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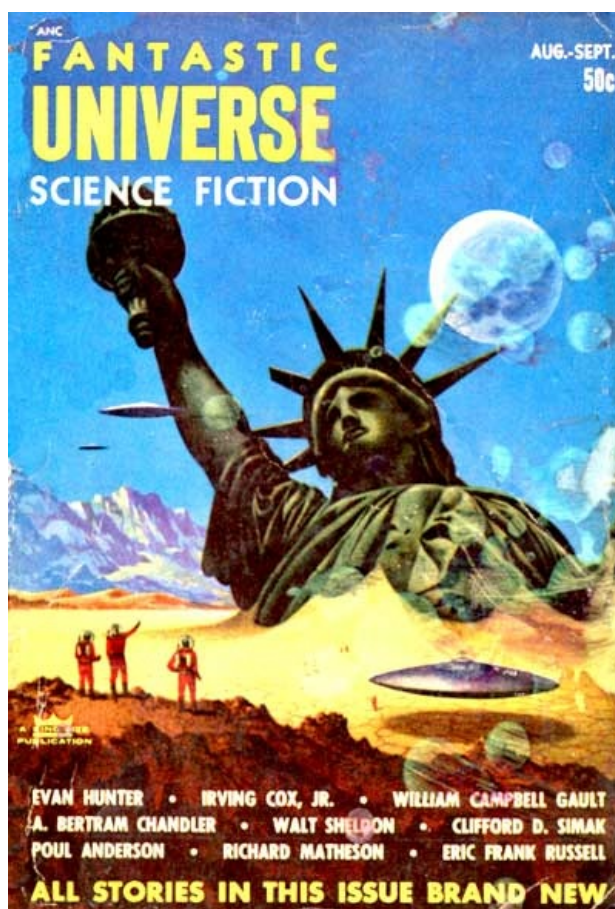
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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE VERY BLACK \*\*\*

### Transcriber's Note:

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*Anders was pretty sure he was going to die. No one had yet flown the new-style jet job and lived to tell the tale. A story both chilling and heart-warming that shows us how bravely the human equation can operate when the chips are stacked against it.*

# the very black

*by ... Dean Evans*

Jet test-pilots and love do not mix too happily as a rule—especially with a ninth-dimensional alter ego messing the whole act.

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There was nothing peculiar about that certain night I suppose—except to me personally. A little earlier in the evening I'd walked out on the Doll, Margie Hayman—and a man doesn't do that and cheer over it. Not if he's in love with the Doll he doesn't—not *this* doll. If you've ever seen her you'll give the nod on that.

The trouble had been Air Force's new triangular ship—the new saucer. Not radio controlled, this one—this one was to carry a real live pilot. At least that's what the doll's father, who was Chief Engineer at Airtech, Inc., had in mind when he designed it.

The doll had said to me sort of casually, "Got something, Baby." She called me baby. Me, one eighty-five in goose pimples.

"Toss it over, Doll," I said.

"No strings on you, Baby." She'd grinned that little one-sided grin of hers. "No strings on you. Not even one. You're a flyboy, you are, and you can take off or land any time any place you feel like it."

"Stake your mom's Charleston cup on that," I said.

She nodded. Her one-sided grin seemed to fade slightly but she hooked it up again fast. A doll—like I said. This was the original model, they've never gone into production on girls like her full-time.

She said, "Therefore, I've got no right to go stalking with a salt shaker in one hand and a pair of shears for your tailfeathers in the other."

"You're cute, Doll," I said, still going along with her one hundred percent.

"Nice—we get along nice."

"Somebody oughta set 'em up on that."

"So far."

"Huh?" I blinked. I hate sour notes. That's why I'm not a musician. You never get a sour note in a jet job—or if you do you don't get annoyed. That's the sour note to end all sour notes.

"Brace yourself, Baby," she said.

I took a hitch on the highball glass I was holding and let one eye get a serious look in it. "Shoot," I told her.

"This new job—this new saucer the TV newscasts are blating about. You boys in the Air Force heard about it yet?"

"There's been a rumor," I said. I frowned. Top secret—in a pig's eyelash!

"Uh-huh. Is it true this particular ship is supposed to carry a pilot this time?"

"Where do they dig up all this old stuff?" I growled. "Hell, I knew all about that way way back this afternoon already."

"Uh-huh, Is it also true they've asked a flyboy named Eddie Anders to take it up the first time? This flyboy named Eddie Anders being my Baby?"

