

## Passage for Piano

Had some cosmic crystal gazer suggested to Margaret Hatchell that she would try to smuggle a concert grand piano onto the colony spaceship, she would have been shocked. Here she was at home in her kitchen on a hot summer afternoon, worried about how to squeeze *ounces* into her family's meager weight allowance for the trip—and the piano weighed more than half a *ton*.

Before she had married Walter Hatchell, she had been a working nurse-dietician, which made her of some use, to the colony group destined for Planet C. But Walter, as the expedition's chief ecologist, was one of the most important cogs in the effort. His field was bionomics: the science of setting up the delicate balance of growing things to support human life on an alien world.

Walter was tied to his work at the White Sands base, hadn't been home to Seattle for a month during this crucial preparation period. This left Margaret with two children and several problems—the chief problem being that one of their children was a blind piano prodigy subject to black moods.

Margaret glanced at the clock on her kitchen wall: three-thirty, time to start dinner. She wheeled the microfilming cabinet out of her kitchen and down the hall to

the music room *to* get it out of her way. Coming into the familiar music room, she suddenly felt herself a hesitant stranger here—almost afraid to look too closely at her favorite wing-back chair, or at her son's concert grand piano, or at the rose pattern rug with afternoon sun streaming dappled gold across it.

It was a sensation of unreality—something like the feeling that had caught her the day the colonization board had notified them that the Hatchells had been chosen.

"We're going to be pioneers on Planet C," she whispered: But that made it no more real. She wondered if others among the three hundred and eight chosen colonists felt the same way about moving to a virgin world.

In the first days after the selection, when they all had been assembled at White Sands for preliminary instructions, a young astronomer had given a brief lecture.

"Your sun will be the star Giansar," he had said, and his voice had echoed in the barnlike hall as he pointed to the star on the chart. "In the tail of constellation Dragon. Your ship will travel sixteen years on sub-macro drive to make the passage from Earth. You already know, of course, that you will pass this time in sleep-freeze, and it'll feel just like one night to you. Giansar has a more orange light than our sun, and it's somewhat cooler. However, Planet C is closer to its sun, and this means your climate will average out warmer than we experience here."

Margaret had tried to follow the astronomer's words closely, just as she had done in the other lectures, but only the high points remained from all of them: orange light, warmer climate, less moisture, conserve weight in what you take along, seventy-five pounds of private luggage allowed for each adult, forty pounds for children to age fourteen . . .

Now, standing in her music room, Margaret felt that it must have been some other person who had listened to those lectures. *I should be excited and happy*, she thought *Why do I feel so sad?*

At thirty-five, Margaret Hatchell looked an indeterminate mid-twenty with a good figure, a graceful walk. Her brown hair carried reddish lights. The dark eyes, **full**

mouth and firm chin combined to give an impression of hidden fire.

She rubbed a hand along the curved edge of the piano lid, felt the dent where the instrument had hit the door when they'd moved here to Seattle from Denver. *How long ago?* she asked herself. *Eight years? Yes . . . it was the year after Grandfather Maurice Hatchell died . . . after playing his final concert with this very piano.*

Through the open back windows she could hear her nine-year-old, Rita, filling the summer afternoon with a *discussion* of the strange insects to be discovered on Planet C. Rita's audience consisted of non-colonist playmates overawed by the fame of their companion. Rita was referring to their colony world as "Ritelle," the name she had submitted to the Survey and Exploration Service.

Margaret thought: *If they choose Rita's name we'll never hear the end of it. . . literally!*

Realization that an entire planet could be named for her daughter sent Margaret's thoughts reeling off on a new tangent. She stood silently in the golden shadows of the music room, one hand on the piano that had belonged to her husband's father, Maurice Hatchell—the Maurice Hatchell of concert fame. For the first time, Margaret saw something of what the news service people had been telling her just that morning—that her family and all the other colonists were "chosen people," and for this reason their lives were of tremendous interest to everyone on Earth.

She noted her son's bat-eye radar box and its shoulder harness atop the piano. That meant David was somewhere around the house. He never used the box in the familiarity of his home where memory served in place of the sight he had lost. Seeing the box there prompted Margaret to move the microfilming cabinet aside where David would not trip over it if he came to the music room to practice. She listened, wondering if David was upstairs trying the lightweight electronic piano that had been built for him to take on the spaceship. There was no hint of his music in the soft sounds of the afternoon, but then he could have turned the sound low.

Thinking of David brought to her mind the boy's tan-

tram that had ended the news-film session just before lunch. The chief reporter—*What was his name? Bonaudi?*—had asked how they intended to dispose of the concert grand piano. She could still hear the awful discord as David had crashed his fists onto the keyboard. He had leaped up, dashed from the room—a dark little figure full of impotent fury.

