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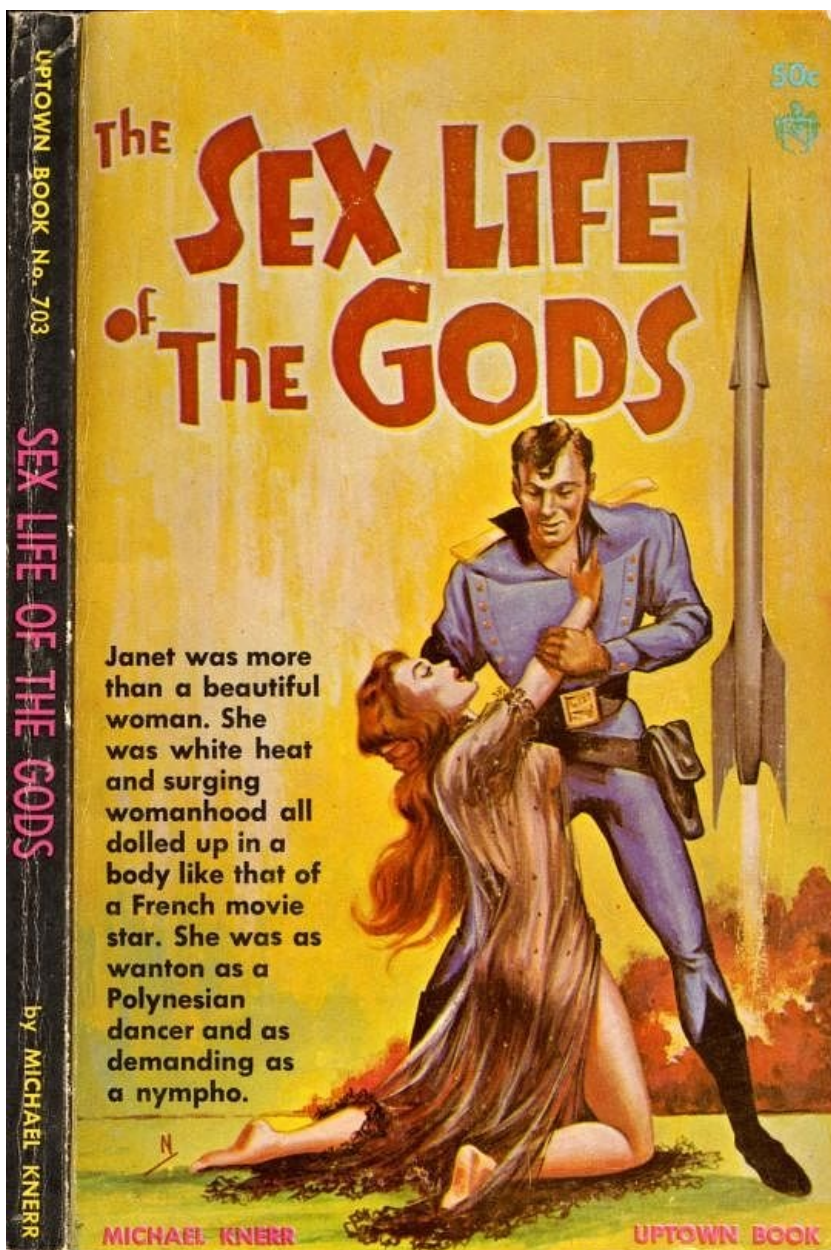
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SEX LIFE OF THE GODS ***

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Beth Danson was about twenty-five and, besides her deep auburn-brown hair and lovely face, she boasted an equally attractive body. He found himself captivated by the warm thrust of her breasts beneath the silk blouse. The clear milk of her flesh, at the "V" of her throat excited him in a strange way. When he thought of her as his wife, it was frightening. It was as though someone had tossed him a woman and expected him to just fall into the routine of marriage. It wouldn't be hard to come to love this woman, but it would take awhile. Hell, he didn't know her. She was a complete stranger who had suddenly told him they were married. There was nothing familiar about her; even the fingers that were softly working over his face were alien.

"I think we're property..."

—*Charles Fort*

He was lying on a strangely made bed, the warm breezes of evening rolling in off the crashing sea and the woman stood in the ornate doorway that entered the bedroom. Her hair was as gold as the noon sun and her eyes, lifting slightly at the outer curves, were as blue as the sea. Her lips petaled back over the white strength of her teeth and her fingers did strange things to make the flimsy robe drop from the rounded softness of her shoulders. Then his fingers curled about the curve of her thigh. His fingers tightened and the crimson smile broadened; he pulled and felt her resist him with maidenly demureness, but in the end she came to him. He felt the yielding firmness of her body pressing down into his on the bed and his arms furred about the softness that she offered. The warm cones of her breasts worked on the hardness of his chest and his mouth fused against hers for a passionate kiss.

SEX LIFE OF THE GODS

by

MICHAEL KNERR

**AN UPTOWN BOOK
AN ORIGINAL NOVEL**

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FOREWORD

He left the mother ship and headed for Terra; he smiled at the instrument panel and watched the operation of the big scout ship as it rocketed toward the light ribbon of atmosphere that enveloped the planet. It was a joke, in a way. In a manner of speaking, he was the first Terran to fly an alien space ship, but he wasn't thinking of that. He was thinking of the woman, Elizabeth Danson of Everett, Pennsylvania.

She was waiting.

And he could see the warmth of her body, sheathed in the web-like gown that seemed spun over her turgid breasts and curved hips by an army of artistic spiders. It would not be a hard thing to love a woman like that.

His fingers curled about the controls, his feet working the rudder pedals of the screaming ship as he headed for the strange darkness of the Atlantic Ocean. The space ship was operating well and the Earth lifted her curved bosom to meet his rush.

Trouble came early. The danger lights flickered in his eyes and the fear welled up within him like a flood. Fifteen hundred miles an hour and the scout ship was out of control! The behavior of the craft was erratic, as though a giant hand was slapping the silver belly as he plummeted toward the ball of the earth.

Desperately he tried to reduce the speed of the hurtling ship, his fingers working the buttons and levers in a frenzy of determination. The craft refused to respond. She whipped into a cloud bank, headed for the sea, lifted suddenly and whirled back toward space.

In an agony of fear he realized that he no longer was the master of the space ship - he was a prisoner in a violent, uncontrollable meteor that would finally slam him into infinity against the very earth that was to be home...

In the early hours of morning, Jean Renault of Nova Scotia fingered the wheel of his fifty foot boat through the grey ground swells of the Grand Banks, almost to the place where he would cast his nets into the water. The overcast sky was refusing to emit the sunlight and a light mist hung over the sea like a disjointed ghost. When Jean heard the whirring roar of the ship, it was too late. The silver streak whipped over his fishing boat with all the furies of the gods, and nearly tore his steadying sail away. Muttering a string of French curses, Jean picked up his radio telephone and reported in violent tones the presence of the jet to the Coast Guard.

In the half-light of early dawn, the United States and Canada whirled with reports upon the strange craft. The CQ of the National Defense system began systematically pinpointing the track of the strange craft as it raked across the adumbral sky.

Then, it was gone!

The rocketing ship had appeared over one observation station near Lake Ontario. It had been spotted by a CD worker near Auburn, N.Y., then it was gone. The last observation of the craft showed it flying an erratic track toward the mountain country of Pennsylvania.

At CQ operations office, in Washington D.C., Lt. Colonel Martin Griswold tossed the last report on his desk and pinched his lower lip thoughtfully. Colonel Delbert, sitting across from him, looked serious.

"It's out of control," he mused. "And it isn't one of ours. Russian?"

"Might be." He looked at the rugged country along the Pennsylvania, New York map for a moment, then he picked up the phone on his desk. "This is Colonel Griswold. Get me the Pentagon."

At 0930 a special plane left Washington, bound for the town in northern Pennsylvania that had been chosen as a base of operations. On board the plane were the Secret Service men who were to track down the crashed ship.

They were several hours too late...

CHAPTER ONE

He awakened to flame and smoke and it was as though he had been born again. About him lay thick, summer cloaked forests and heavy carpets of laurel and brush. Obviously, it was some sort of plane that was burning nearby and he had probably been in it. In his mind, he remembered only the blinding flash of white light, then a sea of darkness that had enveloped him. Whether he had been thrown clear of the wreck, or whether he had crawled, he didn't know. But the torn flying suit he wore convinced him that he had once been airborne in that battered craft.

The heavy, canvas-like material of the flying suit had protected the blue serge business suit underneath, so that besides a ripped pocket it was presentable. He grinned wryly in the pre-dawn darkness. Presentable to whom? The squirrels? He peeled off the flying suit and added it to the flaming wreckage, then staggered off through the night toward the valley below. There was usually, he recalled, water in ravines.

He used small saplings for handholds while his head thumped and thundered wildly. Probing fingers found a lump beneath blood matted hair that was sensitive to the touch. There was a scratch on his cheek, sealed with dried blood, and his hands were skinned as though he had broken a fall in cinders with them. It was, he decided, amazing that he had survived a plane crash with so little injury; but then, stranger things had happened.

There was a run at the bottom of the hill, one of those leaf choked, meandering little creeks that become stagnant pools in July and August, and raging torrents of brown water in the spring. Lying on a sloping, flat rock he thrust his face into the stream and drank deeply, feeling the life flow from the water into the weariness of his body. He washed his face in it, splashing it over his head until his mind began to function with familiar clarity.

But he still did not know who he was...

When he tried to search backward into the past, he could see only the white flash and the darkness. It was frightening. It was as though someone had taken a pair of scissors and cut away the whole memory of his past life. He fumbled through his pockets, found the wallet and the cigarette lighter and began flipping through the cards with the help of the tiny lighter flame.

An identification card labeled him Nicholas Howard Danson and stated that he lived at 2312 Weisman Drive, Everett, Pennsylvania. There was also a draft, social security and drivers license card. The others were membership certificates to various clubs and organizations. Finally there were several pictures of himself and a woman; in fact, there were a great many pictures of the woman. One was a portrait of her, inscribed, "love, Beth", which told him that she was either a girlfriend or his wife.

Nick extinguished the light and put the wallet away. In his shirt pocket he found a crumpled pack of cigarettes. He shook one out, lit it and dragged the smoke down deep into his lungs while he pondered over his newly discovered self.

Of course the proper thing to do would be to get to a phone, call the local authorities and explain the crash. The law would help him get home and check him out. That was the proper thing - but he wasn't about to do the proper thing. He was a stranger to himself. Who was he? What was he? He could well be outside the law, a criminal... Then what? Turn yourself in, Danson, he grimaced, and discover that you are wanted by the law for something? To hell with that. Get to this Beth woman and get some answers to a few questions before you bring in the law.

Apparently no one had seen the crash. No one knew he was here. Perhaps it would be better to leave it like that until he had a chance to find out just what he was up against.

He decided not to contact anyone. When it was light enough he would look for a ride to somewhere. At a gas station he could find out where he was and where Everett, Pennsylvania was. Then, by thumbing, he could get a ride to where he lived. If this Beth woman was his wife, she could fill him in. There was plenty of time to call the law.

Sleep, when he tried it, refused to come. There were too many unanswered questions rocketing around in his brain. Well, he had to find a road, sooner or later, so it might as well be now. Perhaps the more distance he put between himself and the wreck, the better it would be for him. He took a final drink of water from the creek and stood up, his sore, battered muscles protesting violently. Then he began to stumble through the adumbral forests to find a road.

It was getting light when he found the highway. It was small and narrow, bedded with pebbly asphalt with a faded white line down the middle that told him it was not a first class road. It stretched ahead of him, dwindling among the thick hemlock forests and dwarfed by the steep, wooded hills. He grinned, wondering vaguely which direction he should travel to get to Everett. Finally he pulled a quarter from his pocket and flipped it into the air. He caught it deftly. Heads, I go to the right; tails, I go to the left. Heads won and he started off toward the right, the stiffness and the weariness dragging at him like a weight tied to his legs.

While he walked he studied the pictures in his wallet, noting happily that it also contained twenty dollars in bills. That was comforting.

In the daylight, the picture of Beth that had looked pretty in the flame of the lighter, became beautiful. Although it was a black and white photo, Nick decided that her hair was brown. It swept about a soft, heart shaped face like a cloud. The image was smiling at him and he felt that if she was not his wife, he hoped that she was his girl.

It was late in the morning when he found the service station. It was a small, lonely, isolated place that sported two pumps and cramped looking lube rack. Through the open door of the washroom, Nick could see the shoes and coverall legs of the attendant as they stuck out from under a Ford. Nick found a dime in his pocket and treated himself to a cold drink, while he tried to figure out where he was.

Across the highway a marker told him that he was on Route 87. He pulled a Pennsylvania map - not entirely sure he was in Pennsylvania - from the rack inside the door and, unfolding it, found Everett. The route 87 ran through the town, but it was difficult to puzzle out whether he was north or south of the place. He refolded the map and stuffed it into his pocket for further reference, and glanced around. On the far side of the office was a door marked "MEN", that was just what he wanted. His clothes, his hair and his face needed a few emergency repairs before he could confront the population of Everett.

He went in.

In a mirror, with most of the backing peeling away, he discovered that Nick Danson was rather good looking, if you overlooked the damage. His blocky, rugged face was smeared with dirt and dried blood, with a slight stubble shadowing his lean cheeks. The mop of tangled black hair had a lot of red splotches in it from the blood he'd lost. He filled the bowl with tepid water and began soaping his face and hands vigorously, even though it hurt. After washing most of the blood from his hair, he found a comb in a pocket and whipped some order into the matted, dark mass.

The attendant was standing at the counter when Nick came out of the restroom. He was an elderly man with receding grey hair, a hawk nose and grizzled features set firmly into a face that looked like a dried apple. He grinned and the gold cap on an eye tooth flashed dully.

"Thought I heard someone in here," he said around the chew that pouched his cheek. "Car break down on ye?"

"I'm walking," Nick told him.

"Yer a long way from any kind 'o town, son ... say," he said suddenly noticing the scratch marks. "Y' been fightin' a bobcat?"

Nick shook his head and fished for a lie. "Got drunk last night and into a brawl. My friends pitched me out of the car in a moment of playfulness." He hoped he had put enough bitterness into the explanation to make it ring true.

The old man chuckled softly. "Durned shame, son. Y'from around here?"

"New York," Nick lied. "I'm stayin' in Everett."

"Everett," the old man cackled. "Hell, that's fifteen miles south o'here, or better." He paused, swiveled his bird-like head and spat a jet of brown juice through the open door. "Tell y'what, son, seein's how you'll have t'walk it down there. Ain't no one goin' that way, I know of. S'pose y'could thumb it, but it'd be hard. Lonely road, y'see. If y'don't mind waitin' till after supper, I'll run y'down to town. Drop y'off where y'want to go."

"Hadn't thought of waiting so long," Nick told him. "What would I do? Just sit here?"

"Hell no! In th' back room there's a cot. Been sleepin' there myself sometimes, since m'wife passed along back in '53. December of '53 it was. I'll wake ye, come supper."

"Thanks."

With the hunger gnawing at his stomach, Nick took a cellophane wrapped pie from the counter and began eating it. He handed the old man a quarter.

"S'funny," the old man said, ringing up the sale, "ye don't smell like a drunk. Ought t'be some likker smell to y'son."

"I was drinking vodka," Nick countered, wondering how he had pulled that

from a mind that could not remember his past. He took another bite of the pie as the old man gave him his change.