I got bored with the highball. I tossed it down the hole in my head and put the glass on a table. "You're psychic," I said.

She shrugged. "Good looking, maybe. Nice shape, maybe. Peachy disposition, maybe. Psychic, unh-unhh. But who else would they ask to do it?"

"A point," I conceded.

"Fork in the road coming up," the Doll said.

"Huh?"

"Fork—look. It'll be voluntary, won't it? You don't have to do it? They won't think the worse of you if you refuse?"

"*Huh?*" I gawked at her.

"I'm scared, Baby."

Her eyes weren't blue anymore. They'd been blue before but not now. Now they were violet balls that were laying me like somebody taking a last long look at the thing down inside the nice white satin before they close the cover on it for the final time.

"Have a drink, Doll," I said. I got up, went to the liquor wagon. "Seltzer? There isn't any mixer left."

"Asked you something, Baby."

I took her glass over. I handed it to her. My own drink I poured down that same hole in my head. I said finally, "Nice smooth bourbon but I like scotch better."

"They've already crashed four of this new type on tests, haven't they?"

I nearly choked. *That* was supposed to be the very pinnacle of the top secret stuff. But she was right of course. Four of the earlier models had cracked up. No pilots in them at the time—radio controlled. But jobs designed to carry pilots nevertheless.

"Some pitchers have great big ugly-looking ears," I said.

She didn't seem to mind. She said, "Or maybe I'm really psychic as you said. Or maybe my Dad's being Chief at Airtech has something to do with it."

"Somebody oughta stitch a zipper across his big fat yap," I said. "And weld the damn thing shut."

"He told only me," she said softly. "And then only because of you. You see, Baby, he isn't like us. He's got old fashioned notions you and I've got strings tied around each other already just because you gave me a ring."

I stared at her.

"Crazy, isn't it? He isn't sensible like us."

"Can the gag lines, Doll," I said sourly. "The old bird's okay."

And that fetched a few moments of silence in the room—thick pervading silence. A silence to be broken at any fractional second and heavy—supercharged—because of it.

I said finally, "Somebody has to take it up. It might as well be me. And they've already asked me."

"You could refuse, Baby."

"Sure I could. It's voluntary. They don't horsewhip a guy into it."

"Uh-huh—voluntary. And you *can* refuse." She stopped, waited, then, "Making me get right down there on the hard bare floor on both knees, Baby? All right. None of us should be proud. None of us has a right to be proud, have we?"

"All right, Baby. I'm down there—way, way down there. I'm asking you not to take that ship up. I'm begging you—begging, Baby. Look, on me you've never seen anything like this before. Begging!"

I looked at my empty glass. The taste in my mouth was suddenly bitter. "No strings, we said," I said harshly. "A flyboy, we said. Guy who can take off and land anywhere, anytime he likes. Stuff like that we just got through saying."

She didn't answer that. I waited. She didn't answer. I got up finally, got my lousy new officer's cap off the TV set and went over to the door. I opened the door. I went on through.

But before I closed it I heard her whisper. That's the trouble with whispers, they go incredible distances to get places. The whisper said, "That's right, Baby. Right as rain. No strings—*ever!*"

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When you don't have any scotch in the house you'd be surprised how well rum will do—even Jamaica rum. I was on my own davenport in my own apartment and there were two shot glasses in front of me. I was taking turns on them so they wouldn't wear out. And what was keeping these glasses busy was me and a fifth of the Jamaica rum in my right hand. And that's when it all began.

Across the room a rather stout woman was needling a classic through the television screen and at the same time needling a shave rather badly. I wasn't paying any attention to her. I was thinking about the Doll. Wondering, worrying a little. And that's when it began.

That's when the voice said, "Mr. Anders, would you do me the goodness to forget that bottle for a

moment?"

The voice seemed to be coming from the TV screen although the stout lady hadn't finished her song. The voice was like the disappointed sigh of a poor old bloke down to his last beer dime and having to look up into the bartender's grinning puss as the bartender downs a nice bubbly glass of champagne somebody bought for him. Poor guy, I thought. I downed glass number one. And then glass number two. And then I looked over at the TV screen.

That sent a little shiver up my spine. I dropped my eyes to the glasses, filled them once more. Strong stuff, Jamaica rum. At the first the taste is medicine. A little later the taste is pleasant syrup. And a little later still the taste is delightful. But strong—the whole way strong. I downed glass number one.

I figured I wouldn't touch glass number two yet. I brought up my eyes, let them go over to the TV screen again.

He didn't have any eyes. That was the first thing that struck me. There were other things of course, such as the fact he didn't have any arms or legs. He didn't have any head either, in case he had eyes in the first place. He was a black swirling bioplastic mass of something or other and he was doing a graceful tango directly in front of the TV screen, thereby blocking off from view the stout woman who needed a shave.

He said, "Do you have any idea what I am, Mr. Anders?"

"Sure," I said. "Somebody's blennorrhoeal nightmare."

"Incorrect, Mr. Anders. This substance is not mucous. Mucous is very seldom black."

"Mucous is very seldom black," I mimicked.

"Correct, Mr. Anders."

So all right. So they were making Jamaica rum a little stronger these days. So *all right!* Next time I wouldn't get rum, I'd get scotch. Hell with rum. I dismissed the thought from my mind. I picked up glass number two, downed it. I wondered if the Doll was feeling sorry for herself.

"Incorrect, Mr. Anders," he said. "The rum is no stronger than usual."

I jerked. I stared at the black sticky-looking thing he was. I shut my eyes tightly, snapped them open again. Then I worked the glasses again with the bottle.

"Don't be shocked, Mr. Anders. I'm not a mind reader. It's just that you discarded the thought of a moment ago. I picked it up, see?"

"Sure," I said. "You picked it out of the junk pile of my mind, where all my little gems go."

"Correct, Mr. Anders."

It was about time to empty the glasses again. I varied the routine this time by picking up number-two glass first.

"Light a cigarette, Mr. Anders."

I'm a guy to go along with a gag. I fished a cigarette out, lit it "Lit," I said. And just at that instant the stout dame without the shave hit a sour one way up around A above high C. My ears cringed. I forgot the cigarette and glared across the room, trying to see through the black swirling mass that stood in front of the TV screen.

"Puff, Mr. Anders."

I puffed. The puff sounded like somebody getting his lips on a very full glass of beer and quickly sucking so that foaming clouds don't go down the sides of the glass and all over the bar. I didn't have any cigarette.

"Ah!"

I blinked. The black swirling mass was going gently to and fro. At about head height on a man my cigarette was sticking out from it and a little curl of smoke was coming from the end. Even as I looked the curl ceased and then a big blue cloud of smoke barreled across the room toward my face.

"Your cigarette, Mr. Anders."

"Nice trick," I said. "Took it out from between my lips and I never felt it. Nice trick."

"Incorrect, Mr. Anders. When the singer flatted that particular note your attention was diverted momentarily. Your senses are exceptional, you see. Your ears register pain at false sounds. Therefore, you discarded the thoughts of your cigarette during the moment you suffered with the singer. Following this reasoning, your cigarette went into abandonment. And I salvaged it. No trick at all, really."

I thought, to hell with the shot glasses. I put the rum bottle to my lips and tilted it up and held it there until it wasn't good for anything anymore. Then I took it down by the neck and heaved it straight at the black mass.

The television screen didn't shatter, which proved something or other. The bottle didn't even reach the screen. It hit the black swirling mass about navel high. It went in, sank in like slamming your fist into a fat man's stomach. And then it rebounded and clattered on the floor.

"Scream!" I said thickly. "You dirty black delusion—scream!"

"I *am* screaming, Mr. Anders. That hurt terribly."

He sort of unfolded then, like unfolding a limp wool sweater in the air. And from this unfolding, something came forth that could have been somebody's old fashioned idea of what a rifle looked like. He held it up in firing position, pointed at my head.

"Don't be alarmed, Mr. Anders. This is to convince you. A gun, yes, a very old gun—a Brown Bess, they used to call it. I just took it from the City Museum, where it was on display."

He had a nice point-blank sight on my forehead. Now he moved the gun, aimed it off me, pointed, it across the room toward the open windows.

"Note the workmanship, Mr. Anders. Note the stock. Someone put a little effort on the carving. Note the sentiment carved here."

The rum was working hard now. I could feel it climbing hand over hand up from my knees.

"Let me read what it says, Mr. Anders—'*Deathe to ye Colonies*'. Note the odd wording, the spelling. And now watch, Mr. Anders."

The gun came up a trifle, stiffened. There was a loud snapping sound, a click of metal on metal—Flintlock. As all the ancient guns were.

