as a chop on his shoulder paralyzed one arm. Another chop, so fast he couldn't see it done, crippled the other arm, and as he stood there helpless and swaying, Jim speared him in the stomach with stiff fingers, making him curl right into a palm chop across the bridge of his nose. He reeled away, tears blinding him, to stumble and fall over a balloon-chair.

When his vision cleared it was in time to see Johnny, apparently the last, just disappearing up the ladder. He crouched and looked back to say, "All yours, McCool. Nobody invited you, so you only have yourself to blame. You're free to follow as far as the cabin deck, but you can't get to the control area now. Jim has lowered the hatch. Have a good time!"

McCool watched his skinny legs disappear altogether, and now, belatedly, he began to feel fear in earnest. The crazy room, tip-tilted and strewn with unlikely objects, seemed to mock him. This was a spaceship, and they were taking it

to the stars! They had kept on saying so. All McCool's loathing for being dominated by machinery surged into panicked life. Then the bullhorn, loud and shocking, made him jump with its three-fold roar.

Five minutes to go, and he stood in an agony of indecision, not knowing which way to jump. The exit hatch, over there! At the far end he could see the air lock. Shut. He reached it, prodded at controls, battered on it in futility, and a taped voice shattered him by saying, laconically, "One minute to launch-time and counting."

He fled unsteadily back to the main chamber, slipped on the floor, fell, and slid into an aching heap amid the clustered plastic-bubble furnishings. He got up, breathing hard and fighting irrational terror, and that tinny voice told him, "Ten seconds."

His stomach churned, heaved, sent sour-tasting vomit up to the back of his throat. "No!" he croaked. "Stop it! Stop it!"

The voice didn't—couldn't—hear him.

"Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Zero."

The floor struck McCool through his feet, made his legs buckle. It thumped again, and again, the pulses coming faster and faster. An enormous weight grew in him, bearing down, crushing him to the floor. He buckled, saw a plastic couch nearby, fell into it awkwardly, and the weight grew giant-size, squashing him, squeezing out his breath. Lift-pulses came faster. He felt himself sinking into the yielding plastic, his joints twisting, deforming agonizingly under the pressure. A mighty fist gripped his chest, wouldn't let him breathe. His own pulse hammered in his ears, blackened his vision. The air-filled plastic creaked and billowed up to engulf him.

The crushing weight grew to nightmare dimensions, became unbearable. He felt a sudden, shattering jar, the bone-crushing impact of the hard floor, a flaring blaze of lights in his head, and then merciful darkness swallowed him.

Faintly, distantly, he knew that someone was trying to pull him back from this comfortable dark into that agonizing other place of light and pain. He whimpered, wanting to be left alone. Voices came, foggily at first, then louder and plainer.

"We don't even know how bad he's hurt, damn it!"

"Can't leave him here."

"He's burst the couch. Bound to have broken bones."

"Let me see him!" An authoritative feminine voice, this one. "I have training in medical first aid."

Hands came out of the haze to touch and pull, and hurt. He protested, and that authoritative voice told him, "Just keep still until I find out what the damage is. I won't hurt you any more than I can help. Have we anything I can give him as an injection to kill the pain?"

"Medical box, Johnny?" Another feminine voice, strangely shaken.

The hands again, palpating and investigating. Then the bite of a needle and the grateful diminishing of the pain waves.

The controlling voice again, very firmly: "We can't leave him here. We will have to rig up a cradle of some kind, to get him to a cabin."

And then everything went a long way away and was quiet.

He was in a box. And there were aches, a whole array of them pressing in on him from all sides. McCool opened his eyes carefully, warily, and saw a dim glow, and a roof close above his face. A wall to the right; to the left, nothing.

He turned his head that way and stared a long moment until the sight and his memories coalesced into sense. A cabin. Spaceship cabin! Panic came unbidden and he tried to stir, to sit up, and something sent out a quiet *ping*! He slumped back, sweating. Within three breaths the door opened and Lucia came in hurriedly, wide-eyed and anxious, straight over to him.

"Don't move!" she ordered, putting a palm on his chest. "Do you understand what I'm saying? Blink your eyes if you do!"

"I can talk!" he protested, his voice sounding like gravel-scrapings and hurting his throat. "What—"

"Oh please!" She stooped low and attentive. "Please keep still and do nothing sudden. Talk, if you must, but don't move until I tell you." She touched her wrist—he saw a metal band there, with an instrument—and said into it, "Jem? He's awake and conscious. Would you bring that soup now?"

"Right away. Good news, hey?"

As McCool stared at Lucia, still stooping over him, the door opened again and Jem sidled into the narrow space bearing a vaporous carton.

"Hi, invalid!" he greeted, handing her the carton. "Back with us again, huh? Swallow some of this, you'll feel better."

He went away again promptly. Lucia settled on the bunk-side with the carton and a spoon. She had folded back a

long slim lever that had been lying across his chest. He rolled his eyes at it.

"What's that?"

"An alarm-system that Jim rigged up, to give warning when you moved. It's switched off now."

"Just how long have I been—away?"

"Open!" she ordered, and came at him with the spoon. He swallowed, and it was hot, almost too hot, but delicious.

Three more times he submitted, then turned his face away, to a creaking neck, and said, "That's enough, until you answer some questions. How long?"

"A little over three weeks."

"What?"

"Keep still!" She frowned at him. "So far as I can tell you have three broken ribs and a broken arm, but there may be internal injuries that I can't discover. You've been unconscious and in some kind of delirium all this time. Johnny guessed it might be catatonia, or fugue, or something, but we don't know. I'm the only one with practical training—"

"You?"

"Yes. Just a little premed nursing training."

"Oh! And was it part of that training that you attend your patients in the nude?"

Spots of red glowed in her cheeks but she met his stare steadily. "You are not in any position to criticize, Mr. McCool. You were never invited. You were told to leave, and given every chance. You refused to obey orders. You inflicted yourself on us. You've been a liability and a worry for three weeks and more. I think a little gratitude would be more the indicated attitude, don't you?"

He submitted again to being fed until it was all gone and she put the carton aside. Then she reached and touched his chin and cheek.

"You'll need another shave soon."

"Shave?"

"Yes. It's depilatory cream, actually. The waste-converter system is designed to handle that, whereas it wouldn't be able to deal with the ordinary clippings from a razor, because that would be like dust, you see, and would foul up the air-enriching plant."

"You seem to know a lot about it. The ship, I mean."

"I've had time to learn. And it's necessary. I mean, we're all in it together, aren't we? If you ever do move again, you'll have to learn too. I mean, just one silly mistake and we could all be dead!"

"If you ever move again"! The dreadful phrase crowded

at the back of his mind, pushing at his control. "You really don't know how—handicapped I am?" He swallowed, then added, "Or if I'm handicapped at all?"

"I know about the broken bones. I've set those. But the unconsciousness, the complete coma—I don't know about that. I think the best thing you can do is just rest." She rose from the bunk and went to the door, then turned. "I'll ask Jim to bring you a talker like this so that you can be in touch, now that you *can* talk. As for the nudity"—she made a sketchy gesture of dismissal, and he saw that she was, in fact, wearing a skimpy pair of shorts, but nothing else—"it's all part of the support-system. You see, we can't afford the water-loss involved in laundry-work. Whereas these"—and she sketched that gesture again—"are disposable paper, machine-made to order. You see?"

She went, closing the door gently, leaving him to see, painfully, what she had not said in so many words, but had implied so plainly that he had to face it. This was a world, albeit a small one, and it was a closed system. He had to learn to fit in, to take it as it was. Humility. Fit in. Adapt.

He tried to sit up, discovered aches that made him sweat, but kept on. There was rigid yet transparent casing-stuff of some kind on his chest, all over the left side. His left forearm was clad in the same stuff. But his right arm moved. He could bend at the waist. He could sit up. Queasy-stomached, dizzy, unhappy, but sitting up. A faint bee-buzz of vibration tickled his feet from the floor. He heard the windy purr of ventilation. Then footsteps, and the door, and Jim coming briskly in, to halt and stare.

"Hey! Take it easy, Dad; what are you trying to do to yourself?"

"I'm all right!"

"Like fun, you are. Hold it!" Jim reached a long arm, pulled and swung the wardrobe door, with its mirror. "Here, you take a look and say that again!"

McCool looked, and had difficulty in recognizing himself. Dark eyes, red-shot and rimmed with brown stains, stared back at him. Gaunt cheeks, lank black hair spiky from the pillow, dull gray skin, a scarecrow grin.

"I look a sight, don't I?"

"What d'you expect, three weeks out like a light, force-feeding, raving in delirium? Hadn't been for Lucia, you'd have died. She's hovered over you like a mother hen most of the time. Here!" Jim came closer, held out a bracelet with a tiny watch-like device built into it. "Gimme your hand."

McCool watched him clasp the band on his right wrist.

There didn't seem to be any controls to it, just a flat metal grille.

"How do I operate it?"

"You don't. Just talk into it, when you want to."

McCool pulled his arm back, let it fall into his lap. He felt weary, but frantically curious. Long-delayed realizations came bursting into his mind like glittering bubbles. "Talk to me for a moment?"

"Sure. What's on your mind?"

"I owe you an apology. For being crude. Trying to attack you."

"Forget it. I'm touchy about the control-section." Jim settled by his side on the bunk. "You see, we designed it for us, not for stup—I mean, ordinary people. Hell, you know what I mean. Machinery, any machinery, has to be designed so that a fool can't go wrong with it. You look at an auto, sometime. What they call safety factors are nothing more than protection for the stupid driver, or from other stupid drivers. I mean, now look at, say, a racing car. Or at some of the old-time models. You had to be a real driver just to take them on the road."

"I know about vintage cars. I have a collection of models. But it never struck me before. You're quite right, of course, a modern car is designed to be within the grasp of anyone reasonably intelligent." McCool scowled at the new slant.

"Yeah, well, like I said, this one is built for us. We've been planning this one since we were eleven, all of us. So there are no labels on anything, no protective devices, no safeguards like in a standard job. It's built, mind—it won't fall apart. But you *could* poke your finger in the wrong place and blow everything, see what I mean?"

"I'm still not quite with you." McCool struggled to bring the hugeness of the whole thing into his grasp. "You're saying we are actually on our way, just as you planned?"

"Let me not fool you." Jim grunted in deprecation. "The whole thing almost blew inside the first ten minutes. You see, we were sweating on how to get you into this cabin, up that ladder, without doing any more damage. You know? And the computer course-correction circuits cut in. If I'd been on the job I would have gentled them down a bit, but as it was the steering jets cut loose hard, and we went into oscillation. That's one of the snags with my drive system, it resists direction changes."

"Your drive system?" The old part of McCool shivered in shock at the facile words, while the new, humble part was simply curious.

"Nothing to it, once you see how it's done. You see, basic to the whole drive theory is the fact that you can unbalance inertia. This is obvious. People have been doing it for centuries without realizing it. The time-of-onset factor is what does it. Imagine a man sitting on a raft. He leans well back, slowly. Then he swings himself forward with increasing speed, and stops himself suddenly. The accumulated inertia is dispersed through him and the raft, and it moves, just a little. He does it again, and it moves more. If he could go back slow, come forward fast, stop—fast enough and keep it up, he could work up a decent speed. You ever see the prototype model of the current drive system?"

"Saw it in college, yes." McCool remembered it well enough: a system of weights caused to follow a track that looked as if someone had taken a circle and pulled out a section of it into a peak. Three-quarters of the run of the weights exerted steady centrifugal force outward from the common center and the inertial forces were balanced. But as each weight sailed into the brief straight, and then whipped abruptly around the sharp turn, the inertial thrust was unbalanced, and the wheeled model trundled steadily in the direction indicated by the peak. It had struck him at the time as a hard way to get lateral movement, when it was so easy to connect the motor to the wheels. But the next stage was to somehow get that inertial imbalance pointing upward, and there the theory had been too deep for him.

"What they missed," said Jim, as if it was elementary, "is that there doesn't have to be gross movement at all. Solids can transmit inertial impulse effects without actually moving. What I mean, they *do* move, but only in the sense of a wave of compression-expansion. I'll show you. I still have the original test model I made, years ago. Back in a minute."

He went out briskly, leaving McCool to sit and try to sort out his chaotic thoughts. Where was the barrier he had been so conscious of before? This youngster was friendly, almost eager to talk. And lucid. Even if what he was saying was nonsense, it *sounded* rational enough, sounded as if he knew exactly what he was talking about. And here he was back again, opening the wardrobe to swing out a small tabletop.

"This will scare you." Jim chuckled. "It did me, anyway, when I first tried it out. Just for the record, incidentally, we have one *g* right now. Continuous acceleration. Right? Now, this silly-looking thing is all there is to it. This part is an ordinary solenoid, small but powerful, built on an aluminum former. That is just to keep it light. And this bit is a solid

slug of soft iron and lead, sintered to make a rigid mass. Right?"

McCool picked it up, a heavy thing about three inches long, with wires trailing from the solenoid end, and the whole looking like an overgrown bullet from some massive gun. He put it down again on the table, and Jim carefully stood it upright.

"Now," he said, "if I pass a jolt through the coil I instantly get a magnetic field—at least, for all practical purposes it's instant—which tries to heave the slug into the solenoid core. But it can't, because the whole thing is rigidly connected. And that magnetic field, at the same time, is trying to drag the solenoid over the slug. See what I mean: it's an instant pull inward, between the two components. And futile because both are rigidly locked so they can't move. But—and this is the whole trick—there is a mass difference between the two of about ten to one, so the solenoid part tries to jump downward, and the slug tries to jump upward, both simultaneously—and it takes the slug ten times as long to respond. Mass difference, you see? The slug is still surging long after the solenoid has quit. So you get a residual surge upward. If I stood this on a balance, and gave it a jolt, you'd see the weight-reading drop just for a second. All right so far? So, then, the next trick is to feed a series of impulses into that couple so that the slug is kept surging upward. Timing is important here. It took me weeks. You just watch now."

He moved a switch on the box that was at the other end of the wires, and McCool heard a shrill humming. The note climbed, became uncomfortably shrill as Jim eased around a vernier—and the innocent-looking little thing began to tremble, to rattle the tabletop. And then it climbed, impossibly and ridiculously, into the air until there were six inches of nothing between it and the table's surface. McCool extended a hand cautiously and made passes underneath. Jim chuckled.

"Natural reaction. Don't blame you. Did the same thing myself. You know, the nicest thing about it is that you don't need a lot of power, once you get the impulse-surges going. You have it all invested in the mass, you see? We picked up a lot from the ground-assist, just before we took off, and our requirement right now is small."

"But it's fantastic! So shockingly simple!"

"Yeah. That's the bad part. Always gives me a nasty taste in the mind when I find something that has been staring us in the face for so long and nobody saw it. Like gravity it-

self. Or Newton's laws of motion. Steam-pressure. Telepathy. Things like that." He rose suddenly, gathering in his little exhibit in one hand, shoving the table out of the way with the other. "I'd better blow now. You take it easy. Remember, any time you want to talk to anybody, just call by name and then go ahead."

"Wait. One thing—"

"What?" Jim halted at the door and then grinned. "Oh! You mean Yummy's proper name? You ask for Nell. All right?"

Then he was gone, the door clicking shut after him, McCool sitting there in a daze of wonder. It was hard to realize, now, that all this had followed from his irrational infatuation for—what was that name?—Nell? It didn't suit her. Looking back, this time, was like trying to remember someone long ago dead. It was all unreal now. Or this, here and now, was the unreal and that, the real, was gone out of reach.