“Bad stuff, vodka. That’s th’ slop them Russian hassocks drink, ain’t it?”

“I think so.”

“Well, it ain’t for Andy Hocum. Them hassocks can have it.”

Nick was saved from further conversation by a new station wagon pulling into the pumps. A young woman, dressed in a suit, cut the engine and honked the horn briefly. Andy waved and headed for the door.

“Get some shut eye, son. I’ll wake y’ later.”

“Thanks, Andy.”

He finished the last of the pie and watched Andy stick a hose into the wagon’s gas tank, then go around front to wipe off the windshield.

Nick cleared the pie wrapper off the small counter and tossed it into a box as he headed for the backroom. After closing the door, he fell onto the bed and a moment later into the well of sleep.

CHAPTER TWO

Detective Lieutenant Nolan Brice braked the Fairlane at 2312 Weisman Drive and got out quickly. For a moment, he wasn't sure whether Beth Danson would be awake, but it was a long drive into headquarters and he didn't want to go back to a dismal office, or even a lonely bachelor apartment. He glanced at his watch. 9:30. He shrugged and decided to try it.

She answered his knock almost at once, smiling him into the front room. For a moment, he allowed his eyes to finger her body, letting them spear through the wrap around robe and the flimsy nightgown to where warm flesh ebbed and flowed against the sigh of silk. Her brown hair was bed-tangled and most of the makeup was gone from her face, but Beth Danson was a woman who had the unconscious ability to look beautiful under any circumstances. Nolan felt a thunder in his veins as he tossed his hat on the sofa.

"Coffee, Nolan?" she asked.

He nodded and they went into the kitchen. "We found the Peters' kid, so that ends another case." He dropped to a chair and watched her fixing the coffee. "You're up early, Beth."

A shadow crossed her face momentarily. "I had a dream, Nolan. A bad dream."

"About Nick?"

She nodded and set a cup of coffee before him. The tears were close again, but Brice hadn't seen them fall over Nick for a long while. It was ridiculous the way she mooned over the guy, but there was no understanding women.

"You ought to stop dwelling on him, honey," Nolan told her. "It doesn't do any good."

"He's alive," she said, softly.

"You know better than that. If he was alive, we'd have found him. Men just do not drop out of sight in the Twentieth Century."

Beth lifted a hand to brush her hair into place and sat down to sip at her coffee. Nolan studied her. She actually believed that her husband was alive and that he would return to her. He hoped not. It was a selfish thing to think about, but he was in love with her; he'd have had her long ago if it wouldn't have been for Nick and his dark good looks. He mouthed a swallow of coffee and settled the cup in its saucer. She was looking at him.

"Is there any news, Nolan?"

"About Nick? No." He touched her arm. "They've given up ... and so should you. Honey, you're young, beautiful. Hell, another woman would have gone out and had a ball.

"Listen, there's a lousy show on down in Everett. Want to go?"

She smiled. "Thanks, but you're probably tired from hunting for the Peters' kid..."

"I feel fine."

She shook her head. "Nolan, I know how you feel about me. I'm very flattered. But ... but I have to accustom to his loss in my own way. I'm sorry."

Nolan forced a smile. "That's the way the mop flops," he mused. "I'll be around, when you are." He finished his coffee in silence. "Well, I have to get moving, make out a report and all. Thanks for the coffee, Beth."

She nodded, but remained staring into her cup. Nolan went into the front room, picked up his hat and went out into the morning to climb into his car. When he had started it and headed back toward Everett, he found himself struggling with the feeling that he was being cheated.

After all, he reasoned with himself, why should a guy have to play second fiddle to a man who was probably dead. If Nick Danson were alive, it'd be different; but dead, and that was an almost sure thing, he felt cheated. Beth could learn to love him. She could forget. Hell, a lot of women lost their men for some reason or another, but they accustomed, they altered their lives. If a man dropped the reins, some other guy should pick them up. It was only natural.

He shut off the thoughts of Beth as he reached the busy section of town and concentrated on his driving. He could wait, he decided in closing off the thoughts. Sooner or later she would be ready to accept the truth, and he would be right there waiting. He maneuvered the Ford around several other cars parked in the lot of the City Hall and found the berth that bore his name. He killed the engine, got out and went inside to his office.

When he opened the door and saw the two men and the Chief sitting in his office, he knew it was something big. After awhile, it was so you could spot a Fed a mile away. Especially when they were sitting in your office. Chief Daniels looked grouchy at him, but his tone was cordial.

"You finish with Peters?"

"Yes."

Daniels nodded, his florid, moon face looking lumpy and important. "Lieutenant Brice. This is John Cartwell and Sam Morgan. Secret Service. I've promised to give them assistance in an important matter. They'll brief you." He nodded an important good-bye and left the three of them alone.

"What's the problem, gentlemen," Nolan said and settled behind his desk.

Cartwell, a stocky looking thirty year old, with wavy blond hair, did the talking, while his dark complected friend puffed placidly on a cigar.

"Lieutenant Brice," Cartwell said, "your boss seemed to think that you'd be the best man to help us set up our plan of operation. We've already contacted the Civil Air Patrol and the National Guard outfit here. We have an air search under way and for the meanwhile that's all we can do. We were hoping that you could help us get in touch with all the ground observing corps' branches; we'll use this office as a headquarters for operations."

Nolan blinked, "What's up? An Air Force test plane down?"

Cartwell shook his head. "We got a UFO report..."

"A flying saucer?" Nolan was stunned.

Cartwell chuckled and his partner grinned. "An Unidentified Flying Object does not necessarily constitute a space craft, Brice. But something was spotted off the Grand Banks, early this morning, going like hell and apparently out of control. We got our last sighting over Auburn, New York. We checked the observation posts around Everett and found that nothing was seen. We also checked Binghamton and Elmira, with a negative report. Since the object was on a southerly heading, when spotted near Auburn, we can only assume that it went down in the area between Everett and Auburn, and Binghamton and Elmira."

Nolan gave a long low whistle. "Not one of ours, huh?"

"No."

"Canadian?"

"Not at that speed."

"That leaves the big one, then. Russian?"

Cartwell shrugged. "Could be. If it is, we want the wreckage. No matter what it is, or whose it is, we are very interested in any aircraft that travels at speeds of fifteen to nineteen thousand miles per hour."

Nolan whistled again. "That's rolling," he grinned.

"Yeah," mused Sam Morgan, "and we'd kind of like to know what makes it roll like that."

"Okay. Let's go into a huddle," Nolan said. "But I can tell you this. If the thing went down in north central Pennsylvania, it's in some pretty rugged country."

"Great," Cartwell snarled.

CHAPTER THREE

The dream was of a woman.

He was lying on a strangely made bed, the warm breezes of evening rolling in off the crashing sea and the woman stood in the ornate doorway that entered the bedroom. About him lay all manner of bright silks and strange colored cloths. The woman smiled and his eyes caressed her.

Her hair was as gold as the noon sun and her eyes, lifting slightly at the outer corners, were as blue as the sea. Her lips petaled back over the white strength of her teeth and her fingers did strange things to make the flimsy robe drop from the rounded softness of her shoulders. He watched her walk, upon curvaceous legs, to the edge of the bed. For just a second, she smiled down at him.

"Father is sleeping like a baby," she whispered.

He felt himself talk: "Good." Then his fingers curled about the curve of her thigh. His fingers tightened and the crimson smile broadened; he pulled and felt her resist him with maidenly demureness, but in the end she came to him.

He felt the yielding firmness of her body pressing down into his on the bed and his arms furred about the softness that she offered. The warm cones of her breasts worked on the hardness of his chest and his mouth fused against hers in a passionate kiss.

"Lors, Lors, darling. You've been gone so long." Her voice was a kitten purr in his ear, warm and gentle.

"I'm back, Jela," he smiled, his hands caressing the lithe length of her body, folding her against him tightly.

She moved away from him, rolling, tugging at him to respond, but he needed no encouragement. His body rolled with her, his arms pinning her to him tightly so that she could move nothing ... nothing but her legs, but then there was little need to move anything else...

The dream faded and he cursed, and tried to get back to sleep and the beautiful woman who awaited him. Sleep came, but the dream was gone.

Andy, shaking his shoulder, woke him about sundown and Nick swung his legs off the cot and stood up. Still sleepy, he fingered the heavy stubble on his face and looked at the old man.

"Y'kin use my razor t' chop off that beard, son," he said. "C'mon, get around now. Got soup and sandwiches ready an' some famous Hocum coffee."

Nick straightened his wrinkled clothing, shaking the last remnants of weary fog from his brain. Andy went on talking to him and said something that woke Nick Danson up completely.

"Yer buddies was here, couple o' hours ago, son."

"What?" It was almost impossible to keep the surprise out of his face and voice. Andy didn't seem to notice anything wrong.

"Th' fellers y'got drunk with. Wanted t'know if I'd seen any strangers on th' road. I said I hadn't, 'cause I figgered they might want t'slap y'around again."

"Thanks, Andy."

Who could possibly know about the plane crash? If the wreck *had* been found, it would be the police asking questions, not two strangers. Somebody, somewhere, was searching for him. Who? And what did they want?

Fingers of fear and worry flittered along his spine.

When they had finished eating, Nick shaved, cleaned himself up and followed Andy out to where his car was parked. He found that he liked the old man, but under the circumstances conversation was difficult. The plane crash, for one thing, was a bit on the odd side. The burning wreckage, he recalled, had shown no signs of ever having had wings or a tail assembly. But that was probably minor; the wings could have been ripped off by the trees when the plane came down. The important thing was that someone knew he was here. As they drove toward the town of Everett, the old man began talking about the strangers that had inquired after Nick earlier in the day.

"... Nope, I says to the big feller, ain't seen a soul on foot all day, 'ceptin' o'course, Jimmy Dilson, goin' down t'Willer Creek, t'fish. That seemed t'satisfy them so they lit out."

"Notice what kind of car they drove, Andy?" Nick asked.

"Yep. Gave 'em gas. They was drivin' a Chevrolet. Looked to be a '56 or a '57; black, it was. Blacker'n th' inside of a coal bin, with th' shiniest chrome y'ever saw."

"Sounds like them," Nick told him, enlarging the lie. "One of them short and the other medium?"

"Not exactly. The one did all the talkin' had a funny accent. Anyways, he was about six feet, three or four, and heavy. Goodlookin', with blond hair. The other guy was about your build, with sandy hair. Never talked, that guy."

"They're the ones," Nick lied and shook a cigarette from a half empty pack. "Thanks for not giving me away."

Andy nodded, lapsing into silence, while Nick concentrated on coming home to a strange woman, and the two men who had been asking after him. For some reason, he got the feeling that Beth Danson was his wife and he accepted it that way. She couldn't be his sister ... besides, a man his age would be married, in all likelihood. He wondered vaguely how she would welcome him, but cast the thought aside. He'd know soon enough.

As they approached Everett, in the gathering twilight, Andy turned to him.

"Where d'ye want off, son?"

"Weisman Drive. Know it?"

"Yep. We're almost there. Suburban area, just north of town. Y'got friends there?"

"Yes." Nick grinned inwardly. That is, he thought, I hope she's a friend. Hell, I don't know whether she hates my guts, or loves me ... but she's the only one that can help. A frightening gloom fell over him suddenly.

Andy lapsed again into silence and the sound of the motor became loud. Nick continued to ponder the strange men and the woman he was coming home to, but it was like bashing his head against a wall. He could remember nothing. And, through his thoughts, the memory of the dream returned to him. It was the most vivid dream he had ever had, almost as though it was real.

Abruptly Andy brought the car to a stop before a sign that read, "Weisman Drive." Nick thanked him and climbed out onto the road. The old man waved and the car spat cinders as it roared back onto the highway, heading toward the town. For a moment, he stood there watching Andy's car fade into the night, then he began walking along the road, looking for 2312 Weisman Drive and trying to ignore the feeling of fear that welled up within him.

When he finally found it, he saw that it was a two story place that looked to be white frame, trimmed with a darker color that was probably blue. In the off light from the street lamp, it was difficult to tell. There was a garage built alongside and a good sized lawn in the front, but there was no evidence of children. A light in the front room told him that someone was home - likely Beth - and caution told him he'd better make sure no friends were with her.

He slipped quietly up on the porch and looked briefly into the window. Beth was there, sitting on the sofa reading a book. Her hair, he noticed, was brown with a reddish cast to it and she was every bit as beautiful as the picture he carried in his hip pocket.

He knocked on the door.

It occurred to him, after he had rapped, that this was his own house. Why should he rap? But what was done, was done. He waited until she had opened the door and stood looking at him. He tried a smile, but Beth Danson's eyes widened in shock and her lips parted in astonishment.

"Nick," she whispered, as though she had seen a ghost, and fell to the floor in a dead faint.

Stunned, he stepped over the crumpled body of the woman and walked into the room. When he had closed the front door, he lifted her limp body and laid her on the sofa. He began patting her face and hands to revive her, wondering what the hell he had done to cause her to faint.

Why the devil was she so shocked to see him, he wondered. Is she in love with another man and did they rig that plane so it would crash to be rid of me? If they had tried to kill him, he could damned well see why she had fainted at the sight of him. The rings on her left hand bragged that she was married, probably to him. But why faint?

He was trying to decide whether to stay or run, when her long lashes fluttered and she came to. Again her greenish eyes dilated in astonishment, but this time she did not pass out. Her soft arms slid about his neck and she pulled him down to where she could kiss him. Her warm lips caressed his face, kissing his mouth, his cheeks and his eyes, while she murmured his name over and over in absolute joy.

Had news of the crash reached her? Did the authorities find the wreck and presume him dead? Was that why she had fainted and was now so overjoyed at having him back? His mind whirled with a hundred questions that his stunted memory refused to answer, and he decided to take it easy, waiting for her to make the first move.

"Oh, Nick," she murmured against his ear. "Where have you been?"

"I don't know. I've been in a crack up, Beth. I can't remember anything..."

She pushed him away, suddenly, looking at his face. "Darling! Your face! You're hurt!"

"Just scratches," he told her swiftly. "Nothing serious. Beth, you've got to help me. Please!" He felt strange. It was like asking a total stranger for help, and he was ashamed and confused.

"Of course I'll help you, darling. I'm your wife. Now come out to the kitchen where I can patch you up." Suddenly she burst into tears and held him close. "Oh, darling, darling! It's so good to have you back!"

He held her until she had stopped crying, then he allowed himself to be led into the kitchen where she began applying iodine and bandaids to his scratched face. Weariness was again dragging at him like some clutching demon that threatened to drag him down into a bog of darkness. He studied her, trying to take his mind off his lethargy.

Beth Danson was about twenty-five and, besides her deep auburn-brown hair and lovely face, she boasted an equally attractive body. He found himself captivated by the warm thrust of her breasts beneath the silk blouse. The clear milk of her flesh, at the "V" of her throat excited him in a strange way. When he thought of her as his wife, it was frightening. It was as though someone had tossed him a woman and expected him to just fall into the routine of marriage. It wouldn't be hard to come to love this woman, but it would take awhile. Hell, he didn't know her. She was a complete stranger who had suddenly told him they were married. There was nothing familiar about her; even the fingers that were softly working over his face were alien.

Alien! That's it! The whole damned world is alien, and I don't know who I am, who I've been...

"Beth?" He asked suddenly, "how long have I been gone? You act as though it's been a long while..."