*Twelve is such an emotional age*, she told herself. Margaret decided that her sadness was the same as David's. *It's the parting with beloved possessions . . . it's the certain knowledge that we'll never see these things again . . . that all we'll have will be films and lightweight substitutes.* A sensation of terrible longing filled her. *Never again to feel the homely comfort of so many things that spell family tradition: the wing-back chair Walter and I bought when we furnished our first house, the sewing cabinet that great-great grandmother Chrisman brought from Ohio, the oversize double bed built specially to accommodate Walter's long frame . . .*

Abruptly, she turned away from the piano, went back to the kitchen. It was a white tile room with black fixtures, a laboratory kitchen cluttered now with debris of packing. Margaret pushed aside her recipe files on the counter beside the sink, being careful not to disturb the yellow scrap of paper that marked where she'd stopped micro-filming them. The sink was still piled with her mother's Spode china that was being readied for the space journey. Cups and saucers would weigh three and a half pounds in their special packing. Margaret resumed washing the dishes, seating them in the delicate webs of the lightweight box.

The wall phone beside her came alive to the operator's face. "Hatchell residence?"

Margaret lifted her dripping hands from the sink, nudged the call switch with her elbow. "Yes?"

"On your call to Walter Hatchell at White Sands: he still is not available. Shall I try again in twenty minutes?"

"Please do."

The operator's face faded from the screen. Margaret nudged off the switch, resumed washing. The newsfilm group had shot several pictures of her working at the sink

that morning. She wondered how she and her family would appear on the film. The reporter had called Rita a "budding entomologist" and had referred to David as "the blind piano prodigy—one of the few-victims of the *drum* virus brought back from the uninhabitable Planet A-4."

Rita came in from the yard. She was a lanky nine-year-old, a precocious extrovert with large blue eyes that looked on the world as her own private problem waiting to be solved.

"I am desperately ravenous," she announced. "When do we eat?"

"When it's ready," Margaret said. She noted with a twinge of exasperation that Rita had acquired a torn cobweb on her blonde hair and a smudge of dirt across her left cheek.

*Why should a little girl be fascinated by bugs?* Margaret asked herself. *It's not natural.* She said: "How'd you get the cobweb in your hair?"

"Oh, succotash!" Rita put a hand to her hair, rubbed away the offending web.

"How?" repeated Margaret.

"Mother! If one is to acquire knowledge of the insect world, one inevitably encounters such things! I am just dismayed that I tore the web."

"Well, I'm dismayed that you're filthy dirty. Go upstairs and wash so you'll look presentable when we get the call through to your father."

Rita turned away.

"And weigh yourself," called Margaret. "I have to turn in our family's weekly weight aggregate tomorrow."

Rita skipped out of the room.

Margaret felt certain she had heard a muttered "parents!" The sound of the child's footsteps diminished up the stairs. A door slammed on the second floor. Presently, Rita clattered back down the stairs. She ran into the kitchen. "Mother, you . . ."

"You haven't had time to get clean." Margaret spoke without turning.

"It's David," said Rita. "He looks peculiar and he says he doesn't want any supper."

Margaret turned from the sink, her features set to hide the gripping of fear. She knew from experience that Rita's "peculiar" could be anything . . . literally anything. "How do you mean *peculiar*, dear?" "He's so pale. He looks like he doesn't have any blood." For some reason, this brought to Margaret's mind a memory picture of David at the age of three—a still figure in a hospital bed, flesh-colored feeding tube protruding from his nose, and his skin as pale as death with his breathing so quiet it was difficult to detect the chest movements.

She dried her hands on a dishtowel. "Let's go have a look. He's probably just tired."

David was stretched out on his bed, one arm thrown across his eyes. The shades were drawn and the room was in semi-darkness. It took a moment for Margaret's eyes to adjust to the gloom, and she thought: *Do the blind seek darkness because it gives them the advantage over those with sight?* She crossed to the bedside. The boy was a small, dark-haired figure—his father's coloring. The chin was narrow and the mouth a firm line like his grandfather Hatchell's. Right now he looked thin and defenseless . . . and Rita was right: terribly pale.

Margaret adopted her best hospital manner, lifted David's arm from his face, took his pulse. "Don't you feel well, Davey?" she asked. "I wish you wouldn't call me that," he said. "That's a baby name." His narrow features were set, sullen.

She took a short, quick breath. "Sorry. I forgot. Rita says you don't want any supper."

Rita came in from the hallway. "He looks positively infirm, mother."

"Does she have to keep pestering me?" demanded David.

"I thought I heard the phone chime," said Margaret. "Will you go check, Rita?"

"You're being offensively obvious," said Rita. "If you don't want me in here, just say so." She turned, walked slowly out of the room.

"Do you hurt someplace, David?" asked Margaret.

"I just feel tired," he muttered. "Why can't you leave me alone?"

Margaret stared down at him—caught as she had been so many times by his resemblance to his grandfather Hatchell. It was a resemblance made uncanny when the boy sat down at the piano: that same intense vibrancy . . . the same musical genius that had made Hatchell a name to fill concert halls. And she thought: *Perhaps it's because the Steinway belonged to his grandfather that he feels so badly about parting with it. The piano's a symbol of the talent he inherited.*

She patted her son's hand, sat down beside him on the bed, "Is something troubling you, David?"