Heading for the stars! It still didn't make sense. Four guitar-playing popular entertainers, one personal secretary, one junior finance tycoon, one impossible ship—he pulled his thoughts away from that down-spinning spiral and back to more immediate matters, raised the wrist-band device to his mouth, cleared his throat.

"Nell? If you hear me, could you come and talk to me a moment? If you please?"

"Shall I bring you some more soup?" Her reply was prompt, clear as a silver bell, and with a truly lifelike sound, as if she stood there before him in person.

"You're very kind. I'd like that."

"I'll be right there. Are you decent?"

He detected the tinge of humor in her question, and smiled, but at his past deficiencies. "Does it matter?"

"My, you are improved. I'll be there in a minute."

Like Lucia, she wore only the minuscule paper shorts. Unlike Lucia, she still looked boyish, amazingly capable, utterly unsensual. She grinned cheerfully as she came and sat, filled the spoon. Like Jim, there was no longer any sense of barriers, but a cool and candid friendship, as of equals. He allowed her to spoon-feed him for a while, then protested.

"I think I could do that myself."

"I reckon you could, too, but I waited until you wanted to try it for yourself. Here, I'll hold the carton, you try the spoon."

"You're extremely understanding."

"You didn't always think that, did you? You know why?"

"I suppose"—he took it out and looked at it as if it were data about someone else—"it was because I didn't want to. No, that's not quite it. I didn't want to admit that your understanding was correct."

"And why not?"

"Because"—he chewed that one over a bit—"because it would mean that you could understand me, whereas I couldn't understand you. I still can't. Why can't I?"

"You know the answer to that, too, if you look hard enough. But it's not urgent. Leave it awhile. It's by no means easy for us to understand ordinary people, so it follows that it can't be easy for you to understand us, either. Don't worry about it."

"Us!" he echoed, working carefully with the spoon. "I've just been talking with Jim. I realize now that he is brilliant, some kind of intuitive genius. Are you saying that you all are, all four of you?"

"Something like that, yes."

"What are you?" he asked, suppressing the chill that crept along his spine, and not daring to turn and look at her. "Are you . . . aliens?"

She collected the spoon, dropped it in the carton and sat with it clasped in her hands. "You know, we used to worry about that, too, when we were kids. We checked it back. Jim, Johnny and me, we're only children. Nothing remarkable about our ancestry that we could find. Nothing queer about our parents either. I mean, they didn't work with anything nuclear, or mutagenic, nothing to account for us. Jem, now, is slightly different. His folks were well-off and he has a brother, much older than he is, who is a positive genius at money. Thick as molasses in winter at anything else, but a natural with finance. And he's sweet, too. Never asks any awkward questions. He helped us a lot when we first started making money. But, getting back to the main problem, no, I don't think we are alien. I think—and we all agree that this is the most likely explanation—we are just brighter than normal. What made us different was chance, the chance that brought four of us all together at once."

"I don't understand that."

"Well, there must be—in fact there are, and everyone knows it—hundreds of thousands of brighter than average children born every day. But even with enlightened parents, and in a progressive society, they get held back to some extent simply because of the age barrier. Adults, even with the best intentions, can come only so far toward understanding

a child. Any child. And society insists that the child be made to fit society, to some degree. Where we were lucky was that we had, to start with, parents who didn't know, and didn't care much, so they didn't interfere at all. And second, because we found each other very early, and knew each other. And stretched each other to the limit. Because, you see, we are four different people, and we drive each other all the time. Like, for instance, Jim is a whiz with anything that works, with material energies and constructs. You know that. Jem, now, has the family gift for handling finance, for business, for organizing things to pay off. Buzz—that's his brother—is limited to just one aspect, but Jem does it all, can switch from one viewpoint to another and see all sides of a deal, not just one."

McCool shook himself gently, trying to shake loose the growing sense of unreality. There was something intrinsically compelling about her quiet statements, and yet his residual common sense kept insisting that this was just talk, just fancy, the stuff of dreams.

"Of us all," she went on, "I think Johnny is the really complete brain. I can't describe it properly. Call him a visionary, the sort who can see the whole thing in the round, all the details and everything. Scope. Sweep. Grasp! Words like that. And philosophy too. And"—she gave a little deprecating chuckle—"I have to try to keep up with those three, all the time. We all try to keep up with each other. That's what I mean by being stretched, all the time. It's a hard life!"

"But you must surely have been noticed? At school, for instance?"

"No fear!" She laughed again. "We're drop-outs, all of us. We wanted no part of that system, thank you." She stood suddenly, turned to face him and grinned challengingly. "That shakes you, doesn't it? In your world a good education is the *sine qua non*, or one of them. The passport to all the goodies. And the neuroses. Rational education in a non-rational world?"

McCool stared at her, without infatuation, with a clearer gaze. She was not beautiful. Her brows were too high, her eyes too wide, her chin elfinly pointed. And the rest of her, her lean lines, the small and firm breasts, the flat stomach—a word bloomed in his mind and he fastened on it. *Immature*.

"That's right," she said. "I'm twenty-one. We all are. In years. But we're far from being adult, yet. That's just one more reason why we had no place in your world." She laughed again, breaking the moment of chill. "That's enough

for you, for the moment. You need rest, time to get well. I hope you'll be well enough to join us for our test moment."

"Test?" he queried dully.

"About two days from now we'll know whether young Jim's theories about space-time are right or not. We're looking forward to that."

She had turned away to the door before he could call out for her to wait, to answer the question that burned his tongue.

"You—you're telepathic, aren't you?"

"Of course. So are you."

"I am not!" he cried, and she laughed again.

"Of course you are!"

"I am not. What makes you say that?"

"What makes you think you're not? Everybody is, only they don't know it, don't know how to use it. Think hard. Where do you imagine all the ideas that enter your mind come from? Think about it."

And she was gone, the door clicking shut after her. He struggled to hoist his legs back on to the bunk and stretched out. And tried to think.

X

OF HIMSELF, McCool couldn't have said whether it was two days, two minutes, or two weeks. His sense of unreality came and went like the ebb and flow aftermath of influenza, and his lucid moments kept presenting him with additional data to confirm the queerness of everything. Evidences of telepathy? Let him feel hungry, or thirsty, and someone came almost immediately. And he couldn't be sure whether that person had just happened to be in his mind, or had just happened to be on the way and he had thought about it afterward. He was mixed up, and shakingly unwilling to admit that anyone could know what was in his private thoughts.

Then, from time to time, there came music, faintly through the intervening airspace. He could imagine the trio down there in the main lounge having themselves a session. He

recognized some of the numbers as being from their tape-track repertoire. But there was someone down there who could blow a sax exactly like the late Coleman Hawkins, and someone else who had the true spirit and feel of the immortal Satchmo himself on trumpet. And others. It seemed he had only to think of a favorite from his personal collection, and there it was, being played. Even to the girl vocalists. Could that be Yum-Yum, or Nell, as she now was? From all the tapes he had so assiduously collected of her he could recall none with that simple lyrical quality. And, to dampen his fear of telepathy, she did not come, whether he hoped for her or not.

But he made himself exercise steadily. That was the one solid aspect out of the whole confusion. That was how he was able to say, when Jim came again to tell him the moment was at hand: "I'd like to see it, if you'll let me."

"Not a lot to see, and it will have to be from the control room. You feel you can make it?"

"I can." McCool swung himself from the bunk and stood, just to prove his point. "I need something to wear, but I'm capable otherwise."

Jim shrugged. "That's easy to fix, but you recall what I said about controls, huh? Not to touch anything at all. Especially now. Okay?"

McCool signified his agreement, and, clad in a fresh-made pair of paper shorts, he followed Jim, carefully, out and along the narrow passage to the up ladder, and then, still carefully, up into the heart of the ship. *Brain*, he corrected himself. *Or nerve-center?* And then that train of thought went glimmering as he stepped out onto a level floor and saw what was to be seen. Bubble-chairs had been imported from below, and the rest were there, seated and waiting, all facing a large and glowing screen. Around, out on the fringe, were stars in numbers beyond all imagining, so many that the vastness of space seemed crowded. And colored. Somehow McCool had not expected that. Vivid colors, all hues, but no plain white ones. A mental leap got him to the point of realizing he was looking out of the peripheral windows of the control bubble nose—and not just staring into uncharted void.

He tightened his grip on Jim's arm and asked, "Why are they *all* colored? No plain white stars?"

"Huh? Oh, that's because we're rapidly approaching the velocity of light itself. Spectrum shift. That panorama shows stars at right angles to our line of flight, so the effect is not

so severe, but it's there. They're darkening into the red end. Sit here."

McCool sat, his eyesight adapted now to the blacked-out room. Nell was on his right, Lucia on the left, and two dark profiles were Jem and Johnny. Jim had moved to stand by the glowing screen, a dark shadow with a voice.

"One more replay," he said, "just to get us all in the clear. This screen is giving us our stern view. This we are going away from. As you see, the stellar bodies we can see are all in the dark red. Incidentally, luminosity is not a significant factor, as this image is the result of photo-multiplication systems. What I mean is, if there are light rays at all reaching our camera, no matter how feeble, we'll see them. Don't need to tell you the color indicates we are receding from these sources at something close to light speed. That's obvious. But, and this is where it gets tough, there are no proved methods of measuring our speed in this kind of situation, only theoretical ones. So we have to use a secondary data-source. Like this—" There was a faint click; then the silence gave way to a thick and turgid growling, booming, grunting that took McCool several seconds to identify as music played abysmally slowly.

"You guessed it." Jim spoke over the ear-aching din. "That is a radio broadcast from Earth. I lined it up especially. It's an FM music station, and almost out at the limit of detection for us. But I am taping this as you hear it. Later, by speeding it up, I hope to identify the time at which it was originally broadcast, and by that means calculate just where we are now. More immediately though, by my calculations we should break the light barrier in about ten minutes."

"Ten minutes?" McCool's voice was shrill. "Isn't that a little precise? I mean, you expect to achieve one hundred and eighty-six thousand, two hundred miles per second—at some precise instant?"

"Well," Jim drawled, "it becomes a little difficult to be dead accurate when the computer itself is moving almost as fast as the electronic impulses inside it. And I'm not sure just what will happen to our power and lighting system, which is why we are blacked out, and why the power source to the drive is located in front of it. So I'd say give or take a minute or two. But about ten minutes anyway." He had hardly done speaking when the awful mockery of music died away in a basement growl.

"Below audible range," Johnny commented mildly. "Nice work, Jim boy. You're on the nose so far."

"What will happen next?" Lucia asked, and McCool was astonished to hear there was no terror in her voice at all. *How can she be afraid of something she just doesn't understand?* he explained to himself, and grasped the fat arms of his bubble-chair, the sweat breaking out on him as those clustered star-images grew redder and redder like the dying embers of a fire. And then, silently and abruptly, they were gone. It was not failure; the occasional flicks of random interference proved that the screen was still alive. They just were not there any more.

Out of a long silence Jim said, "That's it. Looks like we made it, folks!"

"Nice work, son!" Jem boomed. "Looks like that's a million bucks I owe you. You'll take a check?"

Out of the chuckle that followed came Johnny's voice, still mild: "Let's have the forward screen on, Jim, see what it looks like."

"Yeah. This should be something nobody has ever seen before. I've been trying to calculate just what it should show when we see light shifted up beyond the ultraviolet. Any guesses? No? Okay, here she goes!"

Again a click, and then McCool stiffened in his seat and cried out, as did all the others, to see the screen ablaze with a myriad circular rainbows, each with a black-hearted center and glowing outward from bottomless velvet violet through the spectrum to die away in blackest red.

They quieted, to hear Jim mutter, "Separation. That figures. The shorter wavelengths travel faster. That's been suspected a long time but nobody was ever able to test it experimentally. That effect should contract as we increase speed. I'm going to try the lights now. Wait for it!"

He passed darkly in front of the screen and moved a switch, and the control room flooded with light, a strange shimmering rainbow light that made everything look like some psychedelic dream. Oddly, the same line of thought seemed to strike Johnny's mind.

"There's a thing," he said, gazing around wide-eyed. "Illusions, delusions and hallucinations to the contrary, this is what the mind-bending drugs do. Get it, Nell? Acid and pot and all the rest of them, they alter the individual's time-sense, and he sees rainbows. With our music, we do it a different way, but it's still the same effect. And now, we're all physically out of step with time . . . so rainbows again!"

"Check first," she cautioned. "Lucia, tell us what you see."

"The lights are all funny. Colored, but not like any

colored lights I ever saw. I mean, it's like the air itself was colored, don't you see it like that?"

Nell swiveled to McCool without answering. "You?"

"I can't add anything to that. She's right, it's not like colored lamps. What's it all mean?"

"At a guess," Jim said, and frowned, "and that's all it is, right now, I'd say it's a heterodyne effect, like when you play two notes close together you get a walking beat, a quarrel. We are just beyond light speed, but close enough to it to make an argument. Later, when we move fast enough, the effect will go; we'll have shifted one whole frequency away. That's just a guess. We'll see how it works out. For now, though, the show is over, folks, and I have work to do. Please walk, do not run, to the nearest exit."

"Just a minute!" McCool found his voice, and a lot of his old suspicious habits, as the rest made for the ladder. "I see a lot of this equipment has Magic Box registration plates. This panel. That—whatever it is—over there. The screen console. And that!"

"Computer." Jim patted the object affectionately, and McCool's suspicions flared even higher.

"That's a computer?"

"I know what you're thinking." Jim grinned sympathetically. "Where are all the flickering lights and jerking spools, huh? And why do you have all that chrome trim and stuff on a car, anyway? Isn't it because that's what the layman wants? A computer is an idiot-brain that can add up, and tell the difference between, and remember—and do it fast. Do you wave your arms about, and jump up and down, and shout, when you're thinking?"

"But—but—"

"I know. You have a computer in your office maybe, or somewhere in the building. And it flickers and chatters and puts on a show. And that's all it is, a show. Who needs rows of lamps flashing on and off? I designed a lot of it myself. About Magic Box, sure, most of the equipment here is Magic Box."

"You mean, they backed this . . . ship and venture?"

"All the way. Redesigned it, built in all the fancy bits, outfitted almost all of it. And why not?" Jim's grin grew so broad it threatened to split his cheeks. "No harm, now, in your knowing. Allow me to introduce myself. I am James Nelson, owner, founder, director of Magic Box. I'm it, all of it."

"You? But you're—a trip-tape entertainer!"

"As well. Play pretty good guitar, too. Designed and

built those instruments you said were fakes, remember? Now get out of here; I told you, I have work to do. Nell?"

"I'll bring you a cup of coffee right away, boy. Come on, McCool, you heard him."

McCool took one last look at the peripheral stars, now faint spectrum streaks, dimmed by the control room lights, and then allowed himself to be led down the ladder, along, and then down another, back to the main lounge for the first time since takeoff. He found a seat. Nell scurried away to the cook-nook and started in on coffee. It all looked different somehow, and it took him a moment or two to realize why, that the floor was now level. Johnny drifted across to a multi-keyboard, sat down, touched a stop or two and started in to play Mozart's *G Major Sonata* liltingly fast but with impeccable crispness. Jem ambled close, made a wrist-tilting inquiry and went away, to come back with two steaming cartons.

"Shifted into a new frequency," he said, handing one over. "Must be difficult for you. We've been doing it for years. Comes natural to us."