"A long while, darling."

"How long?"

She looked steadily at him for a moment, her eyes deep with seriousness. "Thirteen months," she whispered, her voice shaking.

Thirteen months! He relaxed heavily in the straight backed chair and stared at her dumbfoundedly. Over a year! Where had he been? What had he done? Why hadn't he been located before now?

"Thirteen months," he croaked, unable to say anything else.

She nodded. "Oh, Nick, every police agency in the country has been looking for you. I've had detectives out hunting. Nolan Brice has been doing everything he can to locate you. But they couldn't. No one could. It was as though you had disappeared from the face of the earth."

"Nolan Brice?" Nick asked.

"Your best friend..." When she realized that he knew nothing of the man, Nick could see her starting to cry. Her eyes began filling and he could almost see the hopelessness within her.

"Please, honey. Don't start crying again."

"I'm trying not to."

He rose to his feet slowly, his head starting to thump and thunder again, and took her into his arms. It was kind of difficult, trying to comfort her the way a husband should, but he tried.

"Listen, Beth," he whispered against her cheek. "It'll all come back to me. It'll all come back eventually and I'll remember. But for now ... for now, you'll have to bear with me. I don't know where I've been, or what I've done, so don't tell anyone I'm here. Please! Don't tell a single soul! No one!"

"But why, Nick?"

"Because I could have killed someone. I could be a thief, a desperado or something. I don't know. I could even have gotten married..."

"Oh, darling!" She collapsed on his shoulder and began crying violently again.

"Honey, honey! I didn't say that's what I've done. It's just that I don't know. Whatever I am, I can take my medicine, but I want to know what it is first. You've got to understand that."

She tried a smile, blinking back the tears that lay close to the surface, and he forced a smile to pull at his mouth. It was difficult to comfort her, yet he knew that it was his duty to do so. She'd been through a hell of a lot, *and* she had the memories of it. He did not. Despite the alien feeling that was welling within him, he knew that she was the only person who could help him return to himself. Whether he loved her or not was immaterial; he needed her desperately to show him to the man he was. Perhaps it would all come back then.

"I'm sorry, Nick. I'll try to help."

"Thanks, honey."

"Hungry?" She asked brightly, moving to turn the flame on under the coffee pot. At his nod, she went on: "There's some apple pie and I can whip up a couple of sandwiches, or something."

"Coffee and pie is fine."

"In a way, it'll be like courting all over again," she told him, in an attempt at lightness. "It's terrible to lose the things we had, the memories. I can't share them with you anymore. But we'll make a whole lot of new ones to take their place."

"I'm interested in the old ones right now," he told her glumly. "Things have happened so fast, it's hard to accustom to the thing."

"I know," she mused, working over the meal.

He looked at her steadily. "Beth? When did you last see me?"

"Thirteen months ago."

"No, no. I mean, where was I going, what was I doing?"

"You were going up to the cabin to repair the fireplace and build some lawn furniture. You were going to stay over night and come back the evening of the second day. When you didn't come back, Nolan took me up to look for you. Your car was there, but you were gone."

"No clues?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. We thought you might have wandered off into the woods and injured yourself; but I couldn't accept that. You were always a good woodsman, even in desolate country like that."

"Secluded, huh?" He asked.

"Some of the worst country in the state. We bought the place so we could get away from the mess in the city."

He smiled at her. Apparently they had gotten away from one mess merely to fall victim to another.

She sliced him a huge piece of pie and set it before him, the same brave smile still fixed upon her lips. Then she fixed the coffee for him, black with a lump of sugar. He forked some of the pie into his mouth and felt a little sick, along with the headache. A stranger feeding him and loving him, and who knew more about him than he did. He bolted the pie and gulped the coffee hurriedly. When he had finished, he glanced at the electric clock above the pink refrigerator. 9:15.

"Tired, dear?" She asked.

He nodded dully. Now, he thought, I suppose I'm to crawl into bed with her! He felt trapped, suddenly panic stricken at the thought; but she was his wife. He'd married her. He'd probably slept with her thirteen months before. Why the horror?

"We'll go to bed now," she decided. "I usually turn in early. Have to work, you know."

"I'll sleep on the sofa," Nick mumbled.

She blinked at him. "You'll do no such thing. You'll march right upstairs to bed, Nick Danson."

And the die, he figured, was cast...

CHAPTER FOUR

In the final analysis, he was just too tired to attempt an explanation - not physically worn out, but mentally. Since just before dawn, he felt as though he had been on a fantastic merry-go-round. Feeling a bit strange, he allowed her to lead him upstairs to the bedroom. The sight of one bed startled him, even though it was a rather large double. He slid eyes sideways, caught her smiling coyly and forced a grin. She installed him in the bathroom, tossed a pair of pajamas to him and left him alone.

He took a long time showering and shaving. Then when he could avoid it no longer, he went into the bedroom. She was combing her long satiny hair at the dresser and had slipped into an aqua colored nightgown. For a moment, his breath caught in amazement, then he slid between the sheets of the bed and watched her. Finally she stopped combing and walked over to look down at him. He looked back, feeling a little like a caged animal - but enjoying it.

She fell to her knees beside the bed, her eyes shining with happiness. The red lipped smile was again tugging at her full mouth. Her fingers wound gently in his hair and the warm pressure of her soft breasts rested boldly upon his arm as though they knew they belonged there.

"I love you so much, Nick," she whispered, her eyes half closed.

He reached out a hand to touch her cheek and the softness of it against his fingers alarmed him, thrilled him. He knew what he had to tell her, but it was a long time in coming. "I ... I love you too, Beth," he whispered.

Her soft, moist lips came gently down upon his like a twin promise of the offering of love that awaited him and he felt his own lips responding. A slight tremor ran through him as her fingers flicked at the wall and the room became sheathed in darkness. Moonlight filtered through the curtains and she moved into the bed, her lithe shape molding into the hardness of his. Her voice was a warm breath in his ear and her arms slid over his chest while she talked.

"You don't love me, darling. That's the whole trouble. We love with our minds, and love is an accumulation of a million memories - but you have lost yours. I know, I know. To you..."

"Beth," he began but she clamped her hand over his mouth.

"To you, darling, I'm a stranger, just another woman. I know I can't be anything more right now. You'll have to learn to love me again.

"But me? Nick, it's different with me. I've waited for thirteen long months for you to love me again, and by some miracle you've come back. You're here and so am I. I love you and I want you. Oh, darling, pretend I'm a whore; pretend I'm anything ... but make love to me. Pay no attention to anything except to me..."

His mouth folded over hers, shutting off the flow of words in a passionate kiss, while his hands smoothed down over the wisp of silk that kept his fingers from her flesh. Her arms clung to him tightly.

"It won't be hard, Beth," he whispered against the side of her face. "You're beautiful ... it won't be hard to love you..."

Then she twisted from him, making a memory of the film of nightgown that had kept his hands away from her. He moved to her, his fingers stroking her into passion while she pulled his face down to the soft thrust of her breasts. Then she was clamped against him and struggling to get even closer, her body making a prison for him ... yet at the same time giving him freedom.

Later, when she slept, he propped himself on one elbow to study the soft lines of her face. Then he too dropped off to sleep.

His uniform was torn by the purple bushes and their nine inch thorns, and streamers of blood painted the rich blue and yellow of his trousers. His face was smeared with grey, pasty dirt and the hand that held the auto-pistol was wet with sweat. His stomach had rolled into a tight ball within him and he was frightened.

They were out there somewhere, waiting for the sound of his black leather boots to clatter on one of the grey-green rocks that littered the hillside. They would find him. Their damned radar antennae would spot him for them. There was no escape from the bastards, and he knew it. Commander Imry had bungled every damned assignment he'd been given, and now Firstspacer Lors would have to die in the supreme bungle that had created the first native uprising on Thista. He looked up along the face of the high mountain in his rear. Nothing moved in the greenish-purple scrub, but he knew they were

there.

He peered over the edge of the rock into the valley, a hundred and fifty *kinos* away. The patrol car was still there, its driver lying grotesquely just a few feet from the hatch. The thick, heavy spear through his chest resembled a finger pointing toward the violet sky. Closer to him, on the slope, one of the enemy lay dying, a greenish-brown fluid pumping spasmodically from the hole put in his chest by the auto-pistol. The alien's huge yellow eyes blinked owlishly and the slash-like mouth worked as if he wanted to call for help. But no sound came. The antennae swiveled limply as he tried to locate his comrades, but they drooped as the alien died.

Still tightly clutching the auto-pistol, he watched the thin, grey antennae fall to the ground. They pointed off to the left. He swung about and looked in the direction the native had been scanning, but he could see no movement beyond the swaying of the desert grass moving in the faint breath of air.

They should have gotten the message. By now, there was probably a ship on its way to him. He had to hold out until they got here. He flipped open the cartridge box and checked his ammunition. Plenty. Of course, the auto-pistol only held fifteen shots and if they rushed him... He wished fervently that he had thought to bring the projectile launcher from the wrecked patrol car.

Damned natives and their uprisings!

He searched the sky anxiously, cold sweat trickling off his forehead in tiny rivulets. Scenes of other uprisings flickered through his brain, and more horrible scenes of the remains of tortured captives when he reached them too late. Those had been small. This one was for real.

The native seemed to materialize out of the ground, screaming shrill obscenities as he drew himself to his full nine feet of height and brandished the heavy maul over his head. He came leaping over the ground and up the hill of tumbled rocks in fiendish rage, his grey antennae pointed directly at Firstspacer Lors. Behind him came the others, eight of them.

He fired the auto-pistol at the lead alien, watching the bullet tear a hole in his face, ripping away one of the blinking yellow eyes. The alien screamed and fell blubbing. He fired again and again, dropping two more before the charge broke.

Then suddenly, at a sound, he whirled and stared terrified at the alien behind him. The charge had been a fake, an old military stunt that any green Spacer could have seen through. For one brief instant, he stared into the large eyes of the native. Then he fired. Another native rose from the ground, then another and another. He fired repeatedly, crying and cursing in his rage at the weapon's inefficiency, while over his head he heard the roaring of the rescue ship.

Tongues of flame soared over his head and into the surging mass of aliens. He hoped the ship was not too late...

"Nick! Nick, darling!"

He awoke, his face drenched with sweat and his stomach a tight knot of fear. He reached out, in his fright, and grabbed the woman at his side, pulling her into his arms to hold her tightly. She stroked his hair, kissed his face and whispered soothing words into his ear.

"What is it, Nick?"

He relaxed his grip and laid his head back on the pillow. In the bright light of the moon, he looked at her and returned to himself. Those monsters! So vivid!

"Nightmare," he croaked hoarsely.

She smiled, her lips glistening in the moonlight, and kissed him gently. "The apple pie," she suggested. "Nightmares are usually caused by eating before bed."

"It was so real," he muttered. "So real. I ... I was on another planet ... I wore a blue uniform with yellow stripes on the legs and my name was Lors, or Lars. The natives, horrible monsters, were in a state of revolution ... they killed my driver. I was alone and they were all around me..."

"Science fiction," she cooed and stroked his hair. "I think it's a good sign. All you ever read, for relaxation, was science fiction. Your dream was probably a story you once read and your mind put you in the hero's place."

He sat up and looked at her. "Did I cry out?"

"You were mumbling. I couldn't hear what you said. Then you began sobbing and thrashing about."

Nick ran his fingers through his hair and over the back of his neck, the reality of the dream almost too much for him. It wasn't an ordinary nightmare where he would be running, with a huge monster panting in pursuit. This was frightening. Like a memory. Like some damned fantastic memory.

He stood up and patted her shoulder. "Go back to sleep, Beth," he told her gently. "I'm going downstairs."

"Shall I turn on a light?"

"No. It might cause the neighbors to wonder." He walked to the door of the bedroom. "The moon is bright enough."

He walked into the hall, feeling his way in the dark places, and down the stairs into the living room. As he sat in the chair near the window, he thought about the dream. It bothered him, because it was unlike a dream; it had the weird consistency and logic of a memory, yet seemed almost supernatural ... Hell, what kind of thing had huge, yellow eyes and stood nine feet tall? What sort of a world had a violet sky and grey-green rocks? The whole damned thing had the scent of a Walt Disney movie, the colors vivid and sharp, the landscape seemingly done by a watercolor brush.

Thista.

Apparently it was some kind of planet and he hoped that Beth was right. Would it be possible for a man to get so confused via a crack on the head, that he believed he had lived through the literature he'd once read? What would he dream about next? *Macbeth*? *Treasure Island*? Christ, what a world!

If he could get to a doctor, a headshrinker, it might all be ironed out. They would get things squared away in a short while, but hell ... suppose I'm Public Enemy Number One, or something. Thirteen months! In thirteen months kings have been broken, dynasties crushed ... What had happened to him in the thirteen months that he had been out of touch? One thing he was sure of; he hadn't been laying around. In a stretch of time like that, he had worked, eaten, slept, loved ... Maybe he had married again! An almost comical thought, compared to the possibility that he could be a killer, a bank robber; there were a million things he could have done.

A psychologist? Nope. That was out of the question, until he knew more about Nicholas Danson. And learning more about himself would be a real problem. The cabin that Beth had spoken of would probably show him nothing. After a period of a year, there would be damned little trail left to hunt along. There would be almost nothing. Whatever had been there, would have probably been sifted through by the guy, the detective, Nolan Brice. Brice! Of all the friends for him to have, he had to be saddled to Brice! He'd have to be real careful where that character was concerned because the slightest slip would set the cop on his trail like a blood hound.

The crackup? Now there was something. He would always be stuck with the question of how he had managed to get out of that mangled mass of metal with merely cuts and bruises. But he could chalk that up to dumb luck, or something. The thing that worried him was had he left a clue that could trace him here? He had burned the flying suit ... he had tried to cover it up to Andy ... A lot of things about the smashed aircraft bothered him. Things like the flying suit; it had been made of strange material; but hell, he'd burned that thing. There would be no problem with that.

Almost without realizing it, he found himself staring at the car that was parked on the other side of the street. The streetlight gleamed on the black paint of the Chevrolet sedan and he thought of what Andy had told him earlier about the men who had been interested in finding him. Looking at the car much closer, he could see the two men sitting in it. The knot of fear returned to his stomach when he saw the light shining on the driver's blond hair.

The men from Andy's gas station!

"Nick?"

It was Beth. She had followed him down and he could see her framed in the doorway at the foot of the stairs. She had slipped into a nightgown that, in the moonlight, was more alluring than if she had been nude. She started to speak, but he hissed at her for silence.

"Come here, Beth," he instructed, "and don't put on a light."

Her bare feet whispered on the rug as she came to his side in obvious bewilderment. He pointed out the car and the two men, telling her about how they had inquired after him at the gas station. She listened quietly.

"What do they want?" She asked, when he'd finished.

She was sitting on the arm of the chair, leaning against him to study the car. The soft pressure of her breasts was disturbing and conjured up memories of early in the evening.

"What do they want?" She asked again.

"I don't know. That's something I have to find out. Listen, give me a minute to get to the upstairs window. Then snap on the light and move around. They're probably looking for me and I want to give them the impression I'm not here."

"All right, Nick."

He got up and threaded his way to the stairs and up to kneel before the bedroom window that fronted on the street. Through the gap in the curtains, he could see the car plainly. The light snapped on downstairs. For a moment, nothing happened; the men merely sat in the car and watched the house. Finally the car began moving down the street with its lights out. Then, out of range, the driver flicked on the lights and the car disappeared. The downstairs light snapped off and a moment later Beth came into the room.