And then came the roar. Wood across the room—the window casing—splintered and flew wildly. Smoke and smell filled my senses.

He said, chuckling, "Let's call it the Abandonment Theory for lack of a better name. This old Brown Bess hasn't been thought of acquisitively for some years. It's been in the museum—abandoned. Therefore subject to the discarded junk pile as you yourself so cleverly put it before. Do I make myself clear, Mr. Anders?"

Perfectly—oh, perfectly, Mr. Bioplast. The rum was going around my eyes now. Going up and around and headed like an arrow for the hunk of my brain that can't seem to hide fast enough.

I guess I made it to the bedroom but I wouldn't put any hard cash on it. And I guess I passed out.

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The morning was a bad one as all bad ones usually are. But no matter how bad they get there's always the consoling thought that in a few hours things will ease up. I hugged this thought through a needle shower, through three cups of coffee in the kitchen. What I was neglecting in this reasoning was the splintered wood in the living room.

I saw it on my way out. It hit me starkly, like the blasted section of a eucalyptus trunk writhing up from the ground. I stopped dead in the doorway and stared at it. Then I got out my knife and got at it.

I probed but it was going to take more than a pocket knife. The ball—and it was just that—was buried a half inch in the soft pine of the casing.

I closed the knife and went to the phone and got Information to ring the museum.

"You people aren't missing a Brown Bess musket," I said. It was a question, of course, but not now—not the way I had said it. "Nobody stole anything out of the museum last night, did they?"

Sweat was oozing over my upper lip. I could feel it. I could feel sweat wetting the phone in my hand. The woman on the other end told me to wait. I said, "Yeah"—not realizing. I waited, not realizing, until a man's voice came on.

"You were saying something about a Brown Bess musket, mister?" A cold sharp voice—a gutter voice but with the masking tag of *official* behind it. Like the voice of someone behind a desk writing something on a blotter—a real police voice.

I put the phone down. I pulled all the shades in the living room, went out the door, locked it behind me and drove as fast as you can make a Buick go, out to the field. But *fast!*

The XXE-1 was ready. She'd been ready for weeks. There wasn't a mechanical or electronic flaw in her. We hoped, I hoped, the man who designed her hoped. The Doll's father—he hoped most of all. Even lying quiescent in her hangar, she looked as sleek as a Napoleon hat done in poured monel. When your eyes went over her you knew instinctively they'd thrown the mach numbers out the window when she was done.

I went through a door that had the simple word *Plotting* on it.

The Doll's father was there already behind his desk, studying something as I came in. He looked up, smiled, said, "Hi, guy."

I flipped a finger at him. I wondered if the Doll had told him about last night.

"Wife and I were going to suggest a snack when we got home last night but you had already gone, and Marge was in bed."

I didn't look at him. "Left early, Pop. Growing boy."

"Yeah. You look lousy, guy."

I put my teeth together. I still didn't look at him. "These nights," I said vaguely.

"Sure."

I could feel something in his voice. I took a breath and put my eyes on his. He said, "I'm a hell of an old duck."

"Not so old, Pop."

"Sure I am. But not too old to remember back to the days when I wasn't too old." There was a grave look in his eyes.

I didn't have to answer that. The door banged open and Melrose, the LC, came in. He jerked a look at both of us, butted a cigarette he'd just lit—lighted another, butted that. He ran a hand through thick graying hair and frowned.

"Anybody got a cigarette?" he said sourly. "Couldn't sleep last night. This damned responsibility. Worried all night about something we hadn't thought of."

Pop looked up. Melrose went on. "Light—travels in a straight line, no?" He blinked small nervous eyes at us. Then, "Can't go around corners unless it's helped, you see. I mean just this. The XXE-One is expected to hit a significant fraction of the speed of light once it gets beyond the atmosphere. Now here's the point—how in hell do we control it then?"

He waited. I didn't say anything. Pop didn't say anything. Melrose ran a hand through his hair once more, muttered *goddamit* to himself, turned around and went barging out the door.

Pop said wryly, "Another quick memo to the Pentagon. He never heard of the Earth's gravity."

"He's heard," I said. "It's just that it slipped his mind these last few years."

Pop grinned. He handed me a sheaf of typewritten notes. "These'll just about make it. You'll notice the initial flight is charted pretty damn closely."

"Thanks, Pop. I better take these, somewhere else to look 'em over. Melrose might be back."

"Pretty damn closely," he repeated. "Almost as closely as if she was going up under radio control...." He stopped. He looked at me from under his eyebrows.

I studied him. "Already told the brass I'd take her up, Pop." I kept my voice down.

"Sure, guy. Sure. Uh—you mention it to Marge?"

"Last night."

"I see." His eyes got suddenly far away. I left him like that. Hell with him—hell with the whole family!

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It was in the evening paper, tucked in the second section. They treated it lightly. It seemed the night watchman had opened the rear door of the museum for a breath of air or maybe a smoke. Or maybe to kitchie-koo some babe under the chin in the alley.

That's the only way it could have happened. And he'd discovered the empty exhibit case at 2:10 in the morning. The case still had a little white card on it that told about the Brown Bess musket and the powder horn and the ball shot inside.

But the little white card lied in its teeth. There weren't any such things in the case at all. And he'd notified the curator at once.

There was also mention of a mysterious phone call which couldn't be traced.

Things like this don't happen in 1953. So I didn't get loaded that night. I went home, went to the davenport, sat down and told myself they don't happen. Things like this have never happened, will never happen. What occurred last night was something in the bottom of a bottle of Jamaica rum.

"Thinking, Mr. Anders?"

I took a slow breath. He was swaying gently in the air a foot from my elbow and he was still a black mucous scum, as he had been the night before. I got up.

I said, "I'm not loaded tonight. I haven't had a thing all day." I took two steps toward him.

He wasn't there.

I took another breath—a very very slow breath. I turned around and went back to the davenport.

He was back again.

"They'll find that musket," he said. "I have no use for it now. You see I wanted it only to convince you, Mr. Anders."

I put my hands on my knees and didn't look at him. I was suddenly trying to remember where I'd put that Luger I'd brought home from Germany a couple years back.

"You're not quite convinced yet, Mr. Anders?"

*Where in the hell did I put it?*

"Very well, Mr. Anders. Now hear this, please. Now watch me." He stirred at about hip height. A shelf-like section of the black mass protruded a little distance from the main part of him. On this shelf suddenly lay a rusted penknife.

"A very little boy, Mr. Anders. And a very long while ago. A talented boy, one of those who has what might be called an exceptional imagination. This boy cherished a penknife when he was quite small. Pick up the knife, Mr. Anders."

The knife was suddenly in my lap. I picked it up. It was rusty. It had a flat bone handle. "Museums again," I whispered to myself.

"So highly did this boy prize his knife that he went to great pains to carve his name very very carefully on one side of the bone handle. Turn the knife over, Mr. Anders."

The name was Edward Anders.

"You lost it when you were eleven. You wouldn't remember though. I found it in an attic where it lay unnoticed. As the years went by you gradually forgot about the knife, you see, and when your mind had completely abandoned the thoughts of it, it was mine—had I wanted it. As a matter of fact I didn't. I retrieved it just today."

I put the knife down. Sweat was coming on my forehead now, I could feel it. I was remembering. I was remembering the knife and what was scaring me even more was I was remembering the very day I had lost it. In the attic.

I said very carefully, "All right. You've made your point. You can take it from there."

"Quite so, Mr. Anders. You now admit I exist, that I have extraordinary powers. I am your own creation, Mr. Anders. As I said before you have exceptional senses, including imagination. And yes, imagination is the greatest of all the senses.

"Some humans with this gift often imagine ludicrous things, exciting things, horrifying things—depending don't you see, on mood, emotion. And the things these mortals imagine become real, are actually, created—only they don't know it, of course."

He stopped. He was probably giving me time to soak that up. Then he went on. "You've forgotten to keep trying to remember where you put that Luger, Mr. Anders. I just picked up the abandoned thought as it left your consciousness just now."

I gulped down something that tried to rise in my throat. I didn't like this guy.

"You created me when you were fourteen, Mr. Anders. You imagined me as a swashbuckling pirate. The only difference between me and the others who have been created in times past is that I have attained the ninth dimension. I am the first to do that. Also the first to capture the secrets of your own third dimension. Naturally then, it would be a pity for me to die."

"Get out," I said.

"Forgive me, Mr. Anders. My time is short. I die tomorrow."

"That's swell. Now get out."

"We're not immortal, you see. When our creators die their imaginations die with them. We too die. It follows. But for some time I've had an idea."

"Out," I said again. "Get the hell out of here!"