McCool took, and sipped, and swallowed. Mentally he tried to do the same thing with concepts that were just too huge to grasp, let alone swallow. When he put them in flat words, the words lost all meaning. Here he was, on a spaceship, an impossible ship. He had broken ribs and a broken arm, and possibly other things wrong with him. The ship, according to all the indications, was somewhere in space, traveling at faster than light speed in the general direction of Proxima Centauri. And for companions he had Miss Lucia Horne, once upon a time no more than a very attractive personal private secretary—office furniture, in fact—and four unreal, enigmatic, freakish young prodigies, either totally alien or ravingly insane, he couldn't be sure which. And yet, to damn him utterly, they all looked and acted perfectly casual and ordinary. This Jem person, for instance, apart from a juvenile tendency to extravagant vocal comedy, looked very much like any other young man of his age. Like one of those trick pictures, everything looked ordinary until you got close, and then it twisted away into weirdness. He tried to think of an innocent, harmless question.

"Why did Jim chase us out of there just now? What's this work he has to do? I thought everything was programmed."

"Up to a point, sure, everything's worked out. We did most of the figuring years ago. There was one snag we

couldn't get around, no matter how we worked at it." Jem smiled to himself reminiscently. "It was the old one about fuel-mass ratios. You see, if you lift off and achieve a set speed, and then drift, that's fine. You'll get somewhere eventually. But you have free-fall conditions to allow for, and they're not nice over a long time. And it's going to *be* a long time, for a trip like this. Around ten years! And that adds up to more trouble with supplies, too. We can recycle water. We do. And run an air-plant and algae-protein hydroponics system. We do that, too. But it's clumsy. So we wanted to maintain, as we are doing now, a constant acceleration. And that cost fuel. And we just couldn't figure our way around that. Until Nell thought of it. She's the one with the inspiration, all the time. She was the one who first thought of this trip anyway. She's our driver, the one who sets the sights for us to aim at, and we have to go like hell to keep up."

McCool thought back, hearing the echo of her saying exactly the same about the others. Four geniuses interacting, multiplying, driving each other to full stretch.

"What was her idea?"

"Very simple, once we heard it. You know, when they started the star-project base, they built several prototypes, for test? We acquired all those. They weren't any good to anybody. In fact Nell got the base for cheap simply because she suggested the Government owed her that much for taking a white elephant off their hands. 'Think of the cost of converting it!' she told them, and they fell for it. They were assuming, of course, that it was to be made over into a luxury villa. In fact we didn't convert a thing. We don't need much in the way of luxuries, never have. Anyway, we acquired the prototype test-hulls. We fixed one up to be identical to this in mass and profile, but with a simpler version of the drive, and all the rest of the hull-space full of fuel. Heliox, that's what we use. And we launched it, at the exact time and in the precise trajectory, to run ahead of us. That was around eighteen months ago. Nine months later we did it again with one more. See what I mean?"

"No. I don't." McCool shook his head dimly.

"But it's simple. What we have are two spare fuel tanks, planted on the route ahead of us. And that's what Jim has to figure out, just where the second one is, and then catch up on it, and refuell"

"You mean . . . ?" McCool stared at him in chill horror. "We have to locate and close up on an object no bigger than

this ship, somewhere between us and where we're going, that was launched nine months ago?"

"Right! It's going to be tricky, what with having to allow for faster than light speed and what that will do the bleeper we installed in it."

"And if we fail?"

"Then too bad—we're all dead. But we figured that chance anyway. More coffee?"

"No. No, thank you." McCool put down his half empty carton with a shaking hand and took another look at this pale, green-eyed young man who spoke so lightly of assumed death.

"You're all taking it for granted that you're going to die anyway, aren't you?"

"We certainly hadn't bothered about coming back," Jem said, and it was the answer to what McCool had thought, rather than what he had said.

"We figured it would be something just to get there, to make the round trip. With our wayside fuel tanks we will have enough to slow down on arrival. And stop, maybe go into orbit. That's all."

"But . . . don't you want to return?"

"What for?" The lazy green eyes turned on McCool. "We went right through and on past that world, McCool. Your world. We didn't dig it much. So we left."

"That's running away!"

"It is? We've left that world a better place, by what we did. The rest of it is a damn sight worse, but we made our little bit a lot better. We have left one, two, three going concerns that will keep a lot of people happy and well-off—and we never did anybody any harm. Can you say that much?"

The retort, so lightly expressed, struck into McCool like a knife. He felt lost and alone, and jumped convulsively as a weight plumped into the seat beside him and a long arm went around his neck.

"Cheer up, McCool!" He knew it was Nell as soon as she spoke. Her face, once a desirable dream, now a scary reality, was close to him and smiling encouragingly. "What can I do to brighten you?" she asked. "You are radiating gloom like heat off a stove. Let me help, huh?"

"Can you?"

"I can try. I don't like anybody unhappy close by. You name it, a song, dance, or just talk. Or maybe you're just hungry, huh?"

"I doubt there would be much point. Jem has just made

it clear that this is a suicide trip. I mean, I know it was crazy from the start, but you never *intended* to survive, did you?"

"Hold on, now. I'm sure Jem didn't say that. We haven't bothered about coming back, sure, but that's not the same thing." She hugged him once, then drew away and leaned back, crinkling her brow.

"I can't explain it very well. You'll have to talk to Johnny for that. He's the one with your kind of words. Me, I just ask the questions. But I can tell you this much: we haven't drawn any *finis* line anywhere. We never do. All our lives we have worked along one line of ideas, like, this is something new, and tricky, so let's try it. Like a challenge, all the time. I mean, who wants to do the same old thing again? We did it in our music. We never played the same number exactly the same way twice. *That* you can get from a tape. Those we made for those who want that. In performance we ran each number different, faster, harder, tossing in new riffs and twists, until it was worn out. Then we'd try something new altogether. You see? Always, it's 'let's wear this one out, and then find something new to go at.' So, we are on our way to Proxima. We're not there yet, I know. But, assuming we arrive, we'll think of the next thing to do, and try to do it. Like that. Does it sound like suicide, to you?"

"Don't you value your lives at all?"

"That one I *can* answer," she said promptly. "I've talked this one out often. Mystery of life. Sacredness of human life. That is rubbish! When you say one thing, sincere and often, and do, at the same time, the direct opposite of that, you are, by definition, insane, a candidate for the laughing academy. Nutsville! So, when a whole society does likewise—likewise!"

"Explain!" he demanded helplessly. "I don't understand you!"

"I don't know that I can. But life, now, is mysterious, wonderful, important. Is it? Then why is it that no matter where you go on Earth, up a mountain, down a hole, down to the bottom of the sea, hot, cold, anywhere—you find life? It's the commonest thing ever. It's not a thing at all, but a process, something that happens inevitably if the conditions allow even the barest chance of it. So it's sacred?"

"But human life—consciousness, mind—surely that is different?"

"Is it? Sacred, huh? To whom?" She held up two fingers. "Either to you personally, or to society—or God—or some-

thing, right? Call it society, for convenience. If life is so sacred to society, why is society's favorite game war? Favorite punishment execution? Biggest ignorance, how to live? Are you taught how to live? How to keep yourself one hundred percent fit, healthy and sane? Are you taught how to get the most of *you*? No! Society rams, jams and crushes you into a pattern, into a groove, to fit it! This is how to handle a sacred object? Nuts! All right, now you personally. If your life is so sacred to you, why do you spend it crouched in back of a desk, inside an anthill, gulping down smog and dirt, passing around bits of paper and making other people do the same? And, try this one for size: can you, really, have three and a half billion sacred objects?"

McCool, down and out and floundering, had no hope of making a sensible reply. He was rescued by a voice, Jim's voice, seemingly sounding just by his ear, and crisp with concern.

"Hey, gang, a moment."

"What?" The quiet response was threefold. McCool stared at the thing on his wrist, but listened avidly.

"Like maybe we're in trouble here. The computer has gone split-minded on me, possibly due to freak conditions of electron-flux at this speed. Anyway, trying to plot a location for that fuel-can, I get two answers; one says about eight hours away, the other says three months."

"You want help with those figures?" That was Jem.

"No, the data and calculations are okay, it's the relativity-factor that's bugging me. Damn old Einstein anyhow. According to him we are in two different places at once. According to me, we are in one or the other but no way of telling which."

"Pick the little one!" The answer came in chorus.

"That's what I mean. Eight hours is close. I'm going to have to cut drive and we'll coast until I get something from the marker. And then we'll have to slow down, match intrinsics. And it could be soon!"

"If 'Skylark' Smith could do it, so can we!" That was Johnny, with wry wit in his voice. "A few hours' free-fall won't hurt us, be an experience. Go ahead and cut."

"No, wait!" That was Nell, and somehow different, more like speech. McCool turned, realizing she was talking close to him, looking at him. She went on: "This will have to be explained to the passengers. Hang on a bit."

McCool raised his eyebrows at her. "You have no need to explain to me. I know what is involved in taking off the drive. In free-fall."

"You heard it all, huh?"

"Of course."

"Of course!" She mocked his manner, then put her wrist nearer her mouth. "How about you, Lucia? Did you hear and understand?"

"I think so. Free-fall . . . that means we'll all be weightless, like when we did the turn-over in the shuttle?"

"That's right. You're in the shower?"

"Yes. Almost done."

"Right. Sing out when you're out. You could drown in there otherwise." Nell brought her head around to McCool again, a wicked smile lighting blue torches in her eyes. "You heard that, too, huh? And you still think you're not telepathic? Oh, man! Jim, soon as you hear Lucia holler, you cut. And give us a whistle when you start juggling, hear? We don't want to be smeared on the walls!"

"Ten seconds is all I can promise. I'll spin her over as soon as we go free, but when we come up on that can it will be fast. Ten seconds is the maximum. Better stay near something soft!"

"You heard that, too? All right, mind it!" She got up and went away briskly to where Johnny had resumed playing.

"It would be a gas to try a go-go routine in free. Dancing in midair! Wow! That I must do."

"Guitars would be okay," Jem agreed promptly. "What'll we play?"

Johnny swiveled on his seat, aimed a cool stare at McCool.

"You have a request number, sir?"

It was insanity. McCool yielded to it with a sense of losing the last vestiges of control. "If you know it," he muttered, "I'd like 'Stardust.' The Hoagy Carmichael thing?"

"You bet!" Nell cried. "Great! You have moments, McCool."

Right on the heels of her enthusiasm came a call from Lucia.

"I'm all done with the shower."

In the next instant McCool fell, grabbed frantically at nothing, and choked back a scream as the big chamber swung and revolved around him slowly. His stomach knotted painfully, his whole body cringed in instinctive readiness for the crushing impact that didn't come. He closed his eyes, but that was even worse, so he opened them again, squeezed his mouth and jaws tight shut, and stared helplessly at a small world that revolved around him as its heart and center.

XI

RESIDUAL RECOIL-THRUST from the elasticity of the balloon-seat sent him drifting gently upward. He spun slowly about his stomach, which seemed to be spinning in an orbit all its own. Between revolutions he saw Nell take off in dreamlike slow motion, diving headfirst upward, arms stiffly down, her cheeks distended as she tried to arrest her glide by blowing frantically ahead, jet-retardation style. Over there, too, he saw his abandoned coffee-carton dawdle up and away from the tabletop, and the dregs inside gathering into a wobbling globe, slowly oozing out of the top.

Now the one-time roof was very near and he squirmed frantically to get his feet to it, his attention distracted at the very last moment by the sight of Lucia trying to tug herself down the ladder from the next deck, her towel rippling in syrupy folds from one hand, her wet hair waving like pale yellow seaweed, her face a mask of suppressed terror. Then the roof hit him with surprising force, sent him billowing away with aching calves, yet with just enough presence of mind to grab Lucia on the way past and carry her on down with him.

Then Jem and Johnny began playing as they soared into the air. Nell started to dance, spinning and revolving to the vigorous movements of her arms and legs. As they neared the floor McCool gasped, "Grab something and hang on. Anything."

It took time. It took effort. By the time he had achieved a measure of security, with one leg wrapped around the table support, and Lucia gripping it with one hand and him the other, he was in a better position than ever before to appreciate the Wellsian story of Pyecraft, and for the first time to really understand Kipling's line: "Till everything has gone except the will that says 'Hold on!'"

And then, perversely, he began to enjoy it, to look inside himself and find pleasure in the lifting of weight from his body.

"It's scary," he admitted to Lucia in a mumble, "but it's fun, in a way, don't you think, Miss Horne?"

"I don't know," she quivered. "I feel all uneasy somehow, inside, as if I were coming apart. Something like swimming, but without the water."

"So it is! Do your swim a lot?"

"When I can get the chance. You?"

"Same as you—when I can. Why don't we try it?"

"Try what?" She asked it fearfully.

"Try swimming. I mean, similar actions. Like a sort of dance. After all, they are playing a fox-trot."

"A fox-trot?" She stared at him with her baby-blue eyes wide. "That's for cubes! Don't you do the hep-step or the poppy-prowl?"

"I'm sorry." He was instantly contrite. "I'm afraid I don't. But I'd be happy to learn, if you care to show me."

"Well, I don't know." She cast a glance around, her lovely face lighting with a sudden excitement. "Why not? Come on!" And it was glorious fun, once they got the hang of it, so much so that he was prompted to say, "I'm enjoying this, Lucia. Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me, Horace. I'm having a great time, too. You sure you've never done this before? You're real groovy!"

"I am?" He felt ridiculously pleased, obliged to return something. "You're a very good teacher. You know"—he hesitated only fractionally before coming out with it—"this no-weight situation really does things for your figure—if you don't mind my saying so."

She went a rosy pink all over, but the smile on her face and the glow in her eyes were adequate evidence that she didn't mind at all. As they looped close again she whispered in his ear, "You're pretty much of a man yourself, you know? What I mean is, *they're* just boys!"

Her sincerity was crystal clear.

As he let the knowledge sink in and warm him like strong wine, he could accept Lucia's shy praise. It was true: he was, at thirty, a man. And they, even though they had achieved chronological maturity, even though they were mentally out of sight ahead of him, were immature. He fell away from her in a slow glide, stretched, caught her hand, swung and drew her close to him in a hugging spin, and wondered if he was glowing the way she had done at his spontaneous compliment. The music ended before he could frame adequate words, leaving them close-hugged and spinning slowly. Then candid applause broke their intimate moment and they drew apart, caught a nearby ladder, looked down

to where the two guitarists and Nell had grouped by the many-keyed console and were clapping gently.

"Great stuff!" Jem called. "How about us trying that, Nell, huh? Put a tape on and have us a ball, what say?" Without waiting for answer he leaned over and shot himself across the space to the musichron, with its stored tapes. "Call the tune!" he invited, and Lucia put out a hand to McCool.

"Let me, please?" As he nodded she said, "Do you have 'Blue Danube'? That's a cubic one, but it's for you, Horace. You'll have to show me."

"I don't know that I can. Waltz, in free-fall? Still, we can try."

Jem punched buttons, hit the play-switch, and the old familiar melody caught them up. There had never been such a waltz before. And there were others, every new melody and rhythm offering a new challenge to the novel conditions. Time fled away and it was with something akin to shock that they heard from Jim, remote in the control room, plaintively demanding that someone bring him food and drink.

"Wild parties! Dancing and cavorting, at a time like this?"

"Oh, poop!" Nell told him, giggling. "You're just jealous because you can't join in. Any sign of that fuel can yet?"

"Not a smell, and only three hours to go."

"Three hours! Good grief, folks, we've been tripping the lightest fantastic for five solids. No wonder I feel empty. Jim, lad, I'm sorry. Nourishment coming up soonest. Come on down, you two, and eat!"

Johnny looked up, once again calm and reflective. "Just let go," he suggested, "and you ought to drift down. Our natural mass-center is in the drive section, ought to give us fractional g. Try it."