"Nick?"

"Here."

"Perhaps they saw the crash..." she began, but he cut her off short.

"No one saw me crash."

"I mean, later," she explained. "After all, a wrecked car on a highway would..."

"Car? Beth, I didn't crack up in a car. I crashed on a wooded mountain in a private plane."

"Oh, darling, don't be silly! You've never been in a plane in your life."

In the darkness of the room, Nick could only stare in stunned amazement at the moonlit outline of his wife.

CHAPTER FIVE

Detective Lieutenant Nolan Brice stood in the brush near the wrecked aircraft, watching the men move about in the light of several spotlights that had been set up by the National Guardsmen who had roped off the area. The thick blackness of the surrounding forest, plus a glance at his watch, told him that dawn wasn't too far away. FAA investigator Dickson, a thin, stringy ex-pilot stepped around the scrambled bits of wreckage and offered a light to the dead cigarette in Nolan's mouth.

"Thanks," Brice said and blew the smoke to the night. "What d'you make of it, Mister Dickson?"

Dickson shrugged and pushed his snap-brim hat back with a blunt forefinger. "Dunno. It's pretty dark to see much, but it's no private plane."

"Why do you say that?"

"No wings, no tail assembly. Of course, it's hard to tell in the dark. When it gets light enough, we'll know the story; but I don't know of any private plane that looks like that one. Then too, the Army is holding the news boys at bay. I think those two government fellows are playing this one close to their chests."

Brice nodded and dragged on the cigarette, but he said nothing about the speed of the thing. "Any bodies?"

Dickson shook his head. "The thing is pretty well burned, and the bodies, if there are any to be found, could be all over the area. We did find a kind of flying suit, though, badly burned and torn."

"Just the suit? No one in it?"

Dickson looked perplexed. "Bothers you huh? Me too. I can't figure out why a pilot would carry something like that as an extra. Oh, well, it'll all come out when we really start investigating."

"How long does a thing like that take?"

Dickson shrugged. "A couple of days, a week. Even a few months. It's hard to say."

Brice nodded, took a final drag on the cigarette and tossed it toward the wreck, watching the red ash burst near the wreck. Dickson had wandered off to the far side of the crash-made clearing. Hell, Brice thought, I'd better get that butt. Leaving a thing like that around here could get me in trouble. They'd think it was part of the crash.

When he walked over to retrieve the butt, he saw the light from the flood glinting on a small gold object. He picked it up and found that he had someone's watch. The crystal had been smashed, likely in the crash, and the hands were stopped at 4:15. The expansion band watch dispelled his hunch that the pilot of the plane had been a Russian, or something; it was a Bulova, and he didn't think Russians had them. But what cinched the whole thing was on the under side of the face, in the light of the spots, he could read: "To Nick, Love, Beth."

And suddenly, it was there! He knew the watch. He knew it as well as he knew his own. Hell, he had picked it up at the jeweler's shop in Everett, two years before, when Beth hadn't been able to get into town and wanted to surprise Nick with it! Stunned and puzzled, Brice dropped the watch into his pocket and decided not to say anything to Cartwell and Morgan. Maybe it would cost him, later, but he couldn't tell them - not until he had a better picture of what the hell was going on.

He lit another cigarette and stood there thinking about the watch. How had it gotten here? Nick didn't know how to fly a plane, and even if he had studied the art, could he fly an aircraft that cleared a speed of two thousand miles per hour? Hell no! Nor had the watch been there, in the weather, all this time.

Of course, Nick could have hocked the damned thing in some town when he needed money, and by some quirk of fate it had been brought back to the same area it had left over a year before. That was possible, but Brice didn't believe it. It just didn't fit.

"Seen enough?"

Brice turned and saw Cartwell standing behind him. How long has he been there, he wondered, and forced a grin. The stocky built blond grinned back at him.

"Thought you might want a cup of coffee," he said.

"Where the hell will you get coffee out here?"

Cartwell waved an arm toward the foot of the hills. "A farm down there. They wake up early around here. Sam conned the farmer's wife into making

coffee for the boys. Want some?"

"Might as well. We have a few minutes - in fact, we have a lot of time, before daylight."

"Getting tired?" Cartwell asked, as they started down the hill past the ring of soldiers.

"A little. More like anxious to find out what the tale is on that wreck."

"You've been talking to Dickson, I see."

Brice nodded. "Yeah. Well, one thing we know. It's apparently some kind of experimental aircraft ... like a rocket, or something. And, if it isn't one of ours..." Brice left it hang and Cartwell didn't pick it up.

For a few minutes they walked in silence through the dew splattered forests, homing in on the glow of yellow lights that winked at them through the branches. Finally they reached the rutted, dirt road that twisted along the stream bed toward the framed shape of the farm house. Cartwell broke the silence as they neared the place.

"Don't talk much about the wreck around these people, Nolan. They're nice folks, but simple natured. They plant by the phases of the moon and the biggest event in their lives is going to the state fair. They're Lancaster Dutch, recently imported, and they believe in the hex signs they painted on the barn."

Brice nodded. "Okay, John."

The farm couple were strangers to Brice, but their type was familiar. Pennsylvania was full of them. They were, as Cartwell had said, good people. They were farmers, about three jumps above the witchcraft believing stock that had given them birth and were hard to understand. They were the stay-at-home type, to whom Pittsburgh was the Far West, and if they were forced to move farther than fifty miles away from home, their relations screamed that they would never see them again.

The woman, whose name Nolan hadn't caught, was plain appearing, with no makeup and her hair pulled back into a severe knot at the base of her skull. From the moment she asked them in and poured their coffee, he liked her. In her own, slow way she was a fine person, but her world was the farm, her life was the soil.

"Have you found that poor pilot, yet?" She asked, setting the coffee before them.

"No, ma'am," Cartwell told her.

The heavy set woman made a clucking sound with her mouth. "Honest to true," she mused. "You'd wonder why a thing like that had to come to be." She sighed heavily. "There'll be some poor woman in tears tonight. D'you think he was married?"

"I don't know, ma'am," Cartwell said.

"It's the children that suffer..." she said softly and allowed the rest of what she was about to say trail off as Dickson came in. He smiled at the farmwife and she poured him a cup of coffee.

Dickson pulled off his hat. "I'd like to thank you," he told her, "for being so kind..."

The woman looked pleased and flustered at the same time; there was a tinge of flush about her face. "Bosh," she said, smiling. "It's the least a body can do. I know I'd feel real glad to have someone helping, were it my boy up there."

"Your boy flies?"

"He did." The woman looked a bit pained. "He was killed during the war."

"I'm sorry," Dickson said, and reached for a doughnut from the plate on the table.

A silence fell over them as they waited for the coming of dawn and a chance to really look the wreck over. Nolan was somehow glad to be spared of conversation with the others. He felt like a criminal, with the small gold watch in his coat pocket and he wanted to tell Dickson and Cartwell about the thing. But he couldn't. For the first time in his life he was delaying an investigation, hiding evidence. He was well aware of the whole thing, but he was also aware of what the presence of that watch meant. It was a personal thing now, and until he knew which way to go, he had to keep the watch a secret.

If Nick Danson had somehow come back in that wreck and, if they found no bodies, he would have gone to Beth ... the whole thing would be complicated beyond belief. What would such a thing do? What would happen to the woman he loved, if Nick Danson was back?

He stared moodily into the dark liquid in his coffee cup and wondered where it would all end.

CHAPTER SIX

Nick awoke to sunlight streaming into his face and had a momentary impression that it was dawn; then he realized that the sunlight had a reddish cast to it. He blinked at the bedroom clock, amazed to find that he had slept until late afternoon.

My God, he thought groggily.

His headache was nearly gone, he noticed as he threw off the covers and swung his long legs to the floor. The soreness was still there, thumping dully in his stiff muscles, but sleep had been deep and brought no fresh nightmares to worry about. He cleaned himself up in the bathroom and got a pair of slacks and a shirt from the closet, still feeling somewhat like a stranger. While he dressed himself, he thought of the woman he was married to.

Despite the feeling of being a stranger in a strange world, and of being caught up in a strange set of circumstances, he found himself feeling delightful tremors when he thought of Beth. Even now, there was a tight, fluttering sensation in his insides when he thought of the talcumed satin of her skin, the warm lift of her brightly nipples breasts and the strong response of her rounded thighs. She was a beautiful woman. She was sex all rolled up in a frame of gentle curves and soft flesh, and he could see that to love a woman like her would not only be easy, it would be a privilege.

He buckled the belt about his waist, trying to dispel the thoughts of the woman, and went downstairs to the kitchen. Hunger gnawed at him violently.

The coffee was cold. He turned the gas on under it and the note on the table caught his eye. He picked it up to scan it briefly.

DARLING,
HAD TO RUSH OFF TO WORK. KISSED YOU GOOD-BY AND
YOU SAID "GLUMPTH". BE HOME SOON. LOVE YOU TERRIBLY.
BETH

He grinned at the note, balled it into his fist and threw it into the paper can. When the coffee was hot, he poured himself a cup and fixed a couple of sandwiches with what was left of the package of cold meat. As he was finishing the last couple of bites of the sandwich, he heard the thud of the evening paper against the front door. For a moment, it startled him, then, when he had realized what it was, he was half out of the chair... He paused there momentarily, then sank back into his seat. He *couldn't* go out there and get the paper - if the neighbors saw him picking it up ... He sat there, waiting for Beth to come home, the suspense digging into his guts with ragged teeth. Had they found the plane? Were they onto him? Who were those two men? How did they know where to find him? Why were they looking for him?

He drank damned near the whole pot of coffee and watched the hands of the electric clock move with agonizing slowness. Finally, at five forty, Beth drove up to the house and came through the door. Nick leaped from the chair.

"The paper!" He snatched it from her hands and began tearing it open. Damn newsboys for folding them!

"Nick! Aren't you going to kiss me?"

"Huh? Oh." He kissed her briefly, fleetingly, and returned to the paper. The crash was on page one.

WRECKAGE OF PRIVATE AIRCRAFT FOUND

Everett, Pa. The smouldering wreckage of what was apparently a private plane was found late yesterday evening in the heavily wooded area north of the city by a young Boy Scout looking for a campsite.

Benjamin Talbot, aged 13, after locating the mangled aircraft, promptly called local police who dispatched Detective Lieutenant Nolan Brice, Everett Rescue Squad and FAA investigator Arron P. Dickson to examine the wreckage.

"It's the most unusual crash site I've ever seen," FAA investigator Dickson told local newsmen. "There's no evidence of wings or tail assembly. The fuselage is also of a strange design."

Detective Lieutenant Brice, after checking with the airport tower at Everett, and with CAP officials, informed newsmen that no private aircraft had been reported in trouble, or even over the particular area

in which the craft was found. "Of course," Lieutenant Brice added, "one plane may have gone unnoticed. This is highly unlikely, but we cannot overlook the possibility. What is puzzling, to me, is that the aircraft has not been identified and there have been no bodies found."

"The Civil Air Patrol," Mr. Dickson commented, "has been most cooperative and are now engaged in an air search of the area, while rescue squads work in the mountains."

Mr. Dickson went on to state that the mystery crash will be thoroughly investigated by authorities in an effort to determine the make and model of the plane, as well as the fate of its occupants.

At present, the crash site has been roped off and placed under guard by local Militiamen. Only authorized personnel will be allowed to view the wreckage. Major Gilbert Donnoue, of the Air Force Experimental Wing, refused to make a statement as to whether the plane was of Air Force origin. "To my knowledge, we have lost no test planes. However, an extensive check will undoubtedly be run to verify this."

Test plane? Nick stared in amazement at the words that leaped at him from the printed page. Test plane? What the hell was going on in this screwy world? No wings? No tail assembly? No Mayday calls? No record of the plane? The whole damned thing sounded ridiculous. Coupled with the fact that he had been out of touch for thirteen months, it all became weird.

And to top it all off, Nolan Brice was one of the men who had been placed on the investigating staff at the crash scene. Suppose he, Nick, had left something at the scene ... a fraternity pin, a slip of paper ... anything that would link the crash to the fact that he was alive and in Everett. The whole damned bunch would be on his tail, before you could say, "Jack Robinson." He...

"Nick," Beth pouted. "Will you pay a little attention to me for a change?"

"I'm sorry, honey, but it's the plane." While she listened he read the account aloud and, when he'd finished, they exchanged glances. "That's the plane I was in," he told her.

"But you don't know how to fly."

"I must know, unless someone else flew it. That's the plane I woke up beside. I must have been in the damned thing. But I don't know if anyone else was." He buried his face in his hands.

"Nick. Should we call the police?"

"No!"

Alarmed at his violent outburst, she put her hand on his shoulder to comfort him. "All right dear. I'm sorry."

"It'd been different, if those men weren't after me. I'd call the police if they weren't dogging my tracks. I'd turn myself in just to find out what the hell's going on."

"Me too," she said softly.

At first he didn't catch the meaning behind her words, then he blinked. "What?" He asked.

"The car, the black one. It followed me to work this morning." She paused, then added, "It didn't follow me home though."

Nick slammed the paper to the floor, his lean jaw muscles knotted in anger. "That settles it," he snapped. "I can face whatever I'm mixed up in, but there's no earthly reason why you should be subjected to it! I'll have to get out!"

Beth threw herself into his arms, the ever ready tears welling in her eyes. "No, Nick," she pleaded. "Whatever it is, we'll fight it. We'll make out, but darling, don't leave me again!"

He held her tightly against him, his hands stroking the warm softness of her back and spine. The perfume of her hair filled him with a heady thought of summer fields of flowers, of sweetness and tenderness, of ... love. Love. Nick Danson, he told himself, you *are* mixed up. You're falling in love with your own wife.

"... and we'll go away," Beth was whispering in his ear. "We'll pack everything and go far away, where we'll never see these men again. Nick. Please. Oh, please keep me with you."

"Going away won't settle anything, sweetheart. They'll always be there, just outside the door. I've got to do something..."

He broke off suddenly and it flicked into his mind like a film of the past, like a memory. The soft face of the girl, her hair a golden color against the backdrop of the ochre mountains ... the softness of the pale blue-green tree...

She spun away from him, the loose, filmy blue dress whirling about her trim ankles ... then she was coming back to him, arms outstretched ... kissing him lovingly...

He shut it off, clamped it from his mind. A memory! A memory that made no sense at all. A tremor of fear ran along his spine and trembled in his flesh. What did it mean? What was happening to him?

"Nick?" It was Beth. "What is it, Nick? You look pale and frightened."

"Nothing. We'll go away."

She beamed. "I know just the place. The cabin. Far up in the mountains. No one will know we're there. We'll learn to love each other again."

"You have to work," he pointed out.

She nodded. "That's true, still *you* could go up there and try to puzzle this all out. I can come up in the evenings, and on weekends."

"Might be a good idea," he admitted, thinking that at least, he'd be safe from prying eyes.

"Then it's settled. You go sit somewhere and I'll get things packed."

She whisked away, almost running up the stairs to pack some things for him. He walked to the kitchen, without turning on a light, and poured himself a glass of water. Outside, through the window, he could see the twilight fading into evening, the heavy purple clouds of night sweeping steadily across the sky. A star winked later and he knew it. Venus. He stood there in the darkness and picked out many of them as they flickered into being. Mars. Sirius, Vega and others. There were...