"You're going to die tomorrow, Mr. Anders, in that new flying saucer. And I must die with you. Except that I've had this idea."

There are times when you look yourself in the eye and don't like what you see. Or maybe what you see scares the living hell out of you. When those times come along some little something inside tells you you'd better watch out. Then the doubts creep in. After that the melancholy. And from that instant on you aren't very sane anymore.

"*Out!*" I yelled. "Out, *out*, OUT! Get the hell out!"

"One moment, Mr. Anders. Now as to this idea of mine. There's this woman—this Margie Hayman. This woman you call the Doll."

That one jerked me around.

"Exactly. Now listen very carefully. You aren't entirely you anymore, Mr. Anders. I mean, you aren't the complete *whole* individual you as you once were. You love this woman. Something inside you has gone out and is now a part of her."

"Therefore, if you will just discard the thought of her sometime between now and when you take that ship up I can attach myself to her sentient being, don't you see, and thereby exist—at least partly—even though you yourself are dead."

I pushed myself unsteadily to my feet. I stared at the entire black repulsive undulating mass before me. I took a step toward it.

"It isn't much to ask, Mr. Anders. You've quarrelled with her. You want no more of her. You've practically told her that. All I ask is that you finish the job—forget her. Discard her—throw her into the mental junk pile of Abandonment."

I didn't take any more steps. Something inside me was screaming, was ripping at my guts, was roaring with all the cacaphony of all the giant discords of all eternity. Something inside my brain was sucking all my strength in one tremendous, surging power-dive of wish fulfillment. I was willing the black mucous mass of him out of my consciousness.

He was no longer there. The only thing to prove he'd ever been there at all was a very-old, very-rusty penknife over on the table in front of the davenport—the knife with my name carved on the bone handle.

After that I went unsteadily to the dresser in the living room. I got the Doll's picture down off the dresser. I undressed. I took the picture to bed with me. The lights burned in my bedroom the entire night.

---

Lieutenant Colonel Melrose looked weatherbeaten. His graying hair was pulled here and there like a rag mop that's dried dirty—stiff. He had a freshly lit cigarette between his lips. He grinned nervously when he saw me, butted the cigarette, said in a thin voice, "This is it, Anders. Ship goes up in twenty minutes."

"I know," I said.

He poked another cigarette at his lips. He said, "What?" in a startled tone.

"Nothing," I said. "All right, I'll get ready."

He lit the cigarette, took a puff that made the smoke do a frenetic dance around his nostrils. He jabbed it at an ashtray, bobbed his head in a convulsive movement, said, "Righto!"

They strapped me in. Pop came to the open hatch. He stuck his head in, grinned, said, "Hi, guy," softly. There was something in his eyes. The Doll had told him how I hate sour notes.

"How's the Doll, Pop?" I forced myself to say it.

"Swell, Ed. Just got a call from her. On her way out here to see you take off. Looks like she won't make it now though."

I didn't say anything. His eyes went down to the wallet I had propped up on my knees. The wallet was open, celluloid window showing. Inside the window was the Doll's picture.

"Tell her that, Pop," I said.

"Yeah, guy. Luck."

They shut the hatch.

There was no doubt about the takeoff. If one thing was perfected in the XXE-1 it was that. The ship rose like the mercury in a thermometer on a hot day in July. I took it slow to fifty thousand feet.

"Fifty thousand," I said into the throat mike.

"Hear you, Anders." Melrose's voice.

"Smooth," I said. "Radar on me?"

"On you, Anders."

I let the ship have a little head. This job used the clutch of a tax collector's claws for fuel. It just hooked itself on the nothing around us and yanked—and there we were.

One hundred thousand.

"Double that," I said into the mike.

"Yeah, Anders. How is it?"

"Haven't yet begun. Radar still on me?"



I heard a nervous laugh. *He* was nervous. "The General—General Hotchkiss just said something, Anders. He—ha, ha—he said you're on plot like stitches in a fat lady's hip. Ha, ha! He's got *us* all in stitches. Ha, ha!"

*Ha, ha!*

This was it. I released my grip on the accelerator control, yet it slide up. They say you can't feel speed in the air unless there's something relative within vision to tip you off. They're going to have to revise that. You can not only feel speed you can reach out and break hunks off it—in the XXE-1, that is. I shook my head, took my eyes off the instruments and looked down at the Doll on my lap.

"Melrose?"

"Hear you, Anders."

"This is it. Reaching me on radar still?"

"Naturally."

"All right."

This was it. This was where the other four ships like the XXE-1—the radio controlled models—had disintegrated. This was where it happened, and they didn't come back anymore.

I sucked in oxygen and let the accelerator control go over all the way.

Pulling a ship out of a steep dive, yes. Blackout then, yes. If the wings stay with you everything's fine and you live to mention the incident at the bar a little while later. Blackout accelerating—climbing—is not in the books. But blackout, nevertheless. Not just plain blackout but a thick mucous, slimy undulating blackout—the very black.

The very very black.

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General Hotchkiss, "What's he saying, Melrose?"

Melrose, "Doesn't answer."

General Eaton, "Try again."

Melrose, "Yes sir."

General Hotchkiss, "What's he saying, Melrose?"

General Eaton, "Still nothing?"

Melrose, "Nothing."

General Hotchkiss, "Dammit, you've still got him on radar, haven't you?"

Melrose, "Yes sir."

General Hotchkiss, "Well, dammit, what's he doing?"

Melrose, "Still going up, sir."

General Eaton, "How far up?"

Melrose, "Signal takes sixty seconds to get back, sir."

General Hotchkiss, "God in heaven! One hundred and twenty thousand miles out! Halfway to the moon. How much more fuel has he?"

Melrose, "Five seconds, sir. Then the auto-switch cuts in. Power will go off until he nears atmosphere again. After that, if he isn't conscious—well, I'm awfully afraid we've lost another ship."

General Eaton, "Cold blooded—"

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The purple drapes before my eyes were wavering. Hung like rippled steel pieces of a caisson suspended by a perilously thin whisper of thread, they swayed, hesitated, shuddered their entire length, then began to bend in the middle from the combined weights of thirteen galaxies. The bend became a cracking bulge that in another second would explode destruction directly into my face. I screamed.

"Is—is that you, Anders?"

I screamed good this time.

"An—Anders! You all right? What happened? I couldn't get through to you?"

I took my hand from the accelerator control and stared numbly at it. The mark of it was deep in the skin. I sucked in oxygen.

"*Anders!* Your power is off. When you hear the signal you've got just three more seconds. You know what to do then. You've been out of the envelope, Anders! You broke through the atmosphere!"

And then I heard him speak to somebody else—he must have been speaking to somebody else, he couldn't have meant me—"Crissake, give me a cigarette. The guy's still alive."

I suppose I was grinning when they unstrapped me and slid me out of the hatch. They were grinning back at any rate. The ground held me up surprisingly—like it always had all my life before. They'd stopped grinning now, their eyes were eating the inside of the ship. They weren't interested in me anymore—all they wanted was the instruments' readings.

My feet could still move me. Knew where to go. Knew where to find the door that had the simple word *Plotting* on it.

The Doll was there with her father. The two of them didn't say anything, just looked at me—just stared at me. I said, "He tried damned hard. He put everything he had in it. He got me. He had me down and there wasn't any up again for the rest of the world. For me there wasn't."

They stared. Pop stared. The Doll stared.

"Just one thing he forgot," I muttered. "He gave me the tip-off himself and then he forgot it. He told me I wasn't all me anymore, that a part of me had gone out to you since I was supposed to be in love with you. And that's where the tip-off lies. I wasn't all me anymore but I hadn't lost anything. You know why, Doll?"

They stared.

"Simple—any damn fool would tumble. If I wasn't all me, then you weren't all you. Part of you was me—get it? And *you* weren't scheduled to bust out today. Not you—me! And that's what he couldn't work over. That's what brought me down again. He couldn't touch that." I stopped for a moment.

I said suddenly, "What the hell you guys staring at?" I growled.

"That's my Baby," said the Doll.

"No strings," I said.

"Like we said." Her words were soft petals. "Like we said, Baby. Just like we said."

"Sure. Only damn it, I don't like it that way. I *want* strings, see? I want meshes of 'em, balls of 'em, like what comes in yarn—get it?"

The Doll grinned. "Sure, Baby—you're sure you want it that way?"

"Sure I'm sure. I just said it, didn't I? *Didn't* I?"

"You just said it, Baby." She left her father's side, came over to me, put her arm in mine, pulled close. We turned, started to go out the door.

"Where you guys going?" asked Pop. We turned again. He looked like something was skipped somewhere on a sound track he'd been listening to. I grinned.

"Gotta look for a Brown Bess," I said. "Museum just lost one."

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