It seemed the most natural thing in the world for McCool to clasp his arm around Lucia's waist before releasing his hold on the ladder upright. And she snuggled close as if she had been doing just that for years. And they did, indeed, come drifting down. By the time they touched the deck Nell had been busy at the auto-chef and had gone by them in a dive, carrying a capped container. Jem was hovering over the cooking-console while the musichron sighed out a spiky atonal modern work.

"I don't get it," McCool said, offering the problem to Johnny. "We came down, so there is a fractional gravitational pull, as you said, toward the mass of the drive-unit. But I

saw the remains of my coffee boil up out of the carton, and the carton lifted off too. Let's see, where did it go?"

"There!" Johnny pointed, very gingerly, and McCool saw the empty pot lying on the polished deck. Near it hovered a grayish brown oblate spheroid, bouncing and shivering gently like animate jelly. "It's cool now. Still enough surface tension to keep it in a blob. But it was hot before. Thermal energy was enough to agitate it out of the cup, that's all."

"Is there anything you *don't* know?" McCool let irritation show in his voice, and Johnny grinned. The expression transformed his face from its habitual satanic intensity into youthful glee for just a moment; then he shook his head.

"There are scads of things we don't know, some we don't want to know, others we never will. All we've ever tried to do is point at something we're interested in and then find out everything we possibly can about that. Like this ship, for instance. Jim is the boss as far as it goes, but we all help. We all made it our business to learn everything we could about the whole picture. And I do mean the *whole* picture. For instance, we have by heart everything that is known, or even suspected, about the Centauri system. Alpha A and B, and Proxima. Alpha is a binary, and the two swing around each other in an eighty year period. Proxima is the third star in the system, is a long way further out but still a part, is smaller, fainter, has an orbital period of about three hundred thousand years around the twins. And so on. Or take music." He leaned back and allowed himself to fall in slow-motion to the couch under him. McCool and Lucia did the same, by common unspoken agreement.

"I know a little about music," McCool said, "and that's something I don't understand, frankly. You're musicians. Good ones. I heard you play Bach, back there. If you had put *that* on tape, I'd have bought it. With that kind of talent, why be content to play pop?"

"But I like it!" Lucia protested, and Johnny nodded.

"There's your answer. Look, we worked all this out a long time ago. Once we had our objective lined up, the thing we had to do first was get rich. There are several ways to do that, some slow, some quick. We were eleven at the time. We decided we could spare five years, call it a third of a lifetime, which it was, to perfect the necessary skills. Jem took over the control of that side. Five years, but what to work at? What pays right off without outlay? Theft, robbery, chicanery—are all out for sixteen year olds. Not much left except entertainment.

"Around that time the pop world was in a mess. We came along just as there was another flux, a swing to audio-visual combinations. And we were ready for it. You'll read in the literature that we were an overnight success. And we were, in public. But we had spent five solid years learning. Among us we can play, but good, any instrument you've ever seen or heard of; any style you care to name, and our repertoire runs from Purcell on up. We really took music apart, went into theory and dynamics, into the physics and chemistry of sound, and we found something that gave us the 'in' where we wanted it."

"You mean certain particular vibration frequencies and their effects?"

"That's right," Johnny agreed, nodding gently. "I've maintained all along that you are pretty bright, McCool. It's a brain-blanket effect. The listener literally takes off, out of this world. A psychedelic experience, but without the chemical hazard. Without any damage at all."

McCool digested this with chills tickling his spine. He felt Lucia cringe close to him. Johnny was quite calm.

"We built our style on that. Jim worked out the instruments and the various pitches, I wrote the music, we all played it, Yummy danced it and sang it, and we went off like a rocket on the first show. Overnight—after five years of slaving, hoarding pennies, haunting the library, doing odd chores, and always, always, practicing and learning—overnight success!"

"But—" McCool spluttered, "all that involvement with Magic Box, and foreign interests. And that fashion woman, Grant?"

"Smoke screens for others to get lost in. Jem was the brain back of all that. Look, we made money right away, and we hung on to it until we had some to invest. First off, we invested in Magic Box. Jim told you, he *is* Magic Box, all of it. So *that* made money too, selling the gear that played our recordings, which made more money. We invested some more in Howard Music Inc., HMI. That's Jem himself. Jeremy Howard. He *is* HMI. So we publish our own stuff, record our own stuff at our own studios, and make more money. And Jem's brother, older brother, 'Buzz' Howard, is financial advisor to Drew and Meredith. He helped us with all the legalities and asked no fool questions, so long as we kept it legal. Then we invested in 'Elegante,' a boutique that could provide the auto-fab machines, by inventing a Magic Box subsidiary for the purpose, which nobody else could copy, so Elegante had it exclusively. And that, of

course, was Miss Eleanor Grant. Our Nell, there. So we made a *lot* of money. We got rich, in fact."

She landed neatly at the foot of the ladder and plunged into a slow dive right up to the couch, grinned and said, "We sure did, all except you, Johnny."

"That's right," he admitted wryly. "I was the only drag on the organization. Even *we* couldn't figure out a way to make real music pay off."

"Real music? You don't mean the stuff you played and recorded?"

"That?" Johnny made a face. "Commercial tripe. Listen a minute. Just coming to the third and final movement, the recapitulation."

McCool turned his attention to the awkwardly angular composition that was still reeling quietly from the musichron's store.

"I know that piece, I think. Isn't it 'Aftermath'? Supposed to be symbolic of a sterile Earth, after the ultimate war?"

"You continue to surprise me, McCool. Right, it is. It's had critical acclaim by some, but the composer didn't get peanuts for it." He grinned his rare grin. "Excuse me not taking a bow, I doubt if I could, in zero g. I wrote that. I'm John York."

And now the sense of alienation was total. McCool clung to Lucia fiercely, as if clinging to the one sane and real thing left to him. John York the composer-artist. Nelson of Magic Box. Howard's music corporation. Eleanor Grant. The Jim-Jem-Johnny Trippers. And Yum-Yum. Four-four separate and colossal financial empires, four skinny and gangling immature kids. The contradictions boiled and swirled in his mind until he thought he must crack and go screaming crazy.

A speaker crackled, hummed, and Jim's voice came, tinny and urgent.

"Ten seconds and I throw out the anchors. Hunt for cover. The brakes go on in ten seconds. Pick somewhere soft. In nine . . . eight . . . seven . . ."

Lucia gasped, flung her arms tight around McCool, and he hugged her in automatic response.

"We stay right here," he said urgently. "This couch is as good as anywhere, if we stretch out."

" . . . two . . . one . . . zero!"

Weight came back with a rush, bearing down like a giant palm, crushing them into the resilient plastic. McCool saw Lucia's face close to his, straining as she fought to breathe. He had the same fight, and pain as his shoulders buckled under the braking force.

Take it easy, damn you! he cursed mentally, as the gigantic weight squeezed him deep into the plastic cushion. As if in response he heard the youngster's voice, not tinny at all, but briskly natural.

"This won't be too rough, folks, if I can manage it. Our bird is well ahead and almost precisely on course, so it will be just a matter of shedding speed. I'll try not to take us over three g's. Who's for suiting-up and a vacuum walk to lay a cable on the monster?"

"Mel!" It was Jem's voice, firmly. "Nobody gets to swipe my turn. We tossed for it, remember, and I won."

"Nobody but you ever got to see that coin!" Nell sounded furious. "Anyway, there are four suits. Does it have to be a one-man job?"

Lucia's eyes were closed and her lovely face distorted by the drag of weight on the tissues of her cheeks. She didn't seem to be breathing. Fright loomed up in McCool.

"In God's name can't you shut up!" he croaked. "I think Lucia has passed out!"

"Echo herel" Jim growled. "I have enough to do trying to match our velocity to that can, without you lot yapping in my ear. Pipe down, can't you? Bear up just a bit, McCool. Almost there!"

The suffocating weight came off a little, then a little more. Heavily, McCool was able to reach out a hand and touch Lucia's face. She stirred, breathed hugely, opened her eyes.

"Are you all right?"

"As long as you don't leave me," she begged. "You won't, will you?"

"Not if I can help it," he vowed, and squeaked with sudden fright as the weight came off altogether, without warning, and he went twisting away up into the air above her. In the next second she was billowing up too, bounced by the resilience of the couch.

"That's it." Jim sounded pleased with himself. "She's over there, just ahead and about three hundred yards away. Go when ready, Jem."

"Three hundred yards?" Jem sounded aggrieved. "What's the matter, ain't you got enough room to maneuver, out here?"

"Get walking, boy. This is quite close enough for an old bucket like this. The walk will do you good!"

Jem disappeared en route to the hatch. Hugging Lucia safely, McCool saw Nell and Johnny make for the up ladder and disappear in the direction of the control room.

"We're alone," he said, suddenly self-conscious.

"I don't mind, not if I'm with you. The others—scare me. I just don't understand them. I mean, how can she be Yum-Yum and Miss Eleanor Grant—and only a girl?"

"They are not ordinary people. None of them."

"And I used to be mad about Jim. I feel like such a fool now, because it was all a trick. Wasn't it?"

"Not really, no." McCool felt obliged to be fair. "It was an illusion that they created, to make a lot of people feel happy. You never really believed you could mean anything to Jim, did you?"

She sighed, wriggled closer, buried her face against his chest. "No, I suppose I didn't. Not really. Oh well!" She seemed to settle, to mold herself even closer to him. He saw, from the corner of his eye, that they were creeping floorward very slowly, and wished suddenly that there was some way of delaying that return to earth, small though it was. This was a moment to be prolonged, fragile and precious.

"But you," she said suddenly and with gentle point, "really thought you had something going for her, didn't you?"

"Yes." He admitted it candidly and with a wry grin. "I did. But then, you know, I was *the* Horace McCool. I was going to elevate her to my level. I don't suppose you're familiar with the tale of King Cophetua and the beggar maid? Trouble is she wasn't a beggar, and I was no catch, not in her eyes. And now I'm nothing at all, just excess weight."

"You mustn't say that! I don't think you're nothing. I think you're kind, and brave. And real!"

"Brave? Come now, hardly that!"

"Of course you are. Why, you haven't once complained about your ribs, or your arm. And they *were* broken, I know."

"Of course they were, but they don't hurt any more. They are almost all healed as good as ever, and I owe that to you, Lucia."

"That's something *they* couldn't do." There was more than just a tinge of malice in her tone. "Something they'd never bothered to learn. But you have no call to thank me, Horace. I wanted to do it. To take care of you"

Like the unfolding of a flower her face brushed up and away from his chest and turned to him, and there was no need for further words, at all. There was only one flaw, marring the perfectness of his bliss no matter how he strove to forget it. He had to say it, just as soon as he was able to again.

"You realize," he whispered, "that this is utterly fu-

tile, that we are on a one way trip to obliteration, along with these maniacs?"

"I don't care, now. Oh Horace, kiss me again like that!"

A monstrous metallic clang made his heart jerk painfully. Lucia stiffened convulsively in his arms.

"What was that?"

"Dunno. Wait a bit." He looped his arm around her neck to bring the wrist-band talker close, and it struck him how quiet everything had become. He made his voice steady. "Jim? What's going on?"

"Nothing to fret. That was Jem the ham-fist stowing the fuel-rig. He'll be back inboard in a jiff. McCool?"

"Yes?"

"Better you and Lucia come on up here. We have a tough one ahead, and you're entitled to cast a vote this time. All right?"

"Very well. We're on our way."

"What d'you suppose this is?" Lucia whispered, her blue eyes huge.

"We'll just have to wait and see," he said, as evenly as he could manage, while his heart sank. What could possibly be wrong, if *they* got grave about it?

XII

DRIFTING to the ladder, he gripped it to brace himself before giving Lucia a boost, and it seemed to him that the ladder shook. Vibration? He held on curiously, looked at her. It shook again.

"Seemed to come from below," he muttered, looking down. There was a metal disc inset in the floor at the foot of the ladder. A hatch? And there was someone knocking at it from underneath. He drove himself down, impelled by strange urgency. She was right beside him as he gripped the handhold and heaved. The hatch came up heavily, revealing a dark hole, letting loose a slight insuck of air. And then a silver dome came up: a space-helmet, beaded with dew and set with a glare-tinted visor through which it was difficult to see properly, but enough, as he seized and

pulled on the limp and motionless suit, to see that the face behind that shield was in distress.

"Blood!" she said, and her fingers flew. "How do we get this thing off? Quickly!"

McCool didn't answer her but put his wrist to his face. "Get down here fast. Jem's in trouble!" Then he heaved more, slipping and staggering in the non-weight conditions, fighting desperately to get the sluggish, suited shape under control. Johnny came down the ladder headfirst, like a swooping fury, rebounding from the deck, darting in, grasping at thumb-screws and toggles with frantic fingers.

"You damned fool, Jem!" he muttered. "Why didn't you ask for help?"

The helmet came off as Jim and Nell arrived, to group on either side. The sight was a shock, stopping time for a breathless moment. Jem's eyes, shut now in stupor, bulged from darkened flesh. Blood oozed from his nose, the corner of his tight-pressed mouth, his ears. There were red hair-lines on his cheeks and the bridge of his nose.

"Decompression!" Jim's voice rasped like a file. "The damned suit failed him. Why the hell didn't he tell us?"

"Came in through the fuel-pipe hatch and up," Nell guessed. "So he wouldn't have to walk space again. Jem! Can you hear me?"

They could all hear breathing, although it wasn't pleasant to listen to, with the gurgling accompaniment. Then Lucia raised her voice, crisp and authoritative.

"We've got to get him out of that suit right away," she ordered. "And then I will want him lying down. I shall want plenty of hot water, and the medical box. And, as soon as I have him lying down, can we have some weight, or gravity, or whatever you call it. Quickly now!"

McCool found time to be astonished at the way the others responded at once and without demur. Jim and Johnny pounced on the suit with expert fingers. Nell took off with a kick and a backward call:

"You bring him up to his cabin. I'll have the hot water and the kit ready by the time you get there."

They got him free, ignoring the rest of the blood that oozed from his fingertips and nails. McCool, organizing his thoughts, nudged Jim to get on his way.

"I'll take your hold. You go and stand by to start up or whatever you have to do. We'll tell you." Jim nodded and flung himself up the ladder ahead of them. It was a fantastic job wangling the limp body in weightlessness up that ladder and along the passage to the cabin, but it

would have been harder still in weighted conditions, possibly to complicate whatever injuries the unconscious man had. Accepting her authority just like all the rest, McCool asked Lucia in a whisper, "What do you suppose is wrong with him?"

"I can only treat what I know. I don't think there's anything broken, but he has a certain amount of internal hemorrhage, that's obvious, and has lost quite a bit of blood. I must get him cleaned up first, then a saline drip to prop up body fluid pressure, and plenty of warm fluid to drink. Nell, you go get plenty of hot sweet coffee ready."

Nell went instantly. They spread him over the bunk and Lucia said, "We will have that weight now, please!"

At once there was a ghost-delicate shudder, and McCool felt the weight of his body press him down on his feet. Warm water and swabs, first for the left arm to get it clean, to sterilize it with a dab of surgical spirit, to set up the drip-bottle, the catheter-tube. . . . McCool was amazed and impressed by the steadiness and precise speed with which Lucia worked. In very little time at all Jem was clean, wrapped in crisp fresh paper-blankets, the puffiness about his eyes receding to match his general pallor, and his breathing much steadier and deeper, but still with an occasional gurgle. Then, all at once, those shut eyes flickered and opened, and the face grinned feebly.

"What?" Johnny demanded, quietly but with furious tension.

"Suit. Was okay going out, hooking on, but when it came to . . . had to fight the dogs to get them loose . . . froze up a bit . . . effort . . . the damned flex-joints must be perished . . . started losing air . . ."