... She came into his arms and talk was insignificant and quite unnecessary. The soft, white arms wound about his neck, tugging fingers pulled playfully at his hair and she smiled at him. His lips moved down against hers and they were lost in themselves. He could feel the taut pressure of her breasts playing against his chest and the firm roundness of her thighs working against his.

Her strong fingers worked against the muscles of his shoulders, pulling him down onto the cottony moss beneath the strange tree. The small liteness of her body molded into his and his hands stroked her breasts beneath the filmy cloth that covered them. Her hands moved upward to the straps that swept over her shoulders and pulled them down. His eager fingers helped her, working the straps down until the firm mounds of her breasts lifted their rubbery, coral tipped nipples toward the sky. His fingers worked them, kneaded the warm muscles, while his mouth worked on hers. When he had released her lips, she pulled his face down into the twin cushions of her breasts. His hand moved against the flesh of her thighs, caressingly...

"Ready, dear?"

It was gone. Like that. A sudden flickering memory of some long vanished event that might have given him some hope. It had been fantastic again, the strange colors and the weird landscape, but he wanted it despite that. She had stolen it, ripped it viciously from his mind; but she was not to blame. He turned and smiled at her as she came into the kitchen.

She had turned on a soft light in the front room, but had allowed the kitchen to remain dark. In the half-light of the room, he thought that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. It would not be hard to love her, he thought again.

He reached out and took her by the shoulders, pulling her gently against him to kiss her. Her mouth moved against his, satiny with desire, until they parted.

"I'm ready, if you are," he said.

"For what, darling? The bedroom, or the car?"

He chuckled. "The car. The bedroom will keep until we're up in the woods."

CHAPTER SEVEN

In the glow of the headlights, the car swallowed the road voraciously and they moved toward the north country - not, he noticed, on route 87. They had not been seen leaving the city, nor had they been seen packing the car. The garage had a door that led into the kitchen, and Nick had laid on the back seat floorboards until they were in the country. Now, sitting in the front seat, he wondered vaguely if Beth, in her joy at having him home, had given herself away to her friends. He hoped not. He glanced sidewise at her and noticed that she drove with a smile on her face.

"Is it far to the cabin?" He asked.

"Not now. We're almost to the turn off."

He lapsed again into silence, the old questions still whirling about in his mind. Who were the men who were after him? What did they want? How much had the FAA learned of the plane? Had they found something to pin it on him? What were these tiny, fleeting thoughts that cropped up in his mind? Was his mind trying to tell him something via the nightmares? And what of his best friend, Nolan Brice. Where has he been? What is he up to? It struck Nick as odd that he had not encountered the detective yet: surely he and Beth had been close the past year. How close? Suppose Brice stumbled upon Andy Hocum. Would the old man talk?

Feeling more helpless than he had ever felt in his life, at least the life he remembered, Nick stared at the road until Beth turned off on another road that was little more than a wagon track beside a small creek. A few minutes of bouncing over ruts and stones, and she turned off again, parking beside a grey, frame cabin.

"Here we are, darling."

They got out, each taking a box from the back seat, and Nick followed her up the stairs to the porch. Beth set her box down and found the key. A moment later the lock clicked and she shoved the door open.

"Wait'll I find the light, Nick," she whispered.

A moment later, the light snapped on and a soft glow filled the front room of the cabin. They took the boxes to the kitchen and set them on the table, then went back into the front room. Nick studied the place.

He liked the room a lot; there was a rugged manliness in the stone fireplace and the knotty pine walls, mingled with just a touch of Beth's femininity to make it neat. All in all, it was a well laid out place. He was attracted to the oil paintings that hung about the walls.

"Like it?" Beth asked.

He nodded.

"But it doesn't bring back any memories?"

"No. Hell, honey, I can't even remember what I did for a living."

She smiled sadly. "Want to see?"

When he nodded, she motioned him to the other side of the front room and opened the door. She flicked on the light and he stepped into a small study filled with the trappings of an artist. Tubes of paint lay on small tables, beside cans of turpentine, lacquer and old paint rags. A half finished nude adorned one of the heavy easels. There were a few water color sketches laying around as well as several oils.

"Want to see some of your favorite models?"

He nodded numbly, and she drew open a drawer in the table and pulled out four fairly large oil paintings done on commercial painting boards.

The first two were of Beth, one a nude and the other a semi-nude, with only her lovely breasts exposed. The second two paintings were of a girl who was not familiar at all. In the first picture, a portrait, she was seated before a table, contemplating a vase of flowers. A rather good looking girl with jet black hair and a soft, warm looking face. The next painting was of the same girl, but this time she had been painted as a Hawaiian dancer and her skin was a trifle darker. She was a pretty girl, but her face and nicely formed body didn't ring a bell.

"Who is she?" He asked.

"Her name is Janet Holman. She lives about four or five miles from here, on her father's farm." Beth nodded toward the green filing cabinet in the corner. "You have her file over there with your records. Doesn't any of this ring a bell, darling?"

"No."

She looked at him sadly, her face mirroring the way she felt. "I hope it'll come back, darling."

He reached out and pulled her to him, holding her tight. "It'll come back," he whispered. "C'mon. I want to build a fire in that fireplace. It's cool in here, even if it is summer."

They went back out into the front room and, while Beth found some kindling, Nick wadded up some newspapers and stuffed them in the fireplace. When she brought it in, he lighted the stuff and after it was going good, he added a couple of logs. He snapped off the light and grinned at her.

"I like firelight," he told her. "It's restful."

She smiled back at him. "Restful? I think it's sexy." She had kicked off her pumps and was lying before the glow of the hearth on the thick rug. He arranged the mesh screen before the fire and laid down beside her.

"Sexy, huh?"

"Uh huh. I don't know, darling ... the warmth of the fire warms me up, I guess."

He grinned and dropped his head to the cushions of her breasts. Her fingers played in his hair.

"I'm glad," he told her.

"You used to be. That used to be our favorite way of spending an evening."

"Laying in front of a fire?" Nick asked.

"Not just *any* fire, darling. This particular fire, sans clothes."

"Sounds like fun," he mused and rolled over to kiss the ripe redness of her lips. Her tongue stabbed a blade of passion at him and her arms pulled him close; then, after a moment, she shoved him away and stood up.

He propped himself on one elbow and looked at her. Her smile was impish as she unfastened the buttons of the white blouse and pulled it from the waistband of the navy blue skirt. Her fingers unhooked the snaps of the bra and dropped it to the floor beside the blouse. The firelight was golden against the swelling lift of her breasts and the flat expanse of her stomach. Nick felt the thundering beginning again to slam through his veins with the holocaust of a napalm bomb exploding against the ground as she unzipped the skirt and dropped it into a puddle on the thick rug. He watched in pounding fascination as she stepped daintily from the whorl of the skirt, clad only in the pinkish transparency of her panties. Then they too were a thing of the past, and Beth was smiling down at him, passion spearing from her eyes.

"Will I still do?" She asked.

"Do what?" He croaked.

"You know?" She laughed at him, kneeling on the rug. "Will I still do as a model?"

He laid down flat and chuckled. "A model, sweetheart, is a small imitation of the real thing. You don't look imitation to me." He reached up and grabbed her arm to pull her down with him onto the rug, but she jerked away.

"Oh, no, you don't. You have to undress too."

He grinned at her and peeled off his clothes quickly. She came into his arms then and they made love, letting the glowing warmth of the fire caress them hotly. His hands smoothed her breasts while his mouth worked at the fire that was coming to life throughout her body.

"Just like old times?" He asked, softly.

"Better, darling ... much better."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sometime near midnight, Beth took the car and went home. Nick poured a cup of the coffee she had made for him and went back into the study to look at the paintings a second time. It was good, professional work, and he wondered if he could do the same stuff again. Hell, he decided, it'll be a long time until I get back at an easel. He finished the coffee and went up to bed.

It took awhile to get to sleep. Thoughts of the wrecked plane, Beth, the strange men and Nolan Brice kept running around in his head without finding answers to the enigmas they presented to him. Finally he slept.

He was looking at himself, in the dream, but it was not in a mirror. He was standing inside a polished room and the other Nick Danson lay on a bed wrapped in sleep. Nick blinked at the still duplicate of himself on the bed and turned away to look at the room he was in. It wasn't large. It appeared to be some kind of bedroom, and it was well lighted although there were no lights to be seen; the walls seemed to glow, and everything was of a bright metal. The mirror caught his eye and he saw himself in the same blue and yellow uniform that he'd worn before. The Danson who lay asleep on the bed was dressed in blue dress pants and a white shirt. The tie had been loosened at his throat and his clothing was wrinkled badly.

Suddenly the other Danson opened his eyes and looked at Nick. For a moment he appeared to be startled at seeing him, then he smiled. The smile erupted in a chuckle that became a laugh. The other Danson's face grew large and full, roaring out laughter at Nick until the whole scene changed from one of odd curiosity to one of absolute horror, the kind of weird horror that can come only from peals of loud, echoing laughter rolling through the caverns of the mind.

Nick awoke gasping, his fingers knotted in the sheets of the bed and a cold sweat beading out upon his face. His heart hammered in his chest like a drum, threatening to leap to his throat at any moment. He looked around anxiously for Beth, but the silence of the room reminded him that she had gone back to the city and her job. Dawn was breaking and the dim light filtered through the unwashed windows. There was little point in trying to sleep now. Might as well get his clothes on and try to start unraveling a long thread of odd events.

He pulled on his clothes slowly and slid his feet into his shoes, wondering where to begin the climb back to himself. It would be bad enough for an amnesia victim to regain all his memory if given an unlimited length of time - this way, with people closing in on all sides, the whole damned thing seemed impossible.

He hooked the last button on his shirt, stuffed it into his pants, and headed for the kitchen. He warmed up last night's coffee and it tasted like warm sulfuric acid, but it brought him around to full consciousness, even if his stomach did object to it.

When he had finished the coffee, he found the library in the den and began reading a few of the titles; often, he remembered, a lot could be told from a man by his reading habits. There were books by Bridgeman, Zaindenburg and Loomis, almost everything on the shelves pertained to art in some form or another - except for the last row. There were about fifteen science fiction volumes, mostly collections of short stories, from Asimov to A.E. van Vogt. He had a fleeting idea to start reading the stuff in an effort to determine whether or not his strange dreams came from somewhere within the pages, then he rejected it. It would take a hell of a long while to even skim through that mass of literature and he didn't have the time.

He shoved a copy of H. Beam Piper back onto the shelf and straightened. To hell with it. He had the whole house to search, before he started fumbling through something as far out as science fiction. He started rummaging through the various rooms of the place with systematic carefulness. Hoping...

When he finished the search, it was noon. He knew a lot about the cabin, but damned little about himself. The cramped, dismal attic contained what was left of pictures, odd bits of furniture and clothes after the local field mice and porcupines had their annual convention up there. The three bedrooms revealed nothing except the usual gear to be found in any bedroom, and of the downstairs section of the place, only the art studio and the combination den-library was of interest. And even these places shed no light upon the ghost of the man that haunted him. The studio contained all of the trappings of an

artist, even though it was in rather battered up shape, and the den was a wall to wall replica of what a woodsman might have owned. There were the books, the stuffed heads and, of course, the guns.

The rack, on the far side of the room, contained a table with bullet loading equipment scattered around it, with cans of DuPont powder on the floor. Above it, in the gun rack were the weapons - enough to hold off a small revolution. There were two handguns and three rifles and a shotgun. He looked them over.

A Smith and Wesson .38, model 36 and a Ruger Blackhawk .44 Magnum that looked like the old peacemaker model. One of the rifles was a Marlin saddle carbine, model 336 and the other was a Winchester African rifle with a .458 bore. The last gun on the rack was a Stevens .410 single barrel shotgun. Nick grinned at the arsenal and took the .44 magnum down from the rack to clean it. It wasn't in too bad of shape, even for as long as it had remained idle; even the western style holster and gunbelt contained enough oil to make them pliable.

He slipped the magnum into the holster and buckled the gunbelt about his waist, letting it hang a little on the right side. To hell with it, he thought. If those two characters show up now, at least I'll have an edge. He pulled five .44 Special slugs from the belt and loaded the weapon, being careful to see that the hammer hung on the empty chamber. Then he decided to see how good he was.

Where the hill rose sharply for a small distance behind the house, Nick found a good area where he could test his marksmanship. He lined up five cans, a few feet apart, at the base of the rise and snapped off five fast shots at them as quick as the single action would operate. Either amnesia had nothing to do with a man's gun knowledge, or he was a natural. All five cans were blown to hell and sent skittering against the side of the hill. Stunned, but satisfied, he reloaded the revolver and dropped it back into the holster.

He prowled the grounds about the cabin with the aimlessness of a man looking for something but not sure what. Beyond the lawn furniture and the shed that contained his tools, the only other interesting thing was the creek. A fast running little stream, barely a foot deep but filled with numerous little holes that bragged of trout. He walked along the gurgling water for a ways, then he went back to the house, still unsure of what to do.

He went back to the cabin and shoved the door open and stopped dead!

She was just like the painting. Her raven black hair hung loose and free while, beneath the scant confines of the shorts and halter, the warm flesh rose and fell temptingly. Nick stood there, unable to say a word. It was Janet and the light in her eyes made him wonder what kind of a guy he'd been more than ever. She gave a little gasp of pure pleasure and flung herself into his arms, planting the ripe sweetness of her lips squarely on his.

"Janet," he managed, but she had a strangle hold on him.

CHAPTER NINE

"Russian?" Brice asked, looking at Sam Morgan.

The dark complected Fed pulled the mangled cigar from his mouth and pointed it toward the twisted wreckage. On the far side, Cartwell and Dickson were looking it over.

"Why not?" Morgan asked.

"It seems outlandish, somehow."

Morgan grinned, his peg-like teeth flashing. "You small town cops are good. I won't take that from you. But you look at everything from a local viewpoint. In our business, you broaden, you might say.

"Look at the facts, Nolan. The Defense boys spotted the thing up north. Radar locked on it and gave it a speed of over two thousand miles per. So it crashes and we find no wings, no tail assembly ... and I have the hunch that the damned thing ran on nuclear power."

"Atomic?" Nolan whispered, amazed. While the Federal cop talked about nuclear power and fantastic speeds, all Brice could think of was the watch he'd found at the scene. How the hell could an artist learn to pilot a thing like that in a mere thirteen months, and what the hell was behind it all. "You mean, atomic power?"

Morgan nodded. "See that funnel shaped gismo over there, with the round ball-like affair?" He was pointing to what was probably the tail of the ship, at least it was not the section that had absorbed the smash into the ground.

Nolan nodded.

"That's a nuclear reactor," Sam went on. "Uncle Sam doesn't have anything in the air with that kind of power. I think we're testing a few engines, but nothing flying yet."

"Then it is Russian?"

"That's my guess. No other country would build it. Oh, Great Britain could, but if it was one of theirs, they would have plastered the red and blue targets on it. Offhand, it looks to me like a glorified version of the old U-2 thing, only on their side."

Brice didn't answer. He stared at the wreckage as though it were some sort of demon, while a million thoughts burst in his brain. Nick Danson was in this? He flew it? Where did he get it? How did he get it? Was it Russian? Was Nick a Russian spy?

He tried to cover the amazement on his face by lighting a cigarette. "How come it didn't develop into a pint sized Hiroshima, if it has atomic power in it?"