His features contorted, and he whirled away from her. "Go away!" He muttered. "Just leave me alone!"

Margaret sighed, felt inadequate. She wished desperately that Walter were not tied to the work at the launching site. She felt a deep need of her husband at this moment. Another sigh escaped her. She knew what she had to do. The rules for colonists were explicit: any symptoms at all—even superficial ones—were to get a doctor's attention. She gave David's hand a final pat, went downstairs to the hall phone, called Dr. Mowery, the medic cleared for colonists in the Seattle area. He said he'd be out in about an hour.

Rita came in as Margaret was completing the call, asked: "Is David going to die?"

All the tenseness and aggravation of the day came out in Margaret's reply: "Don't be such a beastly little fool!"

Immediately, she was sorry. She stooped, gathered Rita to her, crooned apologies.

"It's all right, mother," Rita said. "I realize you're overwrought."

Filled with contriteness, Margaret went into the kitchen, prepared her daughter's favorite food: tunafish sandwiches and chocolate milkshakes.

*I'm getting too jumpy*, thought Margaret. *David's not really sick. Ifs the hot weather we've had lately and all this tension of getting ready to go.* She took a sandwich and milkshake up to the boy, but he still refused to eat. And there was such a pallid sense of defeat about him. A

story about someone who had died merely because he gave up the will to live entered her mind and refused to be shaken.

She made her way back down to the kitchen, dabbled at the work there until the call to Walter went through. Her husband's craggy features and deep voice brought the calmness she had been seeking all day. "I miss you so much, darling," she said. "It won't be much longer," he said. He smiled, leaned to one side, exposing the impersonal wall of a pay booth behind him. He looked tired. "How's my family?"

She told him about David, saw the worry creep into his eyes. "Is the doctor there yet?" he asked.

"He's late. He should've been here by six and it's half past."

"Probably busy as a bird dog," he said. "It doesn't really sound as though David's actually sick. Just upset more likely . . . the excitement of leaving. Call me as soon as the doctor tells you what's wrong."

"I will. I think he's just upset over leaving your father's piano behind."

"David knows it's not that we want to leave these things." A grin brightened his features. "Lord! Imagine taking that thing on the ship! Dr. Charlesworthy would flip!"

She smiled. "Why don't you suggest it." "You're trying to get me in trouble with the old man!" "How're things going, dear?" she asked. His face sobered. He sighed. "I had to talk to poor Smythe's widow today. She came out to pick up his things. It was rather trying. The old man was afraid she might still want to come along . . . but no . . ." He shook his head.

"Do you have his replacement yet?" "Yes. Young fellow from Lebanon. Name's Teryk. His wife's a cute little thing." Walter looked past her at the kitchen. "Look's like you're getting things in order. Decided yet what you're taking?"

"Some of the things. I wish I could make decisions like you do. I've definitely decided to take mother's Spode china cups and saucers and the sterling silver . . . for Rita

when she gets married . . . and the Utrillo your father bought in Lisbon . . . and I've weeded my jewelry down to about two pounds of basics . . . and I'm not going to worry about cosmetics since you say we can make our own when we..."

Rita ran into the kitchen, pushed in beside Margaret. "Hello, father."

"Hi, punkin head. What've you been up to?"

"I've been cataloging my insect collection and filling it out. Mother's going to help me film the glassed-in specimens as soon as I'm ready. They're so *heavy!*"

"How'd you wangle her agreement to get that-close to your bugs?"

"Father! They're not bugs; they're entomological specimens."

"They're bugs to your mother, honey. Now, if..."

"Father! There's one other thing. I told Raul—he's the new boy down the block—I told him today about those hawk like insects on Ritelle that..." "They're not insects, honey; they're adapted amphibians."

She frowned. "But Spencer's report distinctly says that they're coition's and they..."

"Whoa down! You should've read the technical report, the one I showed you when I was home last month. These critters have a copper-base metabolism, and they're closely allied to a common fish on the planet."

"Oh ... Do you think I'd better branch out into marine biology?"

"One thing at a time, honey. Now..."

"Have we set the departure date yet, father? I can hardly wait to get to work there."

"It's not definite yet, honey. But we should know any day. Now, let me talk to your mother."

Rita pulled back.

Walter smiled at his wife. "What're we raising there?"

"I wish I knew."

"Look . . . don't worry about David. It's been nine years since . . . since he recovered from that virus. All the tests show that he was completely cured."

And she thought: *Yes . . . cured—except for the little*

*detail of no optic nerves.* She forced a smile "I know you're probably right. It'll turn out to be something simple . . . and we'll laugh about this when . . ." The front door-bell chimed. "That's probably the doctor now."

"Call me when you find out," said Walter.

Margaret heard Rita's footsteps running toward the door.

"I'll sign off, sweet," she said. She blew a kiss to her husband. "I love you."

Walter held up two fingers in a victory sign, winked. "Same here. Chin up."

They broke the connection.

Dr. Mowery was a grey-haired, flint-faced bustle—addicted to the nodding head and the knowing (but unintelligible) murmur. One big hand held a grey instrument bag. He had a pat on the head for Rita, a firm handshake for Margaret, and he insisted on seeing David alone. "Mothers just clutter up the atmosphere for a doctor," he said, and he winked to take the sting from his words.

Margaret—sent Rita to her room, waited in the upstairs hall. There were one hundred and six flower panels on the wallpaper between the door to David's room and the corner of the hall. She was moving on to count the rungs in the balustrade when the doctor emerged from David's room. He closed the door softly behind him, nodding to himself.

She waited.

"Mmmmmm-hmmmm," said Dr. Mowery. He cleared his throat.

"Is it anything serious?" asked Margaret.

"Not sure." He walked to the head of the stairs. "How long's the boy been acting like that. . . listless and upset?"

Margaret swallowed a lump in her throat. "He's been acting differently ever since they delivered the electronic piano . . . the one that's going to substitute for his grandfather's Steinway. Is that what you mean?"

"Differently?"

"Rebellious, short-tempered . . . wanting to be alone."

"I suppose there's not the remotest possibility of his taking the big piano," said the doctor.

"Oh, my goodness . . . it must weigh all of a thousand

pounds," said Margaret. "The electronic instrument is only twenty-one pounds." She cleared her throat. "Is it worry about the piano, doctor?"

"Possibly." Dr. Mowery nodded, took the first step down the stairs. "It doesn't appear to be anything organic that my instruments can find. I'm going to have Dr. Linquist and some others look in on David tonight. Dr. Linquist is our chief psychiatrist. Meanwhile, I'd try to get the boy to eat something."

She crossed to Dr. Mowery's side at the head of the stairs. "I'm a nurse," she said. "You can tell me if it's something serious that..."

He shifted his bag to his right hand, patted her arm. "Now don't you worry, my dear. The colonization group is fortunate to have a musical genius in its roster. We're not going to let anything happen to him."

Dr. Linquist had the round face and cynical eyes of a fallen cherub. His voice surged out of him in waves that flowed over the listener and towed him under. The psychiatrist and colleagues were with David until almost ten p.m. Then Dr. Linquist dismissed the others, came down to the music room where Margaret was waiting. He sat on the piano bench, hands gripping the lip of wood beside him.

Margaret occupied her wing-back chair—the one piece of furniture she knew she would miss more than any other thing in the house. Long usage had worn contours in the chair that exactly complemented her, and its rough fabric upholstery held the soothing texture of familiarity.

The night outside the screened windows carried a sonorous sawing of crickets.

"We can say definitely that it's a fixation about this piano," said Linquist. He slapped his palms onto his knees. "Have you ever thought of leaving the boy behind?"

"Doctor!"

"Thought I'd ask."

"Is it *that* serious with Davey?" she asked. "I mean, after all . . . we're all of us going to miss things." She rubbed the chair arm. "But good heavens, we . . ."

"I'm not much of a musician," said Linquist, "I'm told by the critics, though, that your boy already has concert stature . . . that he's being deliberately held back now to avoid piling confusion on confusion . . . I mean with your leaving so soon and all." The psychiatrist tugged at his lower lip. "You realize, of course, that your boy worships the memory of his grandfather?"

"He's seen all the old stereos, listened to all the tapes," said Margaret. "He was only four when grandfather died, but David remembers everything they ever did together. It was . . ." She shrugged.

"David has identified his inherited talent with his inherited piano," said Linquist. "He . . ."

"But pianos can be replaced," said Margaret. "Couldn't one of our colony carpenters or cabinetmakers duplicate . . ."

"Ah, no," said Linquist. "Not duplicate. It would not be the piano of Maurice Hatchell. You see, your boy is overly conscious that he inherited musical genius from his grandfather . . . just as he inherited the piano. He's tied the two together. He believes that if—not consciously, you understand? But he believes, nonetheless, that if he loses the piano he loses the talent. And there you have a problem more critical than you might suspect."

She shook her head. "But children get over these . . ."

"He's not a child, Mrs. Hatchell. Perhaps I should say he's not *just* a child. He is that sensitive thing we call *genius*. This is a delicate state that goes sour all too easily."

She felt her mouth go dry. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"I don't want to alarm you without cause, Mrs. Hatchell. But the truth is—and this is the opinion of all of us—that if your boy is deprived of his musical outlet . . . well, he could die."

She paled. "Oh, no! He . . ."

"Such things happen, Mrs. Hatchell. There are therapeutic procedures we could use, of course, but I'm not sure we have the time. They're expecting to set your departure date momentarily. Therapy *could* take years."

"But David's . . ."

"David is precocious and over emotional," said Lin-

quist. "He's invested much more than is healthy in his music. His blindness accounts for part of that, but over and above the fact of blindness there's his need for musical expression. In a genius such as David this is akin to one of the basic drives of life itself."

"We couldn't leave him," she whispered. "We just couldn't. You don't understand. We're such a close family that we . . ."

"Then perhaps you should step aside, let some other family have your . . ."

"It would kill Walter . . . my husband," she said. "He's lived for this chance." She shook her head. "Anyway, I'm not sure we could back out now. Walter's assistant, Dr. Smythe, was killed in a copter crash—near Phoenix last week. They already have a replacement, but I'm sure you know how important Walter's function is to the colony's success."

Linquist nodded. "I read about Smythe, but I failed to make the obvious association here."

"I'm not important to the colony," she said. "Nor the children, really. But the ecologists—the success of our entire effort hangs on them. Without Walter . . ."

"Well just have to solve it then," he said. He got to his feet. "We'll be back tomorrow for another look at David, Mrs. Hatchell. Dr. Mowery made him take some amino pills and then gave him a sedative. He should sleep right through the night. If there're any complications—although there shouldn't be—you can reach me at this number." He pulled a card from his wallet, gave it to her. "It is too bad about the weight problem. I'm sure it would solve everything if he could just take this monster with him." Linquist patted the piano lid. "Well. . . good night."

When Linquist had gone, Margaret leaned against the front door, pressed her forehead against the cool wood. "No," she whispered. "No . . . no . . . no . . ." Presently, she went to the living room phone, placed a call to Walter. It was ten twenty p.m. The call went right through, proving that he had been waiting for it. Margaret noted the deep worry creases in her husband's forehead, longed to reach out, touch them, smooth them.

"What is it, Margaret?" he asked. "Is David all right?"

"Dear, it's . . ." she swallowed, "It's about the piano. Your father's Steinway."

"The *piano*?"

"The doctors have been here all evening up to a few minutes ago examining David. The psychiatrist says if David loses the piano he may lose his . . . his music . . . his . . . and if he loses that he could die."

Walter blinked. "Over a piano? Oh, now, surely there must be some . . ."

She told him everything Dr. Linquist had said.

"The boy's so much like dad," said Walter. "Dad once threw the philharmonic into an uproar because his piano bench was a half inch too low. Good Lord! I... What'd Linquist say we could do?"

"He said if we could take the piano it'd solve . . ."

"That concert grand? The damn' thing must weigh over a thousand pounds. That's more than three times what our whole family is allowed in private luggage."

"I know. I'm almost at my wits' ends. All this turmoil Of deciding what's to go and now... David."

"To go!" barked Walter. "Good Lord! What with worrying about David I almost forgot: our departure date was set just tonight." He glanced at his watch. "Blast off is fourteen days and six hours away—give or take a few minutes. The old man said..."

"Fourteen days!"

"Yes, but *you* have only eight days. That's the colony assembly date. The pickup crews will be around to get your luggage on the afternoon of..."

"Walter! I haven't even decided what to . . ." She broke off. "I was sure we had at least another month. You told me yourself that we ..."

"I know. But fuel "production came out ahead of schedule, and the long range weather forecast is favorable. And it's part of the psychology not to drag out leave taking. This way the shock of abruptness cuts everything clean."

"But what're we going to do about David?" She chewed her lower lip.

"Is he awake?"

"I don't think so. They gave him a sedative."

Walter frowned. "I want to talk to David first thing

in the morning. I've been neglecting him lately because of all the work here, but..."

"He understands, Walter."

"I'm sure he does, but I want to see him for myself. I only wish I had the time to come home, but things are pretty frantic here right now." He shook his head. "I just don't see how that diagnosis could be right. All this fuss over a piano!"

"Walter . . . you're not attached to things. With you it's people and ideas." She lowered her eyes, fought back tears. "But some people can grow to love inanimate objects, too . . . things that mean comfort and security." She swallowed.

He shook his head. "I guess I just don't understand. Well work out something, though. Depend on it."

Margaret forced a smile. "I know you will, dear."

"Now that we have the departure date it may blow the whole thing right out of his mind," Walter said.

"Perhaps you're right."

He glanced at his wristwatch. "I have to sign off now. Got some experiments running" He winked. "I miss my family."

"So do I," she whispered.,

In the morning there was a call from Prester Charlesworthy, colony director. His face came onto the phone screen in Margaret's kitchen just as she finished dishing up breakfast for Rita. David was still in bed. And Margaret had told neither of them about the departure date.

Charlesworthy was a man of skinny features, nervous mannerisms. There was a bumpkin look about him until you saw the incisive stare of the pale blue eyes.

"Forgive me for bothering you like this, Mrs. Hatchell," he said.

She forced herself to calmness. "No bother. We were expecting a call from Walter this morning. I thought this was it."

"I've just been talking to Walter," said Charlesworthy. "He's been telling me about David. We had a report first thing this morning from Dr. Linquist."

After a sleepless night with periodic cat-footed trips to look in on David, Margaret felt her nerves jangling



out to frayed helplessness. She was primed to leap at the worst interpretations that entered her mind. "You're putting us out of the colony group!" she blurted. "You're getting another ecologist to ..."

"Oh, no, Mrs. Hatchell!" Dr. Charlesworthy took a deep breath. "I know it must seem odd—my calling you like this—but our little group will be alone on a very alien world, very dependent upon each other for almost ten years . . . until the next ship gets there. We've got to work together on everything. I sincerely want to help you."

"I'm sorry," she said. "But I didn't get much sleep last night."

"I quite understand. Believe me, I'd like nothing better than to be able to send Walter home to you right now."

Charlesworthy shrugged. "But that's out of the question. With poor Smythe dead there's a terribly heavy load on Walter's shoulders. Without him, we might even have to abort this attempt."

Margaret wet her lips with her tongue. "Dr. Charlesworthy, is there any possibility at all that we could . . . I mean . . . the piano—take it on the ship?"

"Mrs. Hatchell!" Charlesworthy pulled back from his screen. "It must weigh hah<sup>o</sup> a ton!"

She sighed. "I called the moving company first thing this morning—the company that moved the piano here into this house. They checked their records. It weighs fourteen hundred and eight pounds."

"Out of the question! Why . . . we've had to eliminate high priority technical equipment that doesn't weigh half that much!"

"I guess I'm desperate," she said. "I keep thinking over what Dr. Linquist said about David dying if . . ."

"Of course," said Charlesworthy. "That's why I called you. I want you to know what we've done. We dispatched Hector Torres to the Steinway factory this morning. Hector is one of the cabinetmakers we'll have in the colony. The Steinway people have generously consented to show him all of their construction secrets so Hector can build an exact duplicate of this piano—correct in all details. Philip Jackson, one of our metallurgists, will be following Hector this afternoon for the same reason. I'm sure that

when you tell David this it'll completely resolve all his fears."

Margaret blinked back tears. "Dr. Charlesworthy . . . I don't know how to thank you."

"Don't thank me at all, my dear. We're a team . . . we pull together." He nodded. "Now, one other thing: a favor you can do for me." "Certainly."

"Try not to worry Walter too much this week if you can. He's discovered a mutation that may permit us to cross earth plants with ones already growing on Planet C. He's runnings final tests this week with dirt samples from C. These are crucial tests, Mrs. Hatchell. They could cut several years off the initial stage of setting up a new life-cycle balance."

"Of course," she said. "I'm sorry that I..."

"Don't you be sorry. And don't you worry. The boy's only twelve. Time heals all things."

"I'm sure it'll work out," she said.

"Excellent," said Charlesworthy. "That's the spirit. Now, you call on me for any help you may need . . . day or night. We're a team. We have to pull together."

They broke the connection. Margaret stood in front of the phone, facing the blank screen.

Rita spoke from the kitchen table behind her. "What'd he say about the departure date?"

"It's been *set*, dear." Margaret turned. "We have to be with Daddy at White Sands in eight days."

"Whooopeee!" Rita leaped to her feet, upsetting her breakfast dishes. "We're going! We're going!"

"Rita!"

But Rita already was dashing out of the room, out of the house. Her "Eight days!" echoed back from the front hall.

Margaret stepped to the kitchen door. "Rita!"

Her daughter ran back down the hall. "I'm going to tell the kids!"

"You will calm down right now. You're making enough noise to . . ."

"I heard her." It was David at the head of the stairs. He came down slowly, guiding himself by the bannister.

His face looked white as eggshell, and there was a dragging hesitancy to his steps.

Margaret took a deep breath, told him about Dr. Charlesworthy's plan to replace the piano.

David stopped two steps above her, head down. When she had finished, he said: "It won't be the same." He stepped around her, went into the music room. There was a slumped finality to his figure.

Margaret Whirled back into the kitchen. Angry determination flamed in her. She heard Rita's slow footsteps following, spoke without turning: "Rita, how much weight can you cut from your luggage?"

"Mother!"

"We're going to take that piano!" snapped Margaret.

Rita came up beside her. "But our whole family gets to take only two hundred and thirty pounds! We couldn't possibly ..."

"There are three hundred and eight of us in this colonization group," said Margaret. "Every adult is allowed seventy-five pounds, every child under fourteen years gets forty pounds." She found her kitchen scratch pad, scribbled figures on it. "If each person donates only four pounds and twelve ounces we can take that piano!" Before she could change her mind, she whirled to the drainboard, swept the package with her mother's Spode china cups and saucers into the discard box. "There! A gift for the people Who bought Our house! And that's three and a half pounds of it!"

Then she began to cry.

Rita sobered. "I'll leave my insect specimens," she whispered. Then she buried her head in her mother's dress, and she too was sobbing.

"What're you two crying about?" David spoke from the kitchen doorway, his bat-eye box strapped to his shoulders. His small features were drawn into a pinched look of misery.

Margaret dried her eyes. "Davey . . . David, we're going to try to take your piano with us."

His chin lifted, his features momentarily relaxed, then the tight unhappiness returned. "Sure. They'll just dump

out some of dad's seeds and a few tools and scientific instruments for my..."

"There's another way," she said.

"What other way?" His voice was fighting against a hope that might be smashed.

Margaret explained her plan.

"Go begging?" he asked. "Asking people to give up their own . . ."

"David, this will be a barren and cold new world we're going to colonize—very few comforts, drab issue clothing—almost no refinements or the things we think of as belonging to a civilized culture. A real honest to goodness earth piano and the . . . man to play it would help-. It'd help our morale, and keep down the homesickness that's sure to come."

His sightless eyes appeared to stare at her for a long moment of silence; then he said: "That would be a terrible responsibility for me."

She felt pride in her son flow all through her, said: "I'm glad you see it that way."

The small booklet of regulations and advice handed out at the first assembly in White Sands carried names and addresses of all the colonists. Margaret started at the top of the list, called Selma Atkins of Little Rock, wife of the expedition's head zoologist.

Mrs. Atkins was a dark little button of a woman with flaming hair and a fizzing personality. She turned out to be a born conspirator. Before Margaret had finished explaining the problem, Selma Atkins was volunteering to head a phone committee. She jotted down names of prospects, said: "Even if we get the weight allowance, how'll we get the thing aboard?"

Margaret looked puzzled. "What's wrong with just showing that we have the weight allowance, and handing the piano over to the people who pack things on the ship?"

"Charlesworthy's never go for it, honey. He's livid at the amount of equipment that's had to be passed over because of the weight problem. He'd take one look at one thousand four hundred and eight pounds of piano and say: 'That'll be a spare atomic generation kit!' My

husband says he's had to drill holes in packing boxes to save ounces!"

"But how could we smuggle..."

Selma snapped her fingers. "I know! Ozzy Lucan!"

"Lucan?"

"The ship's steward," said Selma. "You know: the big horse of a man with red hair. He spoke at one of the meetings on—you know—all about how to conserve weight in packing and how to use the special containers."

"Oh, yes," said Margaret. "What about him?"

"He's married to my third cousin Betty's oldest daughter. Nothing like a little family pressure. Ill work on it."

"Wouldn't he be likely to go directly to Charlesworthy with it?" asked Margaret:

"Hah!" barked Selma. "You don't know Betty's side of our family!"

Dr. Linquist arrived in the middle of the morning, two consultant psychiatrists in tow. They spent an "hour with David, came down to the kitchen where Margaret and Rita were finishing the microfilming of the recipe files. David followed them, stood in the doorway.

"The boy's apparently tougher than I realized," said Linquist. "Are you sure he hasn't been told he can take that piano? I hope you haven't been misleading him to make him feel better."

David frowned.

Margaret said: "Dr. Charlesworthy refused to take the piano when I asked him. However, he's sent two experts to the Steinway factory so we'll be sure of an exact duplicate."

Linquist turned to David. "And that's all right with you, David?"

David hesitated, then: "I understand about the weight"

"Well, I guess you're growing up," said Linquist.

When the psychiatrists had gone, Rita turned on Margaret. "Mother! You lied to them!"

"No she didn't," said David. "She told the exact truth."

"But not all of it," said Margaret.

"That's just the same as lying," said Rita.

"Oh, stop it!" snapped Margaret. Then: "David, are you sure you want to leave your Braille texts?"

"Yes. That's sixteen pounds. We've got the Braille punch kit and the Braille typewriter; I can type new copies of everything I need if Rita will read to me."

By three o'clock that afternoon they had Chief Steward Oswald Lucan's reluctant agreement to smuggle the piano aboard if they could get the weight allowance precise to the ounce. But Lucan's parting words were: "Don't let the old man get wind of this. He's boiling about the equipment we've had to cut out."

At seven thirty, Margaret added the first day's weight donations: sixty-one commitments for a total of two hundred and seven pounds and seven ounces. *Not enough from each person, she told herself. But I can't blame them. We're all tied to our possessions. It's so hard to part with all the little things that link us with the past and with Earth. We've got to find more weight somewhere.* She cast about in her own mind for things to discard, knew a sense of futility at the few pounds she had at her disposal.

By ten o'clock on the morning of the third day they had five hundred and fifty-four pounds and eight ounces from one hundred and sixty of their fellow colonists. They also had an even twenty violent rejections. The tension of fear that one of these twenty might give away their conspiracy was beginning to tell on Margaret.

David, too, was sinking back into gloom. He sat on the piano bench in the music room, Margaret behind him in her favorite chair. One of David's hands absently caressed the keys that Maurice Hatchell had brought to such crashing Me.

"We're getting less than four pounds per person, aren't we?" asked David.

Margaret rubbed her cheek. "Yes."

A gentle chord came from the piano. "We aren't going to make it," said David. A fluid rippling of music lifted in the room. "I'm not sure we have the right to ask this of people anyway. They're giving up so much already, and then we..."

"Hush, Davey."

He let the baby name pass, coaxed a floating passage of Debussy from the keys.

Margaret put her hands to her eyes, cried silently with fatigue and frustration. But the tears coming from David's fingers on the piano went deeper.

Presently, he stood up, walked slowly out of the room, up the stairs. She heard his bedroom door close softly. The lack of violence in his actions cut her like a knife.

The phone chime broke Margaret from her blue reverie. She took the call on the portable in the hall. Selma Atkins' features came onto the screen, wide-eyed, subdued.

"Ozzy just called me," she blurted. "Somebody snitched to Charlesworthy this morning."

Margaret put a hand over her mouth. . .

"Did you tell your husband what we were doing?" asked Selma.

"No." Margaret shook her head. "I was going to, and then I got afraid of what he'd say. He and Charlesworthy are very close friends, you know."

"You mean he'd peach on his own wife?"

"Oh, no, but he might..."

"Well, he's on the carpet now," said Selma. "Ozzy says the whole base is jumping. He was shouting and banging his hands on the desk at Walter and..."

"Charlesworthy?"

"Who else? I called to warn you. He..."

"But what'll we do?" asked Margaret.

"We run for cover, honey. We fall back and regroup. Call me as soon as you've talked to him. Maybe we can think of a new plan."

"We've contributions from more than half the colonists," said Margaret. "That means we've more than half of them on our side to begin..."

"Right now the colony organization is a dictatorship, not a democracy," said Selma. "But I'll be thinking about it. Bye now."

David came up behind her as she was breaking the connection. "I heard," he said. "That finishes us, doesn't it?"

The phone chimed before she could answer him. She flipped the switch. Walter's face came onto the screen. He looked haggard, the craggy lines more pronounced.

"Margaret," he said. "I'm calling from Dr. Charles-

worthy's office." He took a deep breath. "Why didn't you come to me about this? I could've told you how foolish it was!"

"That's why!" she said.

"But smuggling a piano onto the ship! Of all the..."

"I was thinking of Davey!" she snapped.

"Good Lord, I know it! But..."

"When the doctors said he might die if he lost his..."

"But Margaret, a thousand-pound piano!"

"Fourteen hundred and eight pounds," she corrected him.

"Let's not argue, darling," he said. "I admire your guts... and I love you, but I can't let you endanger the social solidarity of the colony group..." he shook his head "... not even for David."

"Even if it kills your own son?" she demanded.

"I'm not about to kill my son," he said. "I'm an ecology-gist, remember? It's my job to keep us alive... as a group *and* singly! And I..."

"Dad's right," said David. He moved up beside Margaret.

"I didn't know you were there, son," said Walter.

"It's all right, Dad."

"Just a moment, please." It was Charlesworthy, pushing in beside Walter. "I want to know how much weight allowance you've been promised."

"Why?" asked Margaret. "So you can figure how many more scientific *toys* to take along?"

"I want to know how close you are to success in your little project," he said.

"Five hundred and fifty-four pounds and eight ounces," she said. "Contributions from one hundred and sixty people!"

Charlesworthy pursed his lips. "Just about one-third of what you need," he said. "And at this rate you wouldn't get enough. If you had any chance of success I'd almost be inclined to say go ahead, but you can see for yourself that..."

"I have an idea," said David.

Charlesworthy looked at him. "You're David?"

"Yes, sir."

"What's your idea?"

"How much would the harp and keyboard from my piano weigh? You have people at the factory . . ."

"You mean take just that much of your piano?" asked Charlesworthy.

"Yes, sir. It wouldn't be the same . . . it'd be better. It would have roots in both worlds—part of the piano from Earth and part from Planet C"

"Darned if I don't like the idea," said Charlesworthy. He turned. "Walter, call Phil Jackson at the Steinway plant. Find out how much that portion of the piano would weigh."

Walter left the field of the screen. The others waited. Presently, Walter returned, said: "Five hundred and sixty-two pounds more or less. Hector Torres was on the line, too. He said he's sure he can duplicate the rest of the piano exactly."

Charlesworthy smiled. "That's it, then! I'm out of my mind . . . we need so many other things with us so desperately. But maybe we need this too: for morale."

"With the right morale we can make anything else we may need," said Walter.

Margaret found a scratch pad in the phone drawer, scribbled figures on it. She looked up: "I'll get busy right now and find a way to meet the extra few pounds we'll need to . . ."

"How much more?" asked Charlesworthy. Margaret looked down at her scratch pad. "Seven pounds and eight ounces."

Charlesworthy took a deep breath. "While I'm still out of my mind, let me make another gesture: Mrs. Charlesworthy and I will contribute seven pounds and eight ounces to the cultural future of our new home."