"Why didn't you call out?" McCool started. That was Jim's voice, surely? The youth on the bed grinned crookedly.

"What point? All the other suits just the same, I guess. Managed to get back with the hose, came in through the hatchway and up."

"That will do!" Lucia declared. "You need to keep quiet and still, but drink this first. Come on, just a little to start with." Over her shoulder she said sharply, "You can all clear off now. I'll shout if I need you."

As there was barely room for two in the cabin she had a point and they withdrew without a murmur. McCool found a giggling query in his mind and tried to quench it.

"I suppose he couldn't call out because he had to keep his mouth tight shut or throw up—or something?"

"Mouth has nothing to do with it," Johnny growled. "You'd

better come up to control now, McCool, although there doesn't seem much point in any decision. Jem has made that for us."

The tone clicked a key for McCool, helped him interpret Johnny's dark expression. It was suppressed anger, frustration, resentment. Jim, seated inside a U of panels, swiveled his chair as they went up and in and found seats.

"What's it all about?" McCool asked.

Jim put up his wrist and spoke. "You hearing this okay, Lucia? Jem?" The replies were prompt and he swung to Johnny. "You want to tell it, or me?"

"Better you give them a run-down on the technical bits first."

"Okay." Jim scowled a moment, assorting his thoughts. "You remember I had trouble with the computer, relativity effects and like that? Well, I've figured that out now, adjusted for it, and the figures from here on are on the nose. That's one point. Second, we matched speeds just now with that fuel can, and that gave me a chance to take several fixes and firm up our data. And it came out haywire. Which I have also figured out. Like this. We set that can away to drive on course, to reach a certain velocity and then cut, to coast from there on. The one ahead of it was set to do exactly the same; the two drive mechanisms and timers were identical. I mention that because it is important: whatever happened to one must have happened to the other. Get it? Now this is the crunch. That can was on course; that's okay. But, when I matched velocities with it, I found we were going around eleven percent faster than the calculated figure."

"How sure are you of that?"

"Checked it six ways. Like I said, McCool, the figures are now okay, it's the data that is wrong. What I mean is, that can was belting along a lot faster than it had any business to. So why? I worked on that a bit, and I think it's due to unexpected increase in efficiency due to super-cooling. That checks with the way this old bucket is hopping, too."

"But how does improved efficiency get us into trouble?"

"This way." Jim swiveled, touched a switch, and a side screen glowed, showed a schematic. He picked up a light-pen. "That's our plotted course in essence. We planned to refuel here, as we've just done. Only it's not here, but a bit further along, right? According to plan, we now have enough fuel to get us to here, to pick up the other can, which gives us enough fuel to reach Proxima and reduce speed enough to go into orbit. Okay? But now the plan is shot, and we

have a few choices. We did, anyway, before Jem messed it up."

"I heard that!" Jem came through with a mock snarl. "Next time I get a suit of threads I'll let Nell design it. Yours leaks!"

"I imagine"—Johnny's voice was cool—"your technical staff didn't think the suits were important, Jim. Possibly because they were assuming the whole affair some rich eccentric's folly."

"We had to play it that way."

"Yes, of course!" Johnny now took charge of the discussion, but McCool got the vivid impression that a whole lot of things had zipped past his awareness so fast as to be just a blur: regret . . . blame . . . recrimination . . . denial—forget it, it doesn't matter now—and Johnny was speaking.

"The situation is this: if we follow our prearranged flight plan that second fuel-tank ship will be passing through the Centauri system by the time we catch up with it, and I don't need to explain that that offers complications, possibility of gravitational entrapments, collision even—apart from the fact that our fuel capacity will be too scanty to permit extensive maneuvering. On the other hand, if we increase acceleration to try the overtake earlier we will run out of fuel that much faster, and fall short. Because we need a certain amount of power to sustain life systems."

"You mentioned a choice." McCool heard his own voice come out rustily. "That doesn't sound much like it."

"We had two," Jim stated. "This is complicated, but the computer has the last word on it. If we speed up we burn fuel faster, but we achieve higher velocity, which we maintain even when coasting. And there's one way. We could pile it on for a certain time, then cut, and coast, and just manage to catch up that can before we tangle with the Centauri system. In rough figures we'd accelerate at four g's for about five days, then coast for about fifteen. And just make it."

McCool tried to imagine withstanding that fearful crushing weight for five whole days and his imagination refused to cooperate.

"That would kill us all!"

"It would be rugged, sure. And the prolonged free-fall period would be bad too. But we could make it, just. Only not now. Jem has blown that. He couldn't stand anything more than one g the way he is."

"Forget me!" Jem's voice came back instantly, crisply. "Luck of the draw. I can be spared. You go ahead!"

"Just a minute!" McCool was on his feet and shaking with incredulity as he sensed rather than heard the agreement among the youngsters. "Just a minute. You suggested there was another choice. What?"

"Well now." Jim swiveled back again, cutting the display. "That one is a lot simpler. What we can do is maintain this drive until we are down to emergency reserve, and then coast the rest of the way, with enough fuel in hand to lose velocity and strike an orbit, and maybe enough left to survive a few days after that. You want to choose one or the other?"

McCool sank back into his chair, his mind spinning. The awful underlying reality of it all wouldn't be suppressed, that there was no choice at all in the long run. That fact hammered at and hampered his thinking until he achieved the courage to grasp it firmly. Then, magically, everything fell into place and the answer was simple.

"Look," he said, astonished at his own calmness, "let's look at the basic elements. Your aim is to reach Proxima. You'll do that, one way or the other, anyway. So the only real question is how? The easy way, or the hard way? All of you, or just three of you? Where's the problem?"

"But that second can!" Jim cried. "We planned all this, down to the last detail. That second can—"

"Ah yes!" McCool, all at once, was aware of being adult, of a sudden flood of understanding. And a need for delicacy. "You've lived with the plan so long," he said, choosing his words with care, "that you've lost perspective on it. Ever since you were children, since the age of eleven, you've kept this plan as the be-all and end-all of everything: A dogma. Almost a religion. A holy grail. And nothing must alter it!"

"Why you . . . !" Johnny started up, for the very first time visibly in the grip of violent emotion. Then, abruptly, it was as if an invisible hand stopped him, pushed him back. He grinned wryly, shook his head, looked at Jim.

"He's right, you know. So we abandon the second can? So what? We get where we were heading, don't we? And we do it the easy way."

"And there's this." McCool began to feel, at last, that he understood these youngsters in part. "Jem is part of the plan. He wants to go, too. By the easy route, he's included. Right?"

"Right!" Jim sat quite still for a tense moment, then broke into a broad grin, stuck out his hand. "Thanks, McCool. Glad you came along!"

It was the ultimate accolade, for what it was worth. Not

until later, until he sat in partial privacy with Lucia, in one corner of the main lounge, did McCool venture to express the situation in its real terms.

"You were wonderfull" she declared emphatically.

"I was about to say that," he demurred, "about you. The way you took charge and ordered everyone about. How is Jem, anyway?"

"I think he's going to be all right. He's sleeping now. He lost some blood, and I've no idea whether or not he has internal injuries, but I doubt it. He said he didn't bang himself in any way. And he's healthy enough. They all are."

"They're an odd bunch, but I think I'm beginning to get a line on how they work." He cradled his warm coffee carton and stared into it thoughtfully. "If you assume that they are unnaturally smart—brilliant, if you like—and I don't think there can be any doubt of that—but then add on the fact that they are immature, just children, you can see a pattern."

"But they are all twenty-one!"

"Yes, by the calendar." McCool turned his eyes on her, not a difficult thing to do. "Lucia, you're twenty-four. You can remember yourself at twenty-one, can't you? Now take another look, at yourself then and Nell now, and what do you get? Or, if you like, go back to the time when you first started to grow a figure. When you first started taking an interest in boys. When was that?"

Her flushed embarrassment delighted him, as did his new-found daring in actually talking to her in a personal manner. But she took the trouble to work out what he wanted. "I was fourteen, only just. I remember it very well." She smiled suddenly, and sent him an appealing gaze that scorched him. "You don't want to hear all the silly details, do you?"

"No, now now. But think. Nell hasn't reached that stage yet. By the calendar she is twenty-one, yes. But biologically I imagine she is about twelve, or thirteen maybe. I remember reading somewhere that abnormally bright children develop much more slowly than ordinary people. And, you know, if you assume they are still just kids—it explains such a lot."

He watched her wrestling with this novel idea, and it was then that it came to him with renewed force: it was all pointless. It must have shown on his face, for she reached to take his hand impulsively.

"Don't look like that, Horace, please!"

"I'm sorry, dear, but I can't help it. After all, *we* aren't

children. And we have to face it. We have three weeks, almost, by which time we will be drifting into the star system of Centaurus with just enough fuel left to juggle us into some kind of orbit, and keep us alive for a day or two. And then . . . it will be all over for us."

"Not necessarily!" she corrected earnestly. "Anything can happen. We might find a planet where we can land. Or something!"

"No planet." He shook his head. "That is almost a certainty. Wrong kind of system."

"Very well then," she said steadily, "we have three weeks. We should be grateful. Had it not been for them, we wouldn't have had anything at all."

And that, McCool realized with a shock, was quite true. He would have gone on regarding this delightful creature as nothing more than office furniture, and she would eventually have gone elsewhere. Possibly. He became aware that there was a lot about her that he didn't know. He had three weeks to find out. Time to get to know the others better, too. And they were much more willing to accept him, now that the ice of understanding was broken.

Jem was up and about in very short order, apparently none the worse for his frightening experience, but awkward in his attempts to express gratitude to Lucia for her attentions. To satisfy himself on the point, McCool deliberately confronted Johnny one quiet time while the composer-prodigy was touching out a hushed thread of melody at his console.

"I'm surprised," he said, "that you made such little provision for accident, sickness, injury, things like that."

"We never even thought about it. That med kit we have came with the ship's remaining stores, else we wouldn't have had that. Only stupid people get sick, or hurt themselves, or have accidents."

"Surely that's not tenable?"

"Of course it is. You can't be bright if you're unhealthy. And if you're healthy you don't get sick. If you're bright you don't have accidents, either."

"But Jem did."

"Or, if you do, you don't look for sympathy, because it's your own fault. That's why Jem didn't shout for help."

"But it wasn't Jem's fault!"

"No." Johnny frowned over his keyboard. "That's true. But it was *our* fault for relying on somebody else's check-out. Water over the dam, now. Why discuss it?"

"History," McCool said sententiously, "gives us the chance to avoid making the same mistake twice."

"It's been done. Jim and I have checked out the remaining suits, and we have two that will work. That's a good point, about history, only humanity has yet to learn it. We've learned it."

"Have you ever seriously wondered whether you're human or not?"

"Depends on definitions." Johnny took the question without a blink. "We've talked about it, yes. On a biological level, I suppose we are. Mentally, or spiritually, if you prefer that word better, I don't know. We don't think human, in several ways. I don't mean just degree, either, but in kind."

"You mean you have different values?"

"Right!" Johnny struck a sonorous chord and then turned away from the keys, his dark eyes glowing with inner fire. "Humans have values we don't have, that we don't like, and can't understand. Like, for instance, the ability to maintain a set of delusions. Like a man in your line of business will kid himself into believing he is doing what he does for the common good, for the benefit of society, or because it's 'good' in some other way. Whereas he is all the time only working for himself, his own gain."

McCool was stung. "Is that a crime?"

"No. Nothing wrong with it at all. Why shouldn't he promote his own welfare? But why does he have to justify this to himself? Almost everybody does. We don't. We are self-centered, we are working for us, we don't give a damn for anybody else—and we know it."

"What are some of the other things?"

"Cruelty!" Johnny bit the word out acidly. "All the way from simple pecking-order up to mass pogroms and massacres. I'm bigger, better, stronger than you. I will therefore bully and torture and enslave you, or wipe you out altogether if you don't agree with me. And I expect nothing less in return if you happen to be stronger than I am. You said history, just now. Take a look at it, all the way from the Bible on up. It's the same old pattern. Wipe out the opposition, one way or the other. Crush and defeat, enslave, cripple or destroy anything that dares to stand in the way, or even dares to be different. You want to argue that?"

"No. I'm afraid I can't. It's not new, though. This problem has troubled thinking people for centuries, Johnny. What humanity needs are solutions, some workable answers."

"You'll never get 'em as long as you keep up that trick

of self-delusion and hypocrisy. You can't change people until they want to be changed. You know, we first started digging into this when we were planning our musical campaign. All those protest songs, and the oddball movements that keep on coming up—they all have the same gaping hole in the fabric. All they can say is 'You're all wrong. We believe we're right.' Same old thing: opinions in opposition."

"Don't you ever have clashing opinions?"

"Not like that. We have differences of opinion, sure, but we agree to differ. When it comes to something to do we argue about what, but only until we find something worth going for. Then it's how, and we dig into the facts and methods and find the best. And then we do it. For us, that works. I can tell you, I have just told you, how we do it. But I can't tell you how to make people work like that. That's why we're here."

"But that's running away. Escapism!"

"Of course it is. What's wrong with that? We can't change your world. If we could, you wouldn't like it. So, when you're out of step with everything, when you don't fit anywhere, the only thing left is out. Isn't it?"

And he went back to his playing.

Later, when he worked up courage, McCool approached Nell in a moment of confidence. "I wanted to tell you," he said hesitantly, "that the infatuation no longer exists. You may have gathered that. It never mattered to you one way or the other. But I wanted to tell you, anyway."

"Noblesse oblige!" she said, and grinned, not unkindly. "Thanks for saying it, but I did know. We all know. We've known for some time. One thing we're grateful for, that you haven't gone mushy over each other."

"I don't know what you mean!" he declared, although he did, quite well, and it had caused him secret misgivings. With a pitifully brief future dribbling steadily away, it seemed they would want to cram as much happiness as possible into the last fervent minutes. And yet they hadn't, neither of them. He had sensed in Lucia what he knew was in himself, a quiet yet complete understanding and fulfillment that required no extravagant demonstrations, or extremes of behavior at all. Not the way he would have imagined spending the last few hours of his life with the woman he loved.

"It worries you," Nell said acutely. "And it shouldn't. I've already told you the answer, only you wouldn't believe it."

"That nonsense about being telepathic? Perhaps it's true for you four, but I'm not aware of being in any way super-normal."

"Nothing supernormal about it, silly. Did you ever hear your own voice on a playback?"

"Yes, often. Why?"

"Did you recognize it, first time?"

"No. I remember that." He smiled wryly at the memory. "What's that got to do with it?"

"Try this. If you heard that voice saying something you had not, yourself, said, you'd have no way of identifying it as you, right?"

"I suppose so."

"Fair enough. Now twist it around. If you heard, inside your own head, a voice saying something—it's not a voice of course, but however you choose to think of it, so long as it is inside you assume it's you. Unless you've got some positive way of identifying it as somebody else."

"All right," he agreed. "But I have never had that sensation. Of someone else speaking inside my own head."

"If you did, your built-in defenses would immediately make you think you had 'heard a voice' out there somewhere."

"So I would hear disembodied voices, which is the first sign of insanity!" He grew a trifle impatient.

"I wonder how many people have been tucked away on that score," she murmured. "Remember, if you were so wrapped up in your own thought-pattern that there was no room for anything else, you wouldn't hear a thing." She made an elaborate gesture of pinching her lips together with finger and thumb. "But if you were paying attention to someone else, it would sound like this."

"Good God!" He was up off his seat and backing away before he knew it. "I heard you. And I've heard—like that—before!"

"Of course you have!" She looked at him with a wicked grin, but with no lip movement that he could see. "Coherent speech, like this, is a bit hard to do, until you have practice. It's such a habit to say things aloud that we all do it most of the time. But if you shut up, and I shut up, and you think toward me, I can feel what you're thinking. And you can feel what I'm thinking. And why not?"

"But—but why—why haven't I been aware of this before?"

"Self-delusion? That's not all, though. You've had help. You had better get Jim in a corner, to explain just how that bracelet works. Go on!"

Jim was in his favorite roost, lounging in his pilot-seat, listening to the sophisticated hum and chatter of his instruments, and watching the stars. Under half g retardation the

ship was gradually slowing down to the last terminal stages of the long journey. Soon now the drive would be cut entirely and the ship would coast on, its electronic ears and eyes alert for a precise, close-quarters check on the state of things. As McCool chose a seat he became aware of a new sound, a quiet burbling, beeping, chuckling noise, and fugitive blinks of light from a hitherto dark console caught his eye. Jim followed his stare and grinned.

"Watchdog circuits," he explained. "Faithful Fred, here, is doing a full-spectrum rapid scan. That is, he is listening to and feeling out everything coming our way, apart from visible energy, which I am getting on the screen there. Anything that shouldn't be there, he'll squawk."

"So soon? I thought we had a long way to go yet."

"Depends on how you measure. Eight or nine hours before we need to start calculating orbital attitudes, sure, but that's not all that far in terms of radiation, eccentric magnetic fields . . . or little green men with ray guns saying 'Stand and deliver' even! Still, the main worry is stray debris. If our own system is anything to go by, we are almost into the far-out ice and dust-blob cometary belt. Too small to see on there, in time."

McCool spent a moment staring at the screen, at a star-pattern rich and strange, with two dominant points roughly central. Then: "Nell suggested I should ask you about this." He extended his wrist.

"I know. I heard her." Jim sounded disgusted. "What she carefully did not tell you is that the whole idea was hers in the first place. I mean, about telepathy. We tried to talk her out of it. What I mean, when you play music and like that together for years, sure you get a kind of close-harmony sympathy. Why not? But she would have it that there was more to it. And, anyway, it fitted in with what we were doing at the time on the side effects of various sound frequencies, brain rhythms, stuff like that. So, well, we chased up a few blind alleys, barked up a lot of empty trees, but we did come back with one or two solid leads. You know something? The old philosophers had it, right there, and dropped it without seeing it. You ever hear or read about the mind-body problem?"

"A little," McCool said faintly, still capable of being astonished at the range and variation of these needle-sharp minds. "It's a very deep subject, but as I recall the general consensus seemed to be that mind and body are only two different ways of approaching the same phenomenon."

"Right!" Jim nodded, pleased. "You said it: mind and

body. They said it. And then, bingo, they went right away from it and started working on mind and *brain*! Thing is, you think with your whole body. Feel with your whole body too. The brain is just the coordination and decision-making bit, the bit that publicizes the results. Like in a newspaper. A reporter gets the story, phones it in to a re-write man, who transmits it to the editor, who passes it along to somebody else, and eventually it emerges as print, and you pick up the paper and say, 'Here is the news!' But it isn't. The news is the event. What you have is the report. Anyway, you don't want to hear all the ins and outs, do you?"

"Just the essence, please."

"That's the trouble. Look, I can tell you what that thing does. After all, I made it. I can even tell you a bit about how. But when it comes to why, exactly, I can't. I have theories, and I'm not too happy about those. But it works, so what? Like this. Think of you, the whole bit, body and mind, whatever, as a transceiver. But with a difference. You can pick up from outside, or you can transmit *to* outside. But in most circumstances you are receiving on standard channels, eyes, ears and physical sensors, and retaining the message, interpreting it, and storing it or acting on it. You are not paying attention to other wavelengths, just as Fred, there, is not set to accept visible signals, because I have a camera-circuit for that already. Right? But you get those signals, and you send them. If and when you *do* pay attention, 'tune in' to them, you tend to disregard or suppress them as random interference. Now, all that wrist thing does is amplify and filter the incoming and outgoing component on a metal level, simply by setting up a very small electrostatic field all over your skin. It's nothing much. The little mercury cell in there will last for years. But it's enough to bias your skin as an antenna."

McCool eyed his wrist. "I'm afraid that doesn't help much."

"The effect is like this: when you think of somebody, you automatically think of that person as 'out there,' and you 'tune' in to that person and send. And receive, if that person picks you up and tunes in to you. That's all of it. Thinking is linking, we call it."

"But what, exactly, do I send? And receive?" McCool asked it in a fearful whisper.

"The whole bit. Feelings, sensations, emotions—you as a pattern. Talking and listening are slightly different, because there's the long-standing habit of translating down through the mechanisms into verbal muscular movements. But it

comes easy once you learn how to talk to yourself. You ever do that?"

"You mean, if I want to—to talk to Lucia right now, all I have to do is think of her? But anybody else can listen in?"

"You *can* listen in, sure!" Jim shrugged gently. "But you'll find you won't want to, not if it's private. It feels . . . uncomfortable."

Not entirely reassured, McCool sat still and stared at the wrist-band thing. At least he had the answer to one thing, the reason why he and Lucia had that total and satisfying togetherness without physical demonstration. He nerved himself now, thought deliberately of her, and the response came instantly, a warming contact that was indescribable, but unmistakable, was all of her. Now that he was aware of it, tuned in to it, the sensation was overwhelming, and, although he didn't care whether or not anyone else was eavesdropping, he could understand why it would be uncomfortable. . . .

Almost painful. Spring-tight tension. A steely grip on his mind. McCool spiraled up out of blissful euphoria with a start of alarm. The whole control room ached with it. All at once he was aware that all the other minds on the *Ellis Dee* were crowding in, wondering, anxious. And then Jim's crisp voice, over the sudden agitated beeping of the watch-dog mechanism:

"You are never going to believe this, gang," he declared, in mixed amazement and glee, "but we are being met. Somebody is radioing us. And unless they have trained and sentient asteroids in these parts, there's a fleet of ships right ahead of us!"

The shock wave of surprise spread, echoed, rebounded from all six minds and translated itself into one overriding concept: *Aliens!*

"That's right!" Jim was almost hysterical. "Little green men!"

XIII

JIM HAD DONE a number of things fast, the most immediately obvious of which was the main drive going off. In free-fall weightlessness the whole band assembled hurriedly in the control room. Lucia found a strap-down seat beside McCool,

took his hand, and kept quiet. Johnny took immediate and firm command, without question.

"What have we, so far?" he demanded.

"Item, that!" Jim nodded to the main screen, and particularly to a bright pulsing dot just a fraction off dead center. "It is not any star; you can quote me on that. As far as I can tell from here, it is located something like a million miles away from where Proxima ought to be. It is too bright. It's pulsing, as you can see, but Fred says it is not radiation in the sense of a nuclear engine. Not a star. And it came on suddenly, about the same time as the radio-signal woke Fred up.

"Item, I have cut the main drive, just as a precaution, but the course-computer systems are still in, steering jets, and at the moment we are heading straight for that beacon.

"Item, I am still trying to sort out just what crazy set of wavelengths they are transmitting on. Give me a bit of time for that; it shouldn't be too difficult to unscramble."

"Is that the lot?"

"Yep. No, hold it. Fred also reports that there's a whole flock of minor blips and radiation sources, all about the same distance as that flare, but scattered around it. Ships. Can't be anything else. Reception!"

"Right!" That was Johnny, but, as if he had pushed a co-ordination switch, it became four minds interlocked and inter-changing furiously. McCool was in it, not part of it, but aware, dizzily, of the breathtaking speed at which ideas and concepts flew between them. Questions, probable answers and alternatives, temporary decisions, rushing and bubbling, surging up into quick crisis points and subsiding, all a thousand times faster than speech could have followed, yet totally without fear or panic:

Question: Anyone doubt these are intelligences, aliens? No question. Accept the concept. Aware of us? Obvious yes. Awaiting us? Yes, but how could they have known? Must've picked up our fuel can? Accept. Are they hostile, friendly, neutral, curious? Need further data, postpone. What do we do immediately? Nothing. Wait and see. Attempt to communicate. We have no other choice, as we are unarmed and almost out of fuel. Accept.

Second-order question: What is that flare-thing out there? Suggest it is marker-beacon of some kind. Reasoning? There cannot be any inhabited planets here, possibility vanishingly remote. Hence this must be rendezvous of some kind, way-station, base, something of that order. Hence marker. Also note other ships clustered around it. Accept.

Query, fleet? Correction, more probably assembly of some kind. No immediate evidence of purposeful grouping, formation pattern. Accept.

The pulsing bright spot on the screen was larger now, and could be seen to be a ring, a circle of light, a huge incandescent hoop against the velvet blackness, growing larger by the second.

"Got you!" Jim said suddenly and the discordant warbling from the radio-console flattened out into a barely audible hum. Then they heard a voice, quite positively a voice, and even though the sounds it made were totally incomprehensible, the meaning was plain.

"That's a bonus!" Jim sounded jubilant. "Standard speech, from a form of organism not all that different from us. Must be, to make sounds like that. Come on, Fred, let's hear you sort that out."

"A semantic analyzer?" McCool asked, and Jem confirmed.

"We had to go into that kind of deep," he said, "what with doing world tours, having to learn the various languages, and transposing our material into the local speech. We learned a lot of languages, naturally, but we needed the analyzer to do the job properly. For nuances. Keep on talking, friend, whoever you are. The more samples we get the better the computer can convert."

"Better still!" Jim hissed tensely. "I think I'm getting some kind of visual transmission. Certainly looks like it."

"Hey, look!" Nell reached out to make a delicate adjustment to the main screen picture. "That ring has a spot in the center."

It was really huge now, an electric blue ring hanging in space, and McCool could even see, through and beyond it, a dusting of far stars. But his stare focused on the spot in the middle, a ruby red glow like a ball.

"Can you tell how big everything is, or how far away?" he asked.

"Can get a rough approximation," she replied, making a finer adjustment, "for what it's worth. The ring itself, I'd say, is about five hundred miles in diameter. The center blob is about fifty. You'll notice there's no more pulsation? Jim, surely we've had enough now for a trial translation?"

"Coming up!" Jim snapped a switch over, moved a vernier, and they heard the impersonal, somehow nasal, result of the computer's educated guesses.

"Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. Identify/make known/quote number. Before to go/proceed/complete enter target/destin-

ation/completion. Identify/specify origin. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat."

"That's plain enough," Johnny declared, as Jim reduced the volume a little. "We have to tell them who we are before they will let us go ahead, pass through customs, or whatever it is. Where's the mike? Switch to transmit, James, and keep your fingers crossed."

"You're on!"

"Hello, hello, hello, This ship is the *Ellis Dee*. Name of ship is *Ellis Dee*. We are from Earth. We are from Earth, a planet of the star nearest to here. Planet of the nearest star. Earth. We are from Earth. What do you want us to do now? What are your instructions?" Johnny moved the cut-off with an audible click. "Now we all hope they have some kind of translation circuits too, just in case Fred made a hash of that."

The computer must have done well. Within seconds the impersonal translator burped and rendered "Aware/receive you, *Ellis Dee*. Not known/listed/catalogue-entry void. Are/query outside/amateur competitor/challenger/entry? If so, welcome and proceed through termination/completion/final point."

"We're definitely amateurs here!" Johnny grinned and thumbed the switch again. "Thank you. We are amateur entry. Proceeding. Query, is termination point equivalent to center of illumination? Red spot?" He hesitated, then added, "Please identify who is speaking to us. Who are you?"

They waited breathlessly, McCool as tense as the rest, gripping Lucia's hand, while the circuits compared and evaluated. The reply came quickly.

"Repeat. Welcome, amateur. Proceed through red illumination, then stop/rest. Speaking to you is—" The computer-tone gave way to a straight-through rendering of a pleasant baritone sound that came out like "Sinclayer" and then resumed, "In charge/controller race/competition/test event. Good luck/congratulations."

"Like wow!" Nell breathed. "Sounds like we have just entered, or qualified, for some competitive event or other. What do we do now?"

"We don't!" Jim was positive. "By the time we cut our forward motion to zero we are going to have about enough fuel left to keep us breathing and eating, and that's all."

"We'll have to fudge it somehow." Johnny put the mike away, and swung his head as a smaller screen on top of the radio-console spluttered into fragmented glow. Jim hissed between his teeth, and fiddled with adjustments.

"They use a linear frame scan the same as we do, but the picture lock is crazy. No, hold it, maybe I have the color sequence the wrong way—hah! There, ain't that pretty?"

McCool would have argued the adjective, had he been capable of coherent thought in the face of the picture in the screen. It was a face, a humanoid face, but there was something about it, about the proportions, that marked it instantly as not human. Male, probably. Complexion pale yet sleek and not in any way unhealthy looking. A broad almost square face, suggesting power. Three-quarters on, obviously studying something of interest just off to one side, he had a flattened profile reminiscent of an Oriental yet not that. A mobile face, yet the movements were slight and fast-flowing. They saw just head and shoulders. The only artifice was a narrow silverish band on the head, flat against the forehead. It was studded with what appeared to be peanut sized lamps, winking on and off in a random sequence.

"Intercom!" Jim guessed, as they all sagged under the sudden on-coming of weight with the retardation-drive. "That's Controller Sinclayer, Johnny. You want to talk to him, tell him we're sorry, we can't send him pictures of us? We can't, you know."

Lucia spoke up, surprising everybody. "He looks kind. I suppose we will get to meet him, after a while. Maybe—don't you think?—we ought to dress for it?"

"You have a point," Nell agreed promptly. "Thanks, Lucia, we'd never have thought of that in time. Performance gear, boys. We have to make an impression on the natives!"

"You hold on!" Jim told her forcefully. "We have yet to arrive. I'm going to up the thrust a bit. Wish I knew just how far beyond that spot we're supposed to stop. Or how deep it is. Johnny, talk to him, will you? You tell him we will try to achieve a halt as required, but not to blame us if we can't hit it on the nose, as we are almost out of gas!"

They gasped again in concert as increasing inertia leaned on them. The red spot filled the screen now. Nell strained forward to wind back the magnification. Johnny took up the mike again. McCool felt a return of that old sense of unreality. Here he was, plunging into immediate contact with alien intelligences, a mind-cracking concept in any other circumstances, yet these four were taking it right in their stride as if it was just one more problem to be dealt with.

"Controller Sinclayer, this is John York, speaking for the ship *Ellis Dee*, of Earth. We are trying to reduce forward speed so as to come to rest just beyond the red spot region. We hope to achieve this but it is possible we may fail as we are almost at the end of our fuel supply. Do you understand?"

"Greetings/welcome, John York." The block-square face turned now to look directly into the transmitting camera. "We do not understand your method/mechanism for drive/propulsion. We observe with instruments that you are reducing speed. Is this endangering your fuel reserves?"

"Yes. We are using up the last of our power rapidly. We think you may have detected; previously, an object similar in size and shape to this ship. If so, that was our reserve fuel supply, sent on ahead."

"We have the object you describe, and thank you for the explanation. Do not further deplete your resources. Proceed as now. We will grasp/capture your ship safely, and take charge/control of it at the correct/appropriate time. Query, why do we not receive vision/pictures from you? Query, do you receive vision/pictures from me?"

"We can see you very well. Your picture system is almost similar to ours, but we do not have transmission systems for vision. We are shutting off our drive mechanism now. . . . Do that, Jim! If they have whatever to grapple us, or take charge, we'd better not play about with them."