Morgan grinned at him, as though he was a kid. "I said it was powered by atomic energy, not atomic bombs. There's a kind of difference in..."

"Hey, Sam! C'mere!"

Both of the men turned to look across the twisted mass of wreckage to where Cartwell and Dickson were standing. The blond Fed was holding up a piece of the wreckage and his face glowed with excitement that he didn't try to cover.

"C'mon, Nolan," Sam grinned. "Let's go see what my buddy dug up ... I'll bet it's a Russian manufacturer's trade mark."

They skirted the wreck and trotted up to where Cartwell stood with the piece of metal. "Russian, huh?" asked Sam.

"Russian, hell," Cartwell snorted. "It looks like a cross between Chinese and Arabic."

Sam took the piece and looked at it, the cigar clamped belligerently in his jaws. After a tense moment, he grunted noncommittally and passed the thing to Nolan Brice.

He knew nothing of Russian, Chinese or Arabic, but he knew what Chinese characters looked like. The imprinted marks on the metal bore a certain resemblance to the Chinese language, but yet were not the same. It consisted of strange marks that were like nothing Brice had ever seen before.

"There are similar markings on the control panel," Dickson said into the silence.

"Crap," Sam Morgan snorted. "I say Russian. How about you, partner?"

Cartwell furled his blond brows. "I think I'd rather let an expert look this piece over before I make any kind of guess as to where that wreck flew from." He turned to Nolan. "Where can we find an expert, Brice?"

"Everett College would be the only place I know of."

"Okay, we'll give them a try. Where's Lieutenant Peters?"

Morgan jerked a thumb over his shoulder toward the other side of the clearing. "Over there," he said, "dressing down one of his Weekend Warriors."

"Sam. How about going over and remind him to keep any characters off the site. I have a horror of having the news boys scoop us on this."

Sam nodded and took off to talk with the Army. Dickson looked at Cartwell.

"Anything for me?" he asked.

"No. Just continue with your investigators. You can make the arrangements about having this thing hauled down to Everett, but check with me before you do. Okay?"

Dickson nodded.

"C'mon, Brice," Cartwell said. "Let's get Morgan and find out what the college professors can tell us about this screwy thing."

They wrapped the piece of metal in Cartwell's jacket and the three of them headed through the forest toward the road in the valley.

Professor Nichols was a wisp of a man who peered at them through small, bright eyes nearly hidden in fleshy folds. Although his body was about the shortest Brice had ever seen on a man, the brain beneath his crop of white hair had made him a giant. A linguist all his life, Professor Nichols spoke a dozen languages fluently, in addition to reading and writing them. Brice knew him by reputation and grinned at him as he came into the empty Dean's office.

"Gentlemen?" He favored them with a smile. "I'm Nichols. Doctor Bendtolz said you wanted to speak with me."

Brice introduced himself and the Federal men and, after a round of handshaking, Cartwell handed the chunk of metal to the professor.

"We'd like to know about the writing, Professor," Sam put in.

Nichols examined the etching on the metal for some time before he looked up. His small eyes searched their faces in turn, then he smiled thinly as though witnessing a very bad gag.

"Are you gentlemen playing some sort of joke?" he asked.

"The Government doesn't pay us to play jokes," Cartwell informed him cryptically. "Do you know the language?"

Professor Nichols shook his head. "I know every spoken language in the world, and I know many of the dead languages at least by sight. I don't know this one."

"You're serious?"

The old man nodded. "This must be some sort of jest on me. There is no language on Earth, dead or alive, that matches this."

"We aren't joking, Professor," Nolan said seriously.

"Then, my friend, someone must be playing a joke on you. No linguist can identify this language. I'll stake my reputation on that. Where did you get this?"

Cartwell smiled. "I'm sorry, professor, but we cannot disclose that information. We'll also have to ask you to forget about it. Government business, you know."

"Yes, of course. Is there anything else? I have a class in three minutes..."

"No, that's all. Thank you, Professor Nichols."

"You're welcome. Good day, gentlemen."

As the door closed behind him, a thick silence fell over the three men. Cartwell looked out the window and pulled at his lower lip with a blunt thumb and forefinger; Nolan sat on the edge of a desk, looking at the strange writing as an ethnologist might stare at the bones of the missing link.

"What now?" Sam asked, softly. "Call in a Martian to get his opinion?"

"It's not funny, Sam."

"Don't I know it," Sam shot back. "We've got some kind of tiger by the tail in this case ... a tiger bigger than the Kremlin, and I'm wondering how this will all sound in a report to the capital."

Cartwell snorted and ran a hand through his blond hair. "I'll let you write the report, Sam."

"You go to hell. I like my job and I don't want to get booted out because of a science fiction twist on an otherwise normal investigation."

"What's the next move?" Nolan asked, trying to ignore the sinking feeling in his stomach.

Cartwell shrugged. "Go back to the wreck, I guess and try to figure out something."

Sam suddenly slammed his fist on the table and several textbooks danced.

"John," he exploded. "You *know* what this means, don't you? If the professor's right, and this gibberish on this chunk of metal *isn't* an Earth language, then we got problems! You know what we got up there? We got a Flying Saucer! A space ship!"

"Oh, my God, Sam cut it out! I don't believe in the damned things, I refuse to."

Sam snickered. "It looks to me as though you haven't any choice in the matter. It's like refusing to believe in a Ford V-8; it don't make any difference whether you believe it or not, it's there."

"Jesus," Cartwell said softly.

"And that isn't the payoff. We didn't find a body in the wreckage. Unless that ship traveled by remote control, it had a pilot who is wandering around the country right now. I can see it now. A wounded little green man running around trying to hitch a ride back to Mars. It'd be funny if it wasn't so damned serious."

Cartwell nodded at his partner. "We'd better get back up there to the site. Maybe the air search or the rescue squads picked something up. Coming, Brice?"

Nolan forced a grin. "With little green men running around?" Then he became serious. "I'll be up a little later. I have something to do down here."

Morgan snorted as they headed for the door. "See if you can locate a Buck Rogers ray gun. We might need it."

They went back to their cars and Nolan Brice wedged himself behind the wheel but he didn't start the engine. He sat there, instead, watching the Government men drive off down the street, his mind whirling with a million jangling thoughts that tore through him viciously. Flying saucers, Martians, little green men! The whole damned thing was impossible, ridiculous...

But true. A man just couldn't sit down and say "I refuse to believe in lightning." It didn't make sense. You had to believe what your mind told you ... and his mind was telling him wild things.

It all fit. Hell, it fit with a perfection that was absolutely fantastic, but crazy enough to be the truth. Nick Danson, commercial artist, disappeared thirteen months ago and every police agency in the country can't locate him. It was as if the earth had opened and swallowed him; but it hadn't been the earth, it had been the sky. *They* had done it ... the Martians, or whatever the hell they were.

Why? Why steal a Terran?

To replace him? To send an alien being down to take the place of the Terran they had stolen. That took care of the confusion the watch had represented. For awhile it had looked as though Nick had piloted that space ship, but now Nolan knew better. It wasn't Nick. It was an alien!

Beth!

Had an alien, posing as Nick, located Beth and was now engaged in using her to help in whatever they had come here to do? How many other Missing Persons cases were wrapped up in this thing? How many aliens were walking the streets of earth right now? To hell with that, Nolan, he roared at himself. The important thing is Beth. You've got to find out about this thing and stop it, before something happens to her.

He started the car, slammed it into gear and gunned it out onto the street, the tires screaming a protest...

CHAPTER TEN

Janet was more than a beautiful woman and a good model. She was white heat and surging womanhood all dolled up in a body like that of a French movie star. She was as wanton as a Polynesian dancer and as demanding as a nympho. Lying there beside her relaxed nakedness, Nick Danson felt like another man - a tired one.

He laid his hand over the swelling rise of her breast and slid it down the flat velvet of her stomach. She made a small sound in her throat and kissed him on the cheek with lips like branding irons.

"I'm glad you have amnesia," she cooed against his ear.

"Why, for God's sake?"

She snuggled the curling warmth of her body against him and chuckled. "Because of this. You used to kiss me, but that was all. I wanted more, but not you."

He blinked at the ceiling at her words. She'd tricked him! It was a nice trick, but still she'd cheated. All the time he'd figured that she was some sort of mistress, or something - obviously that's what *she* had wanted, but in his other life he'd never given her a tumble. It was funny, in a way.

"You mean ... we never..."

"Nope." She chuckled again. "Aren't I a rat?"

"Vixen, is more like it."

"That's a good word. I like it. Janet Vixen. How would you like to kiss Janet Vixen, Nick Danson?"

"Suppose I get another knock on the head," he suggested, "and I lose the memory of all this, too? Then what?"

"I won't embarrass you in front of company. C'mon, kiss me again, stranger!"

He rolled over and kissed her again and, tired or not, he could feel the desire surging through him again. Her small hands moved over the muscles of his shoulders, digging into his flesh, her teeth nibbling at his neck. Janet was one of those odd women who can't seem to take a darned thing serious. No matter what the risks were involved, to her making wild love was a hell of a lot of fun and that was that. He had the hunch that if he tried to get serious with her - marriage serious - she'd bounce him fast. But hell, it was impossible to think of things like that with her, besides he was having too much fun. If, he thought later, you can call it fun when you're so weak you can't move.

"I have to go, lover," she said finally. "Beth might come up, and I think she would be apt to get a little put out if she caught us in bed."

"That's putting it mildly," he grinned. "Besides, I have to start trying to find out about myself."

"Do me a favor and don't." She pecked him lightly on the lips. "I like the new Nick Danson a hell of a lot better. C'mon. Snap my bra."

They climbed out of bed and he helped her into her shorts and halter. She kissed him lightly again, said; "Good-by, lover," and bounced out into the hall, leaving him standing there, naked in the bedroom.

What a world, he thought for the hundredth time and began to gather his clothes. When he started to put his pants on, his wallet dropped from the hip pocket and flopped open on the floor. He picked it up, his eyes absently noticing the card that was exposed in the clear, plastic window. It was a Selective Service Registration Certificate and someone had written "small scar on right forearm" under the column for general markings. Absently he glanced at his right forearm, then his eyes widened in shock.

There was no scar!

A man cannot lose a scar, he told himself. He checked the card again. It was his, made out to Nicholas Howard Danson; but the scar was missing. He searched his arm and it wasn't there. The full realization of the whole thing struck him suddenly like a punch in the mouth. He was *not* Nicholas Howard Danson!

Who was he? What the hell was going on? Had he killed the real Danson because they were obviously look alike, and stolen the guy's I.D. Why? Was he escaping from some kind of crime? Was he a criminal, and what did the strange dreams have to do with it?

Numbly he climbed into the rest of his clothes and made damned sure the .44 magnum was loaded when he strapped it on. His hands shook uncontrollably and he felt trapped. It would only be a matter of time before

those people at the wreck figured out the whole story and came howling after him. He had to get out.

The screech of car brakes startled him and he leaped to the window. A police car was in the lane and a single, plainclothes cop was getting out. It could only be Nolan. He watched as Brice pulled his Police Positive from the speed rig and headed toward the house. Then Nick hauled out his magnum and slammed it into the window.

Brice dived behind a bush as the magnum threw a .44 slug that barely missed the cop. The .38 barked back and Nick ducked the splinters as the bullet chipped the window frame.

"Come out, you fool," Brice roared.

"You go to hell," Nick yelled and fired again. "Who tipped you off, Nolan? Beth?"

"You left Danson's watch where your flying saucer cracked up!" Brice snapped another shot at the window.

Flying saucer? Nick blinked. What the hell was that stupid cop talking about?

"What'd you do with Nick," Brice roared.

Nick let the magnum answer for him, not trusting his voice. In the few seconds that followed Nick, in his nervous excitement, emptied the revolver at Brice, but never even grazed him. He cursed and began thumbing cartridges into the Ruger. He was almost finished, when Nolan caught onto the maneuver and decided to come in closer. He stood up and began sprinting toward the house. Nick had just yanked the hammer of the gun back to fire as Brice came into the open but he never made it.

Suddenly, in the middle of the yard, Detective Lieutenant Nolan Brice disappeared into thin air! Nick heard him yell for help, but he could see nothing. The yelling kept going straight up into the air until it grew faint in the distance.

Nick stared dumbfoundedly at the area where the cop had suddenly faded out of sight. What the hell was going on in this screwy place? Then he heard the shout below him and he twisted to stare at the borders of the small creek. It was the two men from Andy Hocum's gas station - the blond giant and the sandy haired guy. Panicky, Nick snapped off a shot and the blond dived for cover.

"The dumb bastard is shooting," the blond yelled to his companion several yards away. "Let's get the hell out of here, before he hits something!"

He got a brief glimpse of them as they took off through the brush and snapped a shot at them to hurry them along, just as Beth's car rocked up the rutty road and braked beside the police car. She leaped out yelling for him and he went down the stairs to meet her, the gun still in his hand.

Her face was drained of color as she came into the house, the red of her lips looking even more red against the pale wash of her face. "Nick! Where's Nolan?"

"I..."

"Oh, my God, Nick! Have you killed him?"

"I couldn't hit him," Nick told her. "I emptied the magnum at him and he disappeared into the air." His eyes had a wild look in them, "Right into the air," he added inanely. Everything was so balled up. Everything was crazy. He wasn't Nick Danson ... he didn't know his name ... Brice vanished into thin air ... the two guys were dogging his tracks ... women came out of the woodwork to make love to him. What the hell else could possibly happen?

Beth was staring at him. "You killed him," she breathed.

"No, no! He vanished. He vanished ... honest to God, I never even came close to hitting him. I might as well have thrown rocks."

"Men do not disappear into thin air," she said.

"Listen, forget that for a minute. How'd he know I was here?"

She sank wearily onto a chair and looked at him. "He found the watch I gave you a few years ago. It was lying at the crash site. He came to the office where I work and asked about you. I denied that I knew you were back and he began to yell at me about my life being in danger and that I should stay away from you until he had a chance to put a bullet into you. My God, Nick! What have you done?"

"I dunno," he lied. Should he tell her that he was not her husband, that he didn't have the foggiest notion of who he was? He decided against it. "How'd he know where to find me?"

She sighed. "He helped you build the place. Now where is he?"

"Goddammit, Beth, I told you! How many times do I have to tell you that he vanished!"

"Stop yelling at me!"

"Then believe me! It happened! I saw it happen, and I wasn't seeing things! Go out and look. If you can find his body out there, I'll eat it."

She uttered a little cry and came into his arms, holding him tightly. "Oh, darling, I want to believe you. I want very much to believe you; but men can't vanish."

"Brice did."

"All right. If you say he did. All right. Now what?"

"I don't know. I have to think. I have to try and remember what happened to me. It's the only way that this crazy whirl will make sense, and it has to make sense. It has to."

She nodded. "Let's go into the room. I want to be with you tonight. Let me have the gun, dear?"

He stared at her, his jaws knotted. "You think I'm nuts, don't you? You think I'm crazy."

"Darling, darling, of course not. But I wish you'd give me the gun."

Resignedly he unstrapped the gun and gave it to her. He shrugged. "I don't blame you. Hell, I think I'm crazy too."

She didn't argue the point.

They both went into the front room and sat there staring into the ashes of the dead fireplace while dusk fell about the cabin. Finally Beth started the fire. When she had finished, she bent and kissed him.

"Why don't we get some sleep, honey," she said. "That may help."

"I'll be up later," he told her and she kissed him again. Then she went to bed.

How long he sat there he had no way of knowing, but the fire was steadily dying. The thoughts hammered in his head and he became lost in them, trying mentally to find the key that would tear away the veil and grant him a peek at his past. Bits and snatches had filtered through, garbled and incoherent, that had tried to shed light yet could not. And, while he leaned toward one conclusion, drawn from the dreams, he felt it too fantastic for belief.

He was so absorbed in his thinking that he never heard the door open slowly. When he did hear the soft tread behind him, it was too late! A handkerchief of chloroform was clamped strongly over his face! He struggled, trying to get away from the hands that held him, but he was powerless! The chloroform got to him. He couldn't breathe...

He slept.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The ship came to rest upon a flat, ochre colored plain beside a brilliant white city encased in thick, heavy walls. There was a dull pain in his head and fire in his leg, but he was alive. He lay limply upon the bed while Firstspacer Narvi plied him with honeywine to dull the pain.

He grinned, studying the blond giant's warm, friendly face. He was among friends; the tall, yellow eyed Thistians had failed to kill him and Narvi had whisked him away into the violet sky.

"Thought we'd lost you, Lors," Narvi grinned. "You almost did," he replied, choking on the Thista honeywine. "Haven't you anything else, something from Darkkan?"

"Sorry, friend," Narvi grinned, "but you can be glad to get this. The 36th Command has been drinking up even this stuff. I'll see you later, in the hospital."

"All right, Narvi." The big man started away, but Lors stopped him by grabbing his blue sleeve. "Narvi?"

"Yes."

"Thanks. Thanks a lot."

Firstspacer Narvi punched him playfully on the arm and left the compartment. The medical men came in then, hooking the anti-gravity capsules to the bed and setting them into motion. The cot-like stretcher lifted and the men towed him out to the freight elevator. As they stowed him into the ambulance, he could see Narvi's staff car skimming toward the Commandant's building to make out his report.

No doubt Commandant Imry would be coming to see him, later on.

Nick groaned. Another dream that was beginning to clear things up a little...

"He's coming around." The words were not English, but Nick understood them.

The big blond cursed softly. "Speak English, Thesa. Someone might hear you!"

"There hasn't been anyone around this farm in months," Thesa replied, lapsing into English. "But if you're getting particular, don't call me Thesa."

Nick opened his eyes and blinked at them. It was the two watch dogs, the blond and his sandy haired friend. The giant was grinning at him.

"Hello," he beamed. "Remember me?"

"No! Who in hell are you?" Nick struggled to get out of the chair he'd been dumped in, but was pushed back firmly.

"When you didn't report, we went out to find you. The old guy at the gas station covered up for you, so we had to watch Beth's house. Used all kinds of tricks, Lors. Why in the blue heaven didn't you make contact?"

"You're Narvi!" Nick stared with wide eyes. "You're the man in the dream!"

"Dream? Say, what's wrong with you, Lors? You refuse to report, you take pot shots at us... That crash was a bad thing; don't tell me your head..."

"Narvi," Thesa put in quickly. "The crash! He was lucky to get out of it alive. Maybe he can't remember what went on. That right, Lors?"

Nick stared at them and foggy pictures swung vaguely into his mind. Galaxies of stars whirled about, silver ships streaking in the sky and tiny points of light whipping across ochre deserts. Men in blue uniforms drilling beneath a violet sky in the heat of a solar wafer splotched above them. It was real! The fears he had had, the crazy alternative that the dreams presented to him ... it was all real.

"It wasn't a dream," Nick muttered, shaking his head like a punch-drunk fighter. "I really am Firstspacer Lors! And I know you! I know you!"

"Take it easy, boy," Narvi said softly. "You've had a bad time. I might have known you *couldn't* report to us. Thesa, get some water! He looks as though he's going to pass out!"

"I'm all right, I'm all right." He looked at Narvi and the memories, at least a few of them, came fluttering into place. The temporary amnesia slipped aside and the veil began to rise.

"You're sure you're all right, Lors?"

"Yes, Narvi. Things are beginning to make sense. Tell me about what I'm

doing here.”

Narvi cursed angrily. “Commander Imry, the stupid thistlebug! It’s all his fault! All this fouled up thing is his doing. It would have been bad enough even without your ship crashing; that just added to it. Luckily, Imry has been ordered back. Someone back home heard of his idiotic plan and the government is yelling for his hide.”

“What plan? I ... can’t...”

Thesa came in with a glass of water and handed it to Lors, who sipped at it slowly while the big blond explained things to him. While Narvi talked, it all began to come into sharp focus in his mind.

“After you and I finished campaigning on Darkkan and Thista, we applied for assignment in this galaxy. They wanted to split us up, at first,” Narvi grinned, “but we got mad, so they left us together and we were shipped here under old Commander Imry. After a couple of years, Terran time, studying on Mars we became agents on this planet. I got an easy one here with Thesa, but Imry had bigger plans for you. Damn him!”

“But why are we spying on these people, Narvi? For war?”

“I hope not. The Terrans are getting close to space travel, and you know what that would do to our colonies in this galaxy. They’re entering a primitive Atomic civilization and they’re like little children playing with weapons. Oh, they’re serious enough, but they’re so damned careless they’re likely to ruin the planet in atomic wars...”

“Sounds like the ancient history of our own planet,” Lors said softly. The memories were coming in faster now.

“True. And you know what happened to us? Damned near lost the whole planet. Anyhow, you know the other planets in this galaxy? Well, since Terra has a life form like ours, we could use this place as a link in the supply chain. That is our main purpose. Trade.

“But these people have a strange attitude. Why, if we would land a ship now, they’d rip us to shreds before you knew it. These people fear what they don’t understand, and anything they can’t understand they kill. So, right now, we’re sending agents, or spies, down here with instructions to probe about. They’re coming along rather well, getting out of the trees, you might say; but we’ll have to keep an eye on them for awhile yet.”

Lors finished the water. “But what has this got to do with Commander Imry and me? Apparently I was to take the place of Nick Danson, but why?”

“That was Imry. You see, many times our agents are handicapped by the very lives they lead. In order to learn about people, one has to live with them; when our agents do this, they have to get jobs and settle down in one area. Imry picked Danson because he’s a footloose artist who paints illustrations for magazines. All he had to do was snatch Danson, work a little plastic surgery on you and put you in Nick Danson’s place. You then, would not be confined and could roam all over the planet without being questioned.”

“That’s crazy,” Lors told him. “I couldn’t take Danson’s place for the rest of my life. He was gambling on a hell of a lot.”

Narvi grunted. “You’re a good spacer, Lors. You follow orders, even when they’re dictated by a madman. When you left the ship, you *were* Danson. You were processed so beautifully that no one could tell the difference. When you cracked up, a blow on the head, or something, must have created a temporary amnesia and you thought you *were* Danson. We certainly had a time locating you. Anyhow, you’re to go back to the ship as soon as you can. The new commander wants to talk with you.” Narvi grinned slyly. “I imagine you’ll want to talk to him too. It’s Zark, our old friend from Thista.”

“Zark. Yes. I remember him.” Lors stood up and paced the room in thought. He remembered grey haired, friendly Zark, but more than that, he remembered Commander Zark’s beautiful, blond daughter, Jela. “I remember a lot now, Narvi. It’s too bad they didn’t send him sooner. Things wouldn’t be so messed up.”

“It’s not so bad.”

“No?”

“No. You’ll probably be going back to the home planet now.”

“I can’t go back,” Lors mused. “I have to stay and see this through. It’s personal, now.”

“Personal?” Narvi was clearly puzzled. “What can be personal about a Spacer and an alien race?”

He looked at his friend levelly. “I can’t leave this planet, Narvi, because of Beth Danson. I’m in love with her.”

“Love!” Narvi exploded.

CHAPTER TWELVE

In the heavy silence that followed, the two men stared at one another. Lors regarded his friend with matter-of-fact calmness, but Narvi's mouth was open in astonishment. The situation wasn't covered in the manual.

"Love," Narvi choked finally. "With an alien? You must be joking."

"I'm serious."

"That blow on the head must have been solid as a rock."

Thesa just stared, without speaking.

"Beth is a wonderful woman and I'm in love with her. If the blow on the head did that ... well then, I'm glad the ship cracked up."

"But, Lors! She's an alien! It's like a farmer, falling in love with his stock! It's crazy! You couldn't live on this planet the rest of your life, and she couldn't live with you!"

Lors shrugged.

"What about Jela," Narvi demanded swiftly.

He didn't answer him. Memories of the blond woman with the trim ankles, the slim waist and the large breasts floated back to him; memories of the many evenings they'd shared walking along the sand under the stars. He sat there fingering the thoughts as they rolled past, without feeling anything. He was aware, finally, that Narvi was speaking to him.

"... know how you feel, Lors, but forget it. You could never work anything out. Go on back to Jela and forget about this alien. It doesn't matter how wonderful she is; probably nothing short of killing her husband would gain her for you."

Lors smiled thinly. "We can do that, too." He paused and looked thoughtful for a moment "What did Imry do with Danson?"

"Nothing. He lives better than most spacers. Since we are minus prisons on starships, Imry installed him in your quarters, under guard, of course. Commander Zark hasn't been able to figure out what to do with him, yet. That's what he wants to talk to you about."

"Have you a scout ship here?" Lors asked.

"Certainly. We use them to make reports. The Terrans would pick up the radio waves otherwise."

"How about a uniform?"

"You can borrow one of Thesa's. You'd never get into one of mine."

"Fine. As soon as I'm properly attired, we'll go see Zark." Grinning at Narvi, Lors followed Thesa into the bedroom for the uniform.

Later, dressed in the uniform of a Firstspacer, Lors checked himself in the mirror of the bedroom making certain that he was properly dressed. Trousers bloused neatly into the black, half boots, the yellow stripes perfectly aligned, the cuffs of the tunic fastened at his wrists and throat, the emblems of the 8th. Terran Command on the collar, the patch of rank on his left shoulder sleeve. Yes, he was all set. Precise.

He grinned at Thesa. "Feels good," he said.

The sandy haired spacer handed him the black leather belt containing the auto-pistol and the cartridge belt. He buckled it on, feeling the familiar weight drag at his right hip.

"Okay?" Thesa asked.

Lors nodded. "Thanks for the loan," he said and went out to where Narvi, already dressed, awaited him.

"How's your head?" Narvi asked.

"Fine."

"Let's go, then."

They walked, wordlessly, out to the barn. The blond snapped on a small light near the scout ship and Lors went up close to examine it.

"Climb in," Narvi invited. "I have to scan the area and make sure no one will see the take-off."

Lors leaped to the cockpit and opened the plastic-dome; he dropped lithely into the seat, his feet moving automatically to the rudder pedals, his hands impatiently fingering the controls. So much was coming back. So many remembrances with each second of time. He was *not* Nicholas Howard Danson, and he had never been! He was Firstspacer Lors of the 8th. Terran

Command, and he felt his heart thrill to the knowledge of who he was and where he was. It was slow, this strange process of regaining his mind, but it was coming along. He would soon be whole again, no longer some freak caught in the vortex between two worlds.

"Ready?" Narvi asked, slipping into the seat beside him and pulling the cockpit shield into place.

"Ready. Where's the starship?"

"Bearing 204.5, off-planet. We'll be there in no time."

The barn door swung open as Narvi started the scout ship and they moved out into the night, hovering a foot off the barn floor until they were outside.

Narvi conned the ship, working the verti-control expertly and the little craft whistled upward at a gentle speed. The radar screen before them disclosed no aircraft in the area. Narvi grinned at Lors and shoved the speed control forward, working the elevators with his other hand and the scout ship streaked into the night sky.

Home.

Lors, watching the screen, saw the oblong shape of the mother ship blurr into view and called out its position to his friend. At once, Narvi altered the course, whipping the scout ship onto a collision bearing. When they were close enough, they used their signal and heard it answered.

The ship slipped in easily as the port opened in the starship's side. Narvi guided the craft in with tender hands and settled it gently on the floor. A positioner hooked a line to the ship and pulled it quickly into the repair bins. A light winked in the wall. The area was again pressurized.

They climbed out and dropped to the floor as a crew of repair men went to work on the ship. Narvi slapped Lors on the arm.

"I'm going below for a drink. Join Me?"

Lors shook his head. "No, thanks. I might be down a bit later, but right now I'd best talk to the Commander."

"Right. Just don't tell him that you're thinking of jilting his only daughter for an alien, or he'll turn four different shades of purple."

Lors grinned and watched the big blond stride away to the elevator that would take him down to the bar on the first level. Then he walked off in the opposite direction, heading toward the forward end of the ship where he would find his "future" father-in-law, Commander Zark. Spacers, in the gleaming halls, saluted him in the traditional manner - a hand clasped to the hip that held their holstered auto-pistol - and it was a good feeling. He had almost forgotten.

The Commander's guards stopped him outside the door, but when he explained who he was and what he wanted, they nodded in unison. One of them pressed a button which opened the door to the vestibule outside the Commander's office.

Lors stepped inside and the door hummed shut behind him. The vestibule was little more than a box-like room, containing a small visi-screen. He pressed the small, black button at the base of the dark screen and kept his finger on it while the lines waved.

"Firstspacer Lors to see the Commander," he said, as the rotund face of his future father-in-law waved and blurred into focus.

"Come in, Lors! Come in!" Zark's voice was a bellow of pleasure.

The heavy door swung open and Lors stepped into the room to click his heels and slap his right hand against the black holster before the Commander's desk.

"Firstspacer Lors reporting, sir," he said, as Zark got up from the chair and came toward him.

"Lors, Lors, my son! How are you?"

They grabbed each other by the shoulders and laughed like children. Lors, despite his love for Beth Danson and the trouble that was undoubtedly coming up, was happy as a Terran child at Christmas to see the older man.

"Lors! Let me look at you! It's been eons since Thista! Jela's fair dying to get her hands on you again." He winked at Lors. "And I imagine you are, too."

"She's here?" A ray of panic touched him and he hoped that it didn't show.

"Not that I know of, unless a ship came in. The last I heard, she was waiting for a ship to take her off the base on Mars. She swears she'll get you this time, or she's going back home to find an old mushshell gatherer."

Lors laughed with Zark, who released him to pull a flask of wine from his desk. As he poured two tumblers of the milk-white wine, he winked at the young spacer.

"From the home planet," he grinned. "Mallowine. I'll wager you haven't tasted it in a long time."

"Not since Thista," Lors assured him, accepting the tumbler. He held up the glass for a toast. "To you, sir, and your daughter. May she be saved from marrying a mushshell gatherer."

Commander Zark chuckled and they drank, the soft, mellow taste of the wine lingering fondly in their mouths long after the drink had found its way into their stomachs.

"Now then, Lors. Tell me what that fool of an Imry did to you."

He told the Commander everything, watching the older man nod his head from time to time, the stubby fingers of his hands forming a pyramid before his lips as he slumped in his chair. Lors left nothing out, except his love for Beth Danson. He couldn't bring himself to tell about that. When he had finished, Commander Zark's eyes were hot with angry indignation.

"I'll see that Imry cannot get a command on a planet with a pure ammonia atmosphere for this trick! I'll see him tortured by Thistians!" The old man stopped his tirade as quickly as he had begun it. "You know what this means, Lors?"

"I'm afraid to guess."

"The wrecked scout ship can be covered up easily enough because of the Terran politics; they always arrange it so that one branch of government has no idea of what the other branches are doing. We'll have some of our men in Washington mumble in their beards about experimental aircraft until everyone is taken from the scene except our people. Then we'll have the ship taken somewhere, ostensibly to be studied, and they'll all forget it.

"But these Terrans are another matter. If they can get their people to listen to them, we're in trouble..."

"Perhaps," Lors said softly, "if they were believed, it would speed up our relations with the Terran governments."

Zark shook his grey head. "No. They aren't ready yet. They're still in such a fluctuating state that half the population believes in witchcraft and superstition, while the other half understands science and looks toward the future.

"Besides, Lors, others have tried those same tactics and were not believed. To tell the truth, I'm not quite sure *what* to do."

"We could continue the bluff."

The Commander's brows lifted. "You mean you continue as our agent down there?"

"Yes, sir. The way it worked out, with the crash, it merely supported the story I was to tell Danson's wife. I really did have temporary amnesia. No one knows anything, except about the ship. Brice found Danson's watch at the crash site, but we could work a little mental trick on him and make him forget everything he knows, couldn't we?"

"It would be risky. You never know if that process will work until it is tried. As much as I hate the thought, it would be best to kill both of them and send you back to the Terran woman. After we had tried to bluff out Imry's plan for a month, or so, we could arrange an accident for you in which it would appear that you were dead - perhaps utilizing the real Danson for the accident. Does the woman suspect anything?"

"I don't think so," Lors told him. "She seems too happy in having me back, at the moment."

Zark smiled at him and clamped a hand to his shoulder. "You're tired, my boy. Get some rest and we'll talk about this thing later. You can use Firstspacer Thesa's quarters. Danson is in yours."

"And Brice?"

"Unconscious. In the hospital. The shock of what took place down there has him recalling every old wives' tale about witches that he has ever heard."

"All right, sir," Lors said smiling. "I'll get to my quarters, then. Thank you."

"I'll send Jela to you, if she comes in."

"Thank you," Lors said, but felt shaken at the thought.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Outside, in the corridor, Lors nodded to the guards and began walking toward Thesa's quarters. In his mind, now that he again *had* a whole mind, was the feeling of being trapped, the feeling of being caught in a mesh-like web that was about to strangle him.

Perhaps they could patch things up on Terra, but the two Terrans would have to die, or at least one - merely to gain him another month, or two, with Beth. Was it worth it? In the long run, was it practical? Perhaps he didn't really love the Terran woman - maybe it was just infatuation, or gratitude, or even the result of long abstinence. If that was the case, it would be brutal for them to kill the one man who could make her happy.

Then, on the other hand, suppose his love was genuine. If he really loved her, the coming accident which he was to stage would never come to pass. He knew himself too well to believe that. He would take Beth and run, get away into another country, change his name, his features...

He smiled to himself and remembered his training on Mars, and the ability of the spacemen to reach out with a long arm to stop anything. Anything! *We are the gods, he remembered. We are the gods who move with lightning and speak in thunder. The Terrans are like so many cows that need a watchful eye upon them at all times...*

Gods. Yes, in a manner of speaking, he decided that they were gods ... but what did the book say about one of the minor gods being caught up in a crazy thing like this? It had never happened before.

Without actually realizing it, he found himself standing at the door to his own quarters. A single guard, armed with an auto-rifle stopped him when he approached the door.

"I'm sorry, sir," the Spacer said. "You cannot enter here."

Danson was on the other side, he knew. Nicholas Danson, the artist, the man with whom he had traded places. Suddenly he wanted to speak with the man, find out about him. All at once, Danson was not just another Terran - he was a man, with feelings, emotion...

"I'm Firstspacer Lors," he heard his voice rumble with authority. "I'd like to speak with the Terran."

The guard stiffened. "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't know who you were."

"You will open the door, spacer?"

"Yes, sir, but you'd best leave your sidearm with me."

Lors nodded and pulled his auto-pistol from the black leather holster and handed it to the guard who stuffed it into his belt. He reached back and unlocked the door. As it swung open, Lors stepped inside.

The room was not large; it couldn't be very big on a starship, but it was serviceable. There was a dresser and locker for uniforms, as well as a visiscreen, a couch and a small bed. The Terran was lying on the bed, reading.

Lors smiled at him. They could have been twins of the same mother, were it not for the fact that Terran's disposition was different. He hadn't shaved in a few days, and his black hair was tangled. Even the fatigue uniform he wore was rumpled badly.

"Hello, Danson," Lors said, in English, and to his acute surprise, the Terran answered in Lors' tongue.

"This mortal bids welcome to the great god, Lors," Danson said, with a faint smirk.

"You speak my language?" Lors asked, puzzled.

"Why not? You speak mine. When they checked my brain, they found that I had a rather high I.Q. Besides, I've read all your reading material and decided that you have lousy taste. So I decided to learn the language, and try to make conversation with my watch dogs."

"You are comfortable?"

Danson nodded. "Wonderful. First rate. Now that I know the language, I'm going to get a deck of cards and teach my jailers how to play draw poker. Then I'm going to win this starship and take it to Washington for analysis."

"I didn't come here to jest."

Danson lit a cigarette and smiled thinly. "Why did you come here?"

"To see you. Are you well taken care of?"

"Certainly. They've hooked up my pint sized T.V. set so that I can look at the earth. I've been to the Lunar Base ... terrific real estate. A rock pile. Elaborate, but still a rock pile. I eat very well. I sleep occasionally, except that

I cannot get used to the total darkness, and I have minor grievances ... like I want to get the hell out of here!" He stood up suddenly and glared at Lors. "Am I happy! Am I content! Hell, yes! I'm so goddam content I'm going stir crazy from it!

"I'm sick of the whole damned mess, Firstspacer Lors, plain downright sick and..."

"Take it easy, Danson."

"Shut up! Shut your damned mouth because I'm not finished! Tell me, god, have you ever been confined to a pint sized prison? You ever had your brain picked clean by a flock of intellectual buzzards? You ever sat in a room, with the walls closing in on you, listening to a couple of blue-uniformed knotheads stand outside your door talking a babble of language that sounded like Chinese, and not be able to speak to them? Not be able to take a piss because you don't know how to find the toilet and don't know how to ask where it is?

"Well, I have. I have and I'm up to my ears with this whole bit. I lie here every night and dream about taking this so-called starship and ramming it up your ass, plate by plate..."

Danson broke off suddenly, unable to continue his wild tirade. He sat there on the edge of the bunk, his face a livid white, with the cigarette dangling from his lips. His left eye closed against the bite of the smoke and his jaws knotted as he stared at the wall.

"All finished," Lors demanded quietly.

Danson grunted. "Yeah. Yeah, ace, I'm all finished. In a way, I'm sorry ... but it felt good. I've wanted to get all that off my chest for a long time."

"I can see your position, Danson," Lors told him. "I know what you've been through, but I can't do anything about it. I follow orders."

Danson grinned. "Who're you trying to kid, pal. You got Commander Zark's daughter eating out of the palm of your hand. Hell, I'll bet you pull more strings around this ship than a puppeteer."

"I've underestimated you, Danson," Lors told him in a soft voice. "You have an interesting mind. Quite a grasp."

Danson snorted again. "You guys aren't the sharpest people in the world. I will give you a bit of advice, for free. You better either return me to earth, or kill me. In another thirteen months, I'll figure out a way to blow this hulk into a million pieces."

"I doubt that," Lors mused.

"Go ahead and doubt it, but you'd better keep the powder magazine under double guard. And while you're at it, you better have the boys be careful of what they say around me, since I know the lingo."

"How many Spacers have you talked to?" Lors asked. "How many of them know how intelligent you are?"

Danson shrugged. "Why?"

"Just wondered."

Nick Danson looked at him narrowly. "You have something on your mind, Lors?"

"Maybe. Right now, I'll keep it to myself. Until then, keep your mouth shut about how smart you are. A weapon, Nick, is only useful when the enemy doesn't know how well it will work. When they know, a counter-weapon can be made." Lors moved to the door. "I'll be back, probably," he said and went out into the corridor, leaving the Terran to ponder on what he had said.

The guard snapped to attention, then handed Lors his auto-pistol. The Firstspacer slipped it into the holster and snapped the flap. Then he walked rapidly toward Firstspacer Thesa's quarters with the germ of an idea filtering and dancing through his mind.

It wasn't a complete idea, but it certainly was a wild one. The chances of its working were about a thousand to one, but if it did things might work out.

He hoped so.

He reached the door of Thesa's quarters and jerked it open. His fingers fumbled for the button, inside the door, that would switch on the lighted walls. When he found it, he closed the door and flicked on the lights. He stared at the inside of the room in amazement.

She was lying on the bed, with her golden hair falling about her shoulders like a waterfall of sunlight, and her lips pulled back over white teeth to smile at him. But he was stunned, frozen to the spot.

"Jela," he whispered, in shock.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

For a moment, she didn't move and, in the silence, he allowed his eyes to linger on her.

Beneath the blond tumble of hair, her blue eyes watched him, her lips toying with a bemused smile. She wore the odd toga-like dress that had recently become popular among the women on the home planet; it was a white color, trimmed in a pale blue that went well with her hair, but Lors hardly noticed it. His eyes were fixed upon the twin lift of her breasts as they fought against the material.

She swung her long, curved legs to the floor, a momentary flash of creamy flesh showing at her thighs, and stood up. She came to him on slippered feet, whispering against the floor and stopped before him, her breasts faintly brushing the material of his tunic.

"I thought I'd never get here, darling." Her voice was soft and warm. Sex, love and desire hung in her words; the emotion dripped from her voice the way water falls from the roof of a cave, giving her tone a throaty huskiness that started the blood racing in his veins. Yet she held herself back, restrained her urge to fling herself into his arms. It was a game with her, one she had always played. "Did you miss me?" She asked.

He nodded, unable to trust his voice. It would crack, he knew it would. He would be able to say nothing beyond a mere croak. Too much was happening, too damned fast. It was almost impossible to keep up with it all.

"Well," she mused. "I realize you're stunned to see me, but you ought to kiss me. At least, that."

He reached out his hands slowly, feeling the tremble begin in his fingers as he closed them over the softness of her upper arms. A drum began pounding in his temples as he touched her, a flashflood ripped through his veins, and his stomach churned like a storm. He brought his mouth down slowly against hers and felt her lithe body flatten up against him the way a candle melts against a sheet of hot metal.

Her mouth was a pliant sweetness that shoved all his thoughts of Terra into the back of his mind; her body trembled against the lean hardness of his in a shiver of passion. The very touch of her tongue against his lips beat aside all the problems that swirled about his muddled mind and awakened the desire and need that had lain dormant within him all this time.

"Darling," she breathed, when he had pulled his mouth from hers. "Oh, Lors..."

"Shhh."

There was no need for talking, no sense in it at all. Her body mashed up against him and he allowed his hands to smooth down over the material of her dress, along the curve of her spine to the twin globes of her buttocks. Her mouth lifted to his again, eager, demanding, while her fingers dug through his tunic and into his flesh with a sharp need that thrilled him.

Her hand reached behind him, her fingers finding the light button and suddenly the room was sheathed in the soft cloak of darkness. Only the tiny nightlight gleamed like a small, yellow eye in the center of the ceiling. She spoke to him, without removing her lips, her breath hot and demanding against his mouth.

"I don't want to wait any longer, darling," she panted, "not another minute."

His arms slid around her, lifting her at the shoulders and the thighs to carry her to the bed, but she twisted away from him, whirling off into a darkened corner of the room where the yellow light could not touch. He could hear the sigh of the toga-like robe as she whipped it away from her soft flesh. Then she stood there, before him, framed in the alluring gold of the circle of light.

Lors felt his breath suck inward at the sight of her, standing there nude. She was even more beautiful than he had remembered and he felt shaken, to the very roots of his being.

The smooth curve of her shoulders glowed in the light and her face was kissed by shadows. The arching lift of her breasts and the impassioned nipples threw a wash of dark shadow downward over the flat of her stomach and the lithe curve of her thighs. With the light covering the beauty of her face, Jela lost her identity.

She was woman. Period.

Any and all, from time immemorial, or immoral, perhaps. She was

somehow, standing there, a composite of every woman who had ever drawn a breath. She was the best of woman, the choicest parts of all women since the dawn of time, suddenly thrown together in a high breasted, slim waisted creation that was being offered to him, only to him.

And Lors?

It moved in him, churned through his guts like a forest fire. He was man! All men, glaring with the red eyes of passion at all women. He too, in the wash of lust that had swept over him, lost his identity and he didn't give a damn. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered except that she was waiting...

His fingers ripped away his clothing and he was at her side in no time at all, his arms sliding about the pliant warmth of her flesh to clasp her to him. To take her. To love her with a fever that was equal to the challenge she presented.

She made a small sound and he hushed it with his mouth, planting his lips roughly against hers while he lowered her to the bed. He hurt her, but she didn't try to get away.

It was the kind of hurt she had waited for, that they both had yearned for all the long months that had kept them apart. His hands closed over her. Smoothing the tender flesh and feeling of life beneath his palm.

She moaned, tearing the sound from the very depths of her as his hands smoothed the satiny texture of her thighs, his fingers working against her flesh. He felt the nails of her hands digging into his shoulders, but he paid no attention to it.

Nothing mattered now. Nothing except the warmth of their love and the expenditure of the raging passions that threatened to engulf them both.

They laid there for a long time, basking in the heat of their love, and he knew. Finally he knew that it all would not work. There could be nothing between him and the Terran woman. It was impossible. She could not live in his worlds, nor could he live in hers. Jela was his world and the past was merely an emotional thing. A moth and the flame.

Yet ... somehow, he *did* love Beth. Somehow her and her life was important to him. Her happiness was something that he had to assure. Had to guarantee for her.

He had to work out a plan that would solve everything and return the whole business to a state of normalcy. It would be difficult, if not impossible, and he knew that Zark would never listen to him, never allow him to carry it out.

But he had to do it.

There would be all kinds of risks and, if he failed in the thing, he might have to pay with his life. If he managed to accomplish it, he would get nothing as a reward, except perhaps the hand of the Commander's daughter. That wasn't such a bad reward, though.

He kissed her and the fires began to burn again.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Lors finished dressing himself, buckling the black belt about his waist; then he looked down at the still form of Zark's daughter, Jela, golden in the light of the overhead bulb. She slept like a baby. He blew a kiss to her and let his breath out in a rush.

"If everything goes right," he whispered, "I'll be back before you know I'm gone. If not..." He let it hang there and checked the loads in the auto-pistol.

Then he went out into the bright light of the corridor.

The guard merely accepted his auto-pistol when he stopped at the door to Danson's prison. Lors gave it to him and the spacer opened the door. Nick Danson rubbed the beard on his face and grinned at him.

"Forget something, Firstspacer?" He asked.

When the door closed, Lors said: "Shut up."

Danson blinked.

"Sit down."

Danson sat.

"How badly do you want to get off this ship, Danson?"

"How badly do you want to make Commander?" Danson countered and lit a cigarette.

"You willing to risk your life?"

"Why not? It isn't worth a hell of a lot anyhow."

Lors reached into Danson's shirt pocket, found the pack of cigarettes and filched one. Nick touched a match to it and Lors dragged the smoke into his lungs. He could see the Terran regarding him suspiciously.

"What's the play, Firstspacer?" Danson asked.

"You're dead, Nick," Lors said softly, "if you stