

remarkably unconcerned for a man who had just had his personal watercraft searched by the U.S. Coast Guard. Blake didn't reply—he was too busy taking in the sheer size of the billionaire's yacht, the *Squid*.

"The official term is mega-yacht," said Matlock as they stood beside the sub's docking pool. "She's one-and-a-half football fields long. Carries a crew of sixty, with two helicopters and seven launches—plus my personal sub. There's also a spa, by the way, here on the lower deck. And a heated pool up top."

"I have to ask," said Blake. "How much?"

"About two hundred million to build, and another twenty million per year to staff and maintain," said Matlock. He was striving hard for a casual tone, but he couldn't hide his grin of pleasure at Blake's shocked reaction. "It's the largest privately-owned yacht in the world. The only bigger ones belong to a Saudi sheik and a couple of Asian heads of state. I keep telling you, Blake, it's good to be rich. Speaking of which..." Matlock glanced toward the upper deck. "Come upstairs with me. I've got a surprise for you."

They ascended two flights to a well-appointed dining room with portholes lining the port and starboard sides. Against one wall was a table holding a spread of fresh fruit, cheese, meat and poultry dishes and grilled vegetables. Bottles of wine stood on a sideboard along with an unopened bottle of champagne in a bucket of ice.

"Help yourself," said Matlock. Aware suddenly of his hunger, Blake reached for a piece of salmon sushi. He'd barely popped it into his mouth when Matlock beckoned him with an impatient wave. Obediently, Blake trailed his host down a plush corridor to a padded door in the ship's midsection.

"My recording studio," said Matlock with a child's gleeful smile, ushering Blake inside. From his tone, Blake was expecting some reasonably sophisticated home recording setup. Instead, he found himself inside the production booth of a spacious, ultra-modern facility. Through the booth's transparent front wall he saw a quartet of gray-haired musicians fiddling with their instruments in the main studio, their sound muffled by the plastic barrier. Beside Matlock and Blake, two engineers were busy manipulating banks of faders.

"I don't have to tell you who recorded a whole solo album here,"

said Matlock, looking around with pride. He was referring, Blake knew, to the world-famous British front man that Matlock had befriended decades ago.

Noticing their presence, the musicians had stopped what they were doing and were waiting quietly, their eyes on Matlock. “How’s it going, boys?” said the billionaire, holding the button that activated the studio’s two-way speaker.

“How’s it *going*?” asked the man cradling a bass guitar in a sarcastic English accent. As Blake studied the man’s close-cropped head, he felt a giddy rush. Here, not twenty feet away from him, stood the schoolteacher turned rock superstar that he’d revered since he was a kid. Shifting his gaze to the others, it dawned on him that he was staring at four aging legends of the pop music world.

“You came back after all, you secretive bastard,” said the Bandleader in his Florida drawl.

“I told you he couldn’t stay away from his vintage guitars for long,” said the man behind the drums. Another Brit, famous for his musical versatility and his production skills, his expression was impassive behind his trademark beard and sunglasses.

“Or his vintage champagne,” added the slim rocker known universally as the Artist.

“Where are the ladies?” asked Matlock through the intercom.

“In the spa, of course,” said the Producer. “Adding to their already considerable luster.”

“What are you waiting for, an invitation?” the Schoolteacher broke in. “And how about your friend here—does he play?”

“Sure, he plays,” said Matlock with a hint of cockiness. “Not as good as *me*, of course.”

“Don’t worry, mate,” said the Producer, looking at Blake through the glass. “We’re quite used to carrying Emperor Matlock’s friends on our backs. Just grab a Gibson and give it a go. You’ll have the time of your life.”

“Has he been bragging about you-know-who, and how he recorded a whole album here?” snickered the Bandleader. “He’s Matlock’s one true love, you know.”

“Let me know when you housewives are done gossiping,” said the

Artist impatiently. He had his guitar on his shoulder and was tweaking the amplifier settings. “We shouldn’t waste this precious time on international waters. My deathless music is crying out for release!”

“I like to think of them as a new supergroup in utero,” explained Matlock.

“The Traveling Elderberries,” cracked the Bandleader.

“Assuming these two can fill the shoes of George and Roy, that is,” said the Producer, adjusting the cymbals on the drum kit.

Blake felt like he should join in the banter, but he found himself tongue-tied in the presence of immortality. He was also emotionally drained from the encounter with the Coast Guard. Now that the authorities had connected him with Matlock, he assumed it was only a matter of time before they returned for another look. Meanwhile, he was trapped on this floating funhouse, playing sidekick on a rich lunatic’s ego trip.

“Thanks for the invitation, boys, but we’ll have to pass,” said Matlock, pressing his hand against the glass. “We have an appointment up north.”

“You’re depriving your young friend here of a once-in-a-lifetime experience—you know that, right?” said the Producer. “But then, what do you care? It must be nice to be richer than God.”

“It’s not too shabby—and I love you, too,” grinned Matlock. “I’ll see you tricksters shortly. And now, Robin, to the helipad!”

“Safe journey, Batman,” called the Artist softly.