They went weightless again, abruptly. The red curtain, like a sheet of ruby flame, came ever closer, resolved into a restless shimmering of momentary vortices interlacing with each other. They watched it, breathlessly. All at once, like the blink of an eye and with no more physical sensation, it vanished and they found themselves looking down a vast blue-violet tube that narrowed at the far end like a colossal cone. Then they all cried out as they saw the rapidly growing ship beyond. It was vast, aglow with points and bands of light, of a shape as if some Titan had arranged a dozen immense discs of graded sizes on either side of the central belted structure.

"I hope their grab system works!" Jim muttered, and it was a prayer they could all echo, as the great bulk grew and spread, and then they saw a dark orifice yawning, and the summer-lightning flicker of slim beams from either side, reaching out to seize and hold their ship. They felt the nudge and surge of power; the feeling of being swept up in some enormous suction-cleaner was unavoidable as the orifice swelled off the screen's edges.

"You are safe, and welcome." Sinclayer's words came flat-

ly via the translator, but there was no mistaking the smile on his face. "We will attach/secure a conveyance/pathway to your hatch soon. You will join us, soon."

"Hoo! Boys!" Johnny let out a long and thankful breath. "This is where it could get gummy, brothers and sisters, but at least we're here. And they have our fuel can. Wonder what they made of it? Sounded like they were a bit baffled by it."

"Better question is," Jem put in, "what are they going to make of us? I mean, what's this contest we have just qualified for?"

"Only one thing to do," Nell declared confidently. "The one thing we are good at. Right?"

They left the control room at a gallop, leaving McCool and Lucia to follow more slowly. From long and close association, McCool was able to assemble, piecemeal and with effort, most of the peripheral observations those razor-sharp minds had grasped and accepted almost without thinking. They were within perfectly comfortable, slightly less than normal Earth-value gravity, for one thing. That argued a whole constellation of accompanying data. Then, Sinclayer was obviously and visibly humanoid, and with human-style emotion-reactions. That supplied several other reassuring pieces of data. Oxygen breathing, for one, similar food requirements, all sorts of things, quick grasp of the concept of fuel reserves, even while admitting non-understanding of their ship's mechanism. Lucia broke in on his thoughts with a wail.

"Horace, they're all dressing up to make an impression, and I haven't anything to wear!"

He suppressed the temptation to declare that she couldn't do better than the way she was, and before he could formulate an appropriate answer, Nell's brisk voice came through.

"Not to worry, darling. You come along and see what I've got. Don't forget, you know, you are talking to Eleanor Grant, now!" After a pause for self-satisfied amusement she added, "McCool? You'll find your duds all neatly brushed and pressed in the locker under your bunk. One of the boys could let you have a snazzy shirt, if you like, but nothing else of theirs will fit you."

"Thank you," he said courteously, "but no. Plain white will be quite good enough. It always has been."

As they gathered in the main lounge space in something less than half an hour later, McCool confirmed his guess as to what Nell had meant by the "thing we are good at." The boys were in their close-hugging green velvet pants, calf-

boots with high heels, monkey-jackets and frilly shirts, and each with a guitar. Sight of those took McCool back what felt like several lifetimes, with a shock at how much he had changed in the interim. Then he saw how much they had changed. Once more they were the slick, self-satisfied public idols. Nell had put on the guise of Yum-Yum again, along with the highlight spray on her fire-red curls and her dress, which he mentally classed as animated moire patterns stretching from neck to ankle. Then Lucia came, and he forgot the rest, for she had changed too.

How had he ever been so blind as to regard this deliciously curved and radiantly lovely woman as part of the office background? She had done something to her hair that made it gleam with a deep sheen that was almost liquid, almost a mass of pale yellow metal brushing her shoulders. From Nell's wardrobe she had selected a simple tunic, so simple as to be severe, in deep blue with wriggling arabesques in silver thread all over it. It hugged from neck to waist, then luxuriated in folds to mid-thigh. He had no words to tell her, and didn't need them. The pleasure on her face was enough to show she had seen the admiration he felt.

"I'll check the air lock," Jim offered, as they all felt a gentle and distant percussion. Seconds later he was calling them to come. McCool and Lucia took the rear of the train of excited figures. They stepped out of their air lock, wide-eyed, into a glowing tube, to stare nervously at the man who awaited them.

"Smell that air!" Nell whispered, irrepressibly. "You and your lousy air-conditioning unit, Jim boy!" Truly the air did have a perfumed sparkle, but they were too awed by their alien guests to take much notice of anything else. This was not Sinclayer. This man had similar blocky features but with a distinct epicanthic fold to his eyes and wispy jet black hair, where the other man had been pale blond. But he was huge. McCool, himself just a shade under six feet, had to look up. This man was all of seven feet tall and built in herculean proportions. He stood by a strange object, something like a silver rod basket half covering a massive and glossy black ball. But his eyes licked them over and were compelling. He wore a broad waist-sash in vivid scarlet, from which were suspended pouches of some kind.

About his right forearm was a similar scarlet band, and he had a headband, but with only one winking light set in its center.

He moved now, placed the flat palm of his left hand on

his chest and spoke, with an intonation that made it sound like some formal greeting, quite brief. Dark eyes scanned them critically. As his speech closed he dipped a hand into one pouch and brought out a handful of objects, stepped close to McCool, and then offered one between finger and thumb. It lay easily in McCool's palm, and it took him no more than five seconds to realize what it must be. That bit would go in the ear, and that part would attach to the lobe to hold it surely? He raised it, and the huge stranger inclined his head approvingly as he brought it to his ear and managed to settle it in place. In very quick order they all had one.

McCool heard Jim muttering under his breath. "You want to bet this is some kind of micro-miniature translator job?"

"No bet!" was Nell's hissed retort. "What I'm wondering is, do they all undress like him?" And McCool was thus made aware of what he had completely overlooked so far, that the big man was quite naked, apart from his sash and armband, and soft transparent foot-coverings.

"I am Noriarkar. I greet you. I wish to address the master of this ship, *Ellis Dee*." The big man's eyes went expectantly to McCool, who shook his head, momentarily staggered by the way the words had seemed to come from Noriarkar directly, in normally accented Earth English.

"I am John York." Johnny stepped a little apart and ahead. "We're not very strong on having leaders or commanders, but for what it's worth, I'm in charge of the outfit. I am happy to meet you, Noriarkar." He made a gesture to the rest, and went on. "This is Eleanor Grant. Jeremy Howard. James Nelson. We four are the crew of the ship. This is Lucia Horne, and Horace McCool, who are guests along with us."

"Only four crew? And you are a guest?" Noriarkar's faintly puzzled gaze came back to McCool, who nodded this time.

"Came along for the ride," he said, unable to think of anything better to say.

"Remarkable! And your ship, it is amazing. We have studied it from remote and it is truly remarkable. But I fail my duty, which is to make you welcome. I have to ask one formal question, that you permit officials to inspect and examine your ship to be sure that you qualify."

"You won't fiddle with anything, will you?" Jim demanded, and the big man smiled easily.

"But of course not. That is understood. We will regard it

as precious, you may be sure. Utmost care will be taken. You agree?"

"Can't do anything else," Johnny muttered aside to Jim. "What's the difference? We agree," he told Noriarkar.

"Good. Now, if you will follow me, I will take you to those who are eagerly waiting to entertain you." He turned away and they saw what the ball-and-frame device was for. The basket-work frame had a flat top, a thick disc of black stuff. Noriarkar put his hand on it, and the ball rolled to meet him, whereupon he got one foot to a step-projection, hoisted, and sat himself on the disc, obviously a cushioned seat, setting his other foot on a step at the opposite side.

"Whoa!" Jim called out. "That's cool. How's it work?"

"The carrier? Within the globe is a shaped force-field which is in equilibrium only when the seat is directly above, or opposed to, the point of contact with the floor. It acts at all times to restore this equilibrium if it is disturbed. So, if I incline my weight forward—you see?" They saw him roll away along the tube, halt, spin around, and roll back to halt before them again. "One steers with the feet, with gentle pressure, for turning. It is an easy skill to learn. Come."

He spun again and set away at a steady roll. They trailed after him. McCool heard Jim whispering, almost squeaking in his excitement, and his own thoughts were in turmoil. He was no genius in technology, but even he could appreciate, for instance, a fluently perfect translator that would fit in the ear, and a shaped force-field generator so matter-of-fact that it was used as personal transport. *We must be like ignorant savages, to them, he thought, and yet they seem genuinely glad to see us!*

They came to a massive portal, standing open. Beyond there was much light and color, whispering music and semi-transparent curtains which gave intriguing glimpses of a vast room beyond them. Again McCool hung back to let the others go first, but now Lucia hung back with him.

"They scare me," she whispered. "Not the size, but they're so beautiful, don't you think?"

McCool hadn't thought in quite those terms, but he did now as he saw the reception committee waiting for them. Noriarkar wheeled a little aside to join a group, about seven or eight, all male, all wearing matching red sashes and armbands, and he assumed, instantly, that these were the inspectors. Then he had to forget them in view of the others, a standing, beaming, glittering group of men and women. Not huge at all, this time, but reasonably human-

sized and reassuring—but they were beautiful, even the men. He watched in sudden green envy as a beaming Apollo of a man clad in a golden jerkin detached himself from the cluster and made for Lucia.

"I am Moderick," he said, holding out both hands, "and you are Lucia Horne." He ran the whole thing together, but his identification was good. "It has fallen to my good fortune to be your entertainer and companion. Will you come with me?"

Lucia gripped tight at McCool's hand, cringed back, but Moderick was quietly determined. "There is no need to be anxious. It will be my pleasure to amuse you. Pillmilla will perform the same service for your mate."

And McCool felt his arm touched, his attention drawn, by a woman who had approached alongside Moderick. He saw, also, that the young four were being similarly separated out, that a brawny alien, in a swirling green robe, had hooked Nell on his arm and was marching her off through the curtain.

"We wish to do you honor," the woman said, in a throaty murmur that set thrills tickling along his spine. "It is an honor for me to entertain one of the champions." Bewildered, McCool threw a helpless glance to Lucia and she managed a tremulous smile in return.

"I can't believe they mean us any harm, dear," he told her. "In any case, what can we do?"

"You have a relationship with her." Pillmilla made it a statement, rather than a question, as McCool watched Lucia being led away.

"Is it so obvious?" he said, remembering his manners and bringing his attention around to his fair companion.

"And understandable. She is very lovely. You are fortunate. Will you come this way, now?" She led off up to and through the gauzy veil, and McCool, following, felt a momentary tingling and was on through before he realized that this, again, must be some kind of force-field. Then the greater sound of strange music caught him, and the unmistakable surf-roar of many people gathered in amiable association. His first impression was of a great domed ball-room, of twinkling overhead lights, a glossy floor, and a great concourse of people, color, and movement; then his companion, touching his arm again, brought him to one side, where there were arrays of the ball-and-frame things. He protested his ignorance, and she laughed.

"You have only to try, Horace McCool. The carrier is designed to be cooperative. Try!"

He put a hand on the seat edge as he had seen Noriarkar do, and the thing edged toward him fractionally, toward the weight of his hand. He found the step, put his foot on it, and somehow the thing seemed to dip and turn under him and he was seated, with his other foot going naturally to the other step. For a giddy moment he had terror of falling off, as there was no other support, but then the ball moved restlessly and rapidly under him in response to his teetering, and he realized he *couldn't* fall off, even if he tried. In a flash she had mounted up beside him, extended her hand to take his fingers, and called gayly, "Follow. You see how it is easy?"

They settled almost automatically in to a mode of travel with him just slightly trailing her. Like skating on ice, which he had done, one had only to lean and bear down with body weight, and the spinning ball swooped and obeyed smoothly. She led him speedily past gathered knots of chattering folk in rainbow hues, too fast for him to grasp more than fragmentary details of their appearances, but letting him see at least that they were all attractive, and most of them wavingly aware of who he was. That brought back something she had said about champions. Champions?

They swooped to a halt close to yet another curtain of gauzy energy, and he had to discover the trick of getting down. Then she led him again, through that moment of tingle and, at last, into quiet silence. Privacy. It seemed to be a room, quite large, with scattered things that looked like divans and oddly shaped chairs, and an undoubted table.

"We are alone here for a while," she said, gesturing around to make him free of it, "until the clear verdict. Please tell me all about yourself."

"Just a moment." He gathered his wits desperately. "There are so many questions I want to ask that I hardly know where to begin. This whole thing—everything—is completely strange to me."

"You would like something to drink, perhaps? Names will not help here, but if you could describe the contents I can order a synthesis." She moved to stand by the table and, for the first time, he got a really good look at her. She was tall, almost as tall as he, and now that he was paying attention, sorting out the details of what he had taken as a gestalt up to now, she was very odd indeed. Her hair was a silver cloud about her head and ears. A slim black headband pressed it into a wave on either side, its one winking light set in the center of her high forehead. Her eyes and lips

were glowing amber-yellow, and her exquisitely lovely face, neck, shoulders, all were vividly pure emerald green. Like, he thought dazedly, the glow of copper salts in a gas flame. Her dress, such as it was, seemed to be of many strings and threads of stuff that glittered and sparkled with every movement, studded here and there with egg-sized many-faceted jewels. It met with a loop about her throat, and reached, in places, as far as her knees; in other places it was nonexistent. It permitted her bountiful bosom to spill out, seemed to emphasize those curves, seemed intended to underline and proclaim that she was female. And she was green all over, down to the tiny feet that stood in transparent slippers.

He came back to her face, completely speechless, and saw an expression of wonder there. "This is strange," she said, her voice sinking low into a murmur. "Can it be? A moment, and I shall know." She turned to the table, to touch something and concentrate as she operated a small protrusion that had appeared. Ordering drinks, he assumed, felt certain, and wondered how he knew. And he was right. Within seconds another something emerged from the tabletop, became an inverted bowl, stood revealed as a curiously shaped flagon and glittering glasses as she removed the bowl-cover. She poured, then handed him a glass.

"Taste and tell me if it is what you wish."

Even before he had it on his tongue, his nose had told him that it was—or was a fine imitation of—a rare old Dutch brandy liqueur with a distinctive spicy tang of tangerine. Van der Hum, and he had been thinking of just that. His expression was enough. She sank on to a chair, staring at him.

"You placed that in my thoughts," she said. "Not the words, because you do not have my kind of words, nor I yours. That is what the interlingua is for." She touched her ear, where she wore the duplicate of his translator. "We are of many worlds and many speeches. We use the interlingua commonly, as you will understand. But this direct interchange of thought is something we have only rarely, and only in people of great power. I myself have never encountered it before, have merely heard of it. Who are you? What are you? I heard you declare that your ship is from Earth, from a planet of that star nearby which no one has ever bothered to visit, it being so far out of the known worlds and systems. Also that you, personally, are but a guest on that ship. You and the woman, Lucia Horne. I know, as we all know merely by looking, that the four others are but children, yet they were in charge of the ship.

I ask again, who are you? If you are a great dignitary, and you must be, you should declare it so that we may treat you properly."

"Now wait, wait!" McCool patted the air in consternation. "You're getting this all wrong. I'm no great power. It's true that Lucia and I are older than the rest, but not much. And, truly, I suppose I am a person of some substance on my world, but not in the way you mean. Not at all!"

He hesitated, trying to gather his scrambled thoughts into some kind of order, some way of explaining to her that she would understand. He saw the lamp on her headband flicker rapidly and then settle to a steady glow, saw her attention turn inward, as if listening. Then, just as she was about to speak, Johnny's excited voice intruded into his head.

"McCool! Everybody! Listen, I've just caught on to what this is all about, and it will slay you when you know. You especially, McCool, you and your collection of vintage automobiles!"

XIV

McCOOL PUT UP his right hand hastily to check Pillmilla's imminent words, raised his left wrist to bring the talker close.

"A moment," he pleaded. "My colleagues wish to talk to me." He made a mental picture of Johnny and asked, "What on Earth is this all about? What have you found out?" He knew, by feel, that the others were all agog.

"Vintage automobiles! You're a collector, McCool, you should know. You ever hear of an event they call the 'Old Crock's Race'?"

"Of course. It still runs, once a year, in England. London to Brighton, I believe. They turn out all the old museum-piece automobiles and give them a run. All in fun, I believe, but what—?"

"You've guessed it. Seems they have some kind of association that translates out into the 'First Ship Club.' Once every fifty years or thereabouts they set up this base—back of beyond, for them—and have a race. It's a closed entry, open

only to first-stage drives, real primitive stuff, and an award to anybody who even gets this far, plus a grand prize for the best-preserved and oldest genuine model. They have never seen anything to come near our bucket. We have won the grand award away ahead of any other competitor. The referees have just finished checking."

McCool held his breath until the others had done whooping in glee, then: "What happens now?"

"Celebration, first. We are all invited out into the grand hall for the presentation and speeches and stuff like that."

"And then what?"

"Who knows. That's enough to be going on with, isn't it? See you!"

McCool allowed himself to be signed off, put his wrist down, remembering belatedly that the gesture was superfluous in any case, and stared thoughtfully at Pillmilla. "My colleagues have just given me the information that, I think, you were about to pass on. That we have won some reward or other?"

"That is true." She touched her headband in explanation. "We communicate remotely by these. Not your way." Her beautiful breasts heaved as she leaned forward excitedly.

"The award is a great honor, nothing more than that, but the ship will be much sought-after by wealthy collectors. You will sell?"

That was a new and frightening twist. McCool frowned. "I can't answer that. It is not my ship. As I told you, I'm only a guest aboard."

She sat up, suddenly, again tilting her head as if listening. She was, he told himself all over again, a very beautiful woman, even if she was green. . . . Perhaps the color was artificial. She came out of her silence with a dazzling smile for him, and stood.

"I am to bring you to the grand hall. There is no hurry. You have hardly tasted your drink."

"You haven't tasted it at all," he retorted. "It is our custom to drink together for friendship and celebration. Please?"

She nodded, poured, raised her glass with him, and sipped. Her eyes opened wide, brightened in appreciation. She was very beautiful. McCool sipped, letting the aromatic liqueur infuse his palate. He saw a faint deepening of the lambent green tint on her face, and a fluttering of her eyes.

"Your thoughts are very warm, very flattering," she whispered, and he went suddenly hot all over.

"I'm dreadfully sorry. I should have been keeping my feelings to myself. Please excuse me."

"But why? It was very pleasant, and a compliment. I thank you. We should go now. Come!"

Getting across the grand hall was no easy matter. There were thousands of people gathered to celebrate the moment, and all delightedly willing to cheer McCool in passing, on the way to the platform at the far end. The four youngsters were already there, grinning like idiots, with their guitars slung across their backs like so many old-time troubadours. Lucia arrived just ahead of McCool, and he scrambled up the stepped hemisphere stage right after her, to where Sinclair, Noriarkar, and another man, an old and bejeweled man this time, stood patiently waiting. And then, all at once, the whole scene seemed to take on a banal aspect to McCool.

Speech! Chairman, people in charge, dignitaries, ladies and gentlemen, it is a great honor and privilege . . . and so on. Not quite in the same stuffy phrases he was accustomed to, but with precisely the same turgid and boring atmosphere as in any Earth-side stockholders' meeting. McCool found he had Lucia on one side and Johnny on the other.

"I'm told the ship is a collector's item," he whispered. "Worth a lot of whatever they use for money. Will you sell?"

"We're thinking about it. We like the idea, but what'll we use for exchange when we've run through that? Jem says we ought to confirm that we can earn our way, first."

"Earn? How do you propose to do that?"

"Same way we always have. You'll see!"

"Good luck! Incidentally, if that fails, I think I know a way that Jim can earn, at least; tell you later. But, suppose you do sell the ship, how do we get home again?"

"Who wants to go?" The retort came fourfold. The reply came back as an instant duet from McCool and Lucia: "*We do!*" And then McCool carried on. "I can put you in the way of earning your keep, if you'll help out with getting us back to Earth. Deal?"

"We'll work something out. Hold it. My cue for speech."

Johnny edged forward as the jewel-decked old man, whose name came out as Benobal, swung into his introductory speech of award.

"—have no hesitation whatever in declaring the ship *Ellis Dee* to be the finest and best-preserved example of a first-level spaceship we have ever seen, and we are deep in admiration for the courage of her crew and observers in undertaking a trip so hazardous, and yet with such confidence as to scorn prior warning, announcement, or emergency assistance arrangements. We are not familiar with the culture

of Earth, but we have no hesitation at all in declaring this award well and truly won by them, and their ship. In the name of, and on behalf of the members of the 'First Ship Club,' it is my honor to present this trophy to you, Captain John York."

Johnny took the glittering gold model of a ship bristling with jets and inexplicable fittings, bowed, passed it back to McCool to hold.

"Mr. President, Chairman, referees, members, ladies and gentlemen, I'm honored. On behalf of my fellow traveling companions I think it would be true to say we are all surprised and overwhelmed, because we hadn't expected anything like this. I'm no good at making speeches, none of us are. On my own world I am an entertainer. With your kind indulgence we would like to show our gratitude by trying to entertain you now."

There was no end to it, McCool thought, as he watched the imperturbable four settle themselves into the ready position. Then it struck him that this, really, was nothing new or strange to this group. After all, they had spent five hard years catching and winning a variety of audiences. This was just one more show, to them. Johnny tapped with his toe to establish the beat.

The magic had lost nothing by traveling. Within the first five minutes, his own senses beginning to reel under the emotionally loaded impact of the furious four, McCool gripped Lucia's fingers, cast a sympathetic glance over the stunned and hypnotized audience, and scream-whispered in her ear. "Let's get out of the public eye. This is no place for us."

"Aren't they just marvelous?" she said, as he conducted her through the standing, staring knots of fascinated galactics and aimed for a distant shimmer curtain of quiet.

"They are," he agreed honestly. "Trust that bunch to fall right on their feet, no matter what." Fringe questions were troubling him, like why the galactics had not become aware of Earth a lot earlier. Radio, surely? But then, Johnny had said this event was back-of-beyond and only once every fifty years. And how much longer was it due to go on? If the award meant anything, the show was almost over. And that propped up the main question in his mind, the burning question: what now, McCool? He and Lucia were on the point of venturing through a force-field curtain in search of peace and quiet when he felt a gentle but firm touch on his shoulder and turned to see the aged master of ceremonies close

on his heels. With him were a group of others. Among them McCool recognized three of the referee group.

"We would have a word with you, Earth-person McCool," Benobal said, raising his voice over the noise. "This is truly a time for revelry, for the younger ones, but there are other things."

McCool, clutching the trophy in one arm, holding Lucia's hand with the other, thought that he recognized something familiar about the expressions, the attitudes, of the attendant group. Instincts suddenly breaking into overdrive, he managed a careful smile.

"At your service, of course. Will we be private in here?"

Minutes later they were a group in seclusion, gathered around a table on which flagons and glasses had appeared promptly. Very faintly, they could still hear The Trippers, running through their repertoire. Benobal sipped, made a brief head-gesture toward the distant noise, and smiled thinly.

"Your young ones have talent in great degree. It is something novel to us, and acceptable, to judge by the reception. But you, also, have talent."

"You think so?" McCool was giving nothing away now. Every passing moment was confirming his original impression. "Why do you think that?"

Benobal made a deprecatory gesture. "We are gathered," he said, "to talk business. I do not know how the translator will render that to your ears, so I will expand that. Trade. You understand?"

"Perfectly. But why me?"

"Look at us," Benobal offered, then with a casual finger identified one man after another by names which sounded like so much noise to McCool. "We are men of business. This event, this gathering, is a diversion, a playtime for those of wealth, but we are never too busy playing to miss a chance to do business. And you, too, are such a man. By the look."

"You are quite right." McCool nodded slowly, according respect to the old man's shrewdness. He felt more at home with every breath. "Before anything else," he said boldly, "a question. Is it your habit to carry on your business purely by word of mouth, or do you employ more durable forms of recording particulars?"

"Ah!" Benobal raised a finger as if winning a bet with himself. "I knew I was not mistaken. We, McCool, prefer to employ direct recording on metal. Like this." And he produced from a pouch a slim pencil-like device. They all had

them. Their operation was simplicity itself. Benobal was able to supply a spare. McCool requested a demonstration, then turned it over to Lucia and introduced her all over again.

"In my world," he told them, "it is customary to have another person make the recordings and act as witness of faith, a person especially trained for just this function."

"Better and better!" Benobal's slate gray eyes glittered in appreciation. "It is so, also, with us. One moment." It worked out nearer five minutes, but with little fuss the quiet chamber was suddenly invaded by staff, mostly female, all highly decorative, but all quietly competent. McCool withdrew his wonderment from a contemplation of glowing skin-colors and delightfully revealed curves, faced Benobal, and settled down to fight, in his own sphere, as he had never fought before.

It was all of two hours later, when the drinks had all been disposed of, throats were sore from argument and dispute, but mutual respect had been solidly forged, that McCool and Lucia were once more left alone.

"I still think," she declared, respectful but firm, "that we should have consulted the boys first. I mean, after all that work, you are still dependent on their agreement. Without that, nothing!"

"Leave that to me," he declared, weary but assured. "Hark! Does that sound to you as if they've taken a break, at last?"

They had. He passed through the force-curtain far enough to see that the bowl-stage was now occupied by a group of writhing females, and the air pulsing with music that was definitely not The Trippers. Ducking back he employed his wrist-band to call them.

"This is important," he said firmly. "We are located in a booth right opposite the stage area. It's quiet, if it's rest you're after."

They came, gleaming with perspiration and grumbling, but attentive. They sat bonelessly, utterly relaxed, and waited for him to speak. "You've said," he started, "all of you, that the reason why you wanted to quit Earth was that you felt you couldn't change it. Among other things, of course. Well, like it or not, you have changed it now." He had their full attention with those words. "There are many interested parties who are just itching to track back to where we came from. It will be a simple matter for them. And that means contact between Earth and the rest of the civilized galaxy. You understand that much?"

"We are right with you, McCool," Johnny said as spokesman. "So?"

"Either"—and he chose his words with care—"you can

sell the ship, use the proceeds to stake yourselves, go on your way entertaining, enjoying life, having a time, like space-tramps, and do well at it. In which case you leave Earth to its fate, and that will be simply a repetition of the old story of the primitive culture being taken over and destroyed by the superior one, but why should you care?"

"Or?" Johnny snapped.

"Or you can do something, right now, to ensure that Earth gets a square deal, an even break. I do not suggest that you should do this out of sympathy, charity, or loyalty, alone. I hope to show you that you'll stand to gain enormously at the same time. Well?"

"Keep talking," Jem said. "You've made a deal of some kind?"

"I have. No, not over your heads. Contingent, depending on whether you say yes or no. You'll realize that I could have done it on my own, as representative of McCool Financing. Depending on you I may even do that, yet, but I thought it was only fair to let you have your choice. It goes like this. First, you'll sell the ship, and you'll get plenty, believe me. Some collector or other, or even a museum, will pay handsomely, if properly dealt with. There's more, on the side. Every young space-buff in the galaxy will want a duplicate model for his collection. An authentic copy. I have a distributor all lined up to handle that."

Jem nodded, his eyes keen. The others sat still.

"Then there's your music. They like it, you don't need me to tell you. But, know this: recorded entertainment, as such, is something fairly rare and novel, here. There's an enormous market, wide open, for that. For your stuff certainly—all of it over the past five years. I have an exclusive for HMI on that, on publishing and recordings. And you"—he swung on Jim—"are in this too. Your Magic Box equipment—they haven't anything like it here. There's another exclusive market, enormous, all yours. I have the franchise all settled."

"But wait!" Johnny frowned. "That's a mighty big bait you're dangling, McCool. Only, we don't want to go back to Earth and become tycoons."

"It's big!" Jem murmured. "Real big!"

"We don't want to go back!" Johnny snapped. McCool sensed an imminent clash among the four. Nell was hesitating. Jim was scowling to himself.

"There's no need," he said, with precise timing, "for you to go back at all. You have only to say the word, make me your Terrestrial Agent. I will handle it for you. I have the

reputation and financial standing of McCool Financing to back me. I can sew up the whole thing on an exclusive basis. HMI and Magic Box Galactic Contractors. You'll have an income beyond anything you've ever had before. And we can slam the door firmly on any and all wildcat exploiters, too. I can swing this deal right up to the United Nations, and I will." He scanned their faces intently, settled on Nell, who was looking a trifle woebegone.

"You," he said, aiming a finger, "could transfer your holding rights in your lunar villa to me, and that's where we can build the trading station and offices. With a percentage to you. And your names forever enshrined in honor as the people who opened the galaxy to Earth. Ambassadors!"

"My boutiques!" she wailed. "Just think of the market there is here! And on a two-way basis, too. Some of the cosmetics I've seen, that crazy skin-tint thing would go like a nova on Earth. And the fabrics! Damn you, McCool, I'm torn!"

"Miss Grant!" Lucia spoke up now, surprising everybody. "Why not have an agency for that, too? I mean, if you would consider me as your representative, I could run the business from the top, without interfering with the way you have it organized; by keeping in touch with you I could be your agent for interchange of ideas and styles and things like that."

Nell hesitated, looked to Jem for advice. They all did. Jem the business-wise pursed his lips just once, then: "I'm for it, gang. Look, we set up the whole affair to run itself after we ducked out, right? So nothing is changed except that we empower McCool to deal with the galactic extension of the works, right? Is that okay with you, McCool? That you do not have any hand in the internal running, but only take over the extensions, the galactic trading rights?"

"That's it, exactly. Are we agreed?"

It took them no more than a minute of mind-exchange to come to a firm agreement, and that led McCool into his final proposition.

"Something else you have that is novel in the galaxy. This mind-contact amplifier. The galactics know about telepathy, but to them it is a rare and potent power, held only by outstanding minds. This bracelet gadget makes it common, within everyone's reach. I suggest—and that's all I can do—that this is something we should keep back; at least for a while, until we know a bit more about the general setup. Agreed?"

That one took them less than half a minute. Johnny, with

a rare grin, said, "You're smart, McCool, haven't I always maintained it? But here's a thought for you. Jim can let you have the specs for the bracelet, and you could let it leak, carefully, back home on Earth. To those people you can trust and work with. It should reform a lot of business dealings. And just one more thing. Look after old Barney, hey? I mean, he looked after us, but good."

As if concluding an Earth-Galaxy trading agreement was all in the line of fun, they clattered hurriedly away back to the stage and the new and clamorous audience.

"You were wonderful." Lucia sighed. "I suppose you have it all worked out how we are going to get back?"

"That's simple. Benobal has put a small trader at our disposal, one that will make the trip in about a week."

"First thing I'm going to do, when we get back," she vowed, "is to make sure that everyone knows just how much they owe to you in all this."

"Something comes before that," McCool declared, clearing his mind for the moment of a host of business items. "Your status has to be changed. You'll have to become a full partner." He watched her face and grinned at her modified rapture. "I mean," he added casually, "that we are going to get married!"

"Oh!" She breathed it. Then, with mischief: "You haven't asked me!"

He exhibited the bracelet and used the gesture as an excuse to put his arm around her. "Do I need to, with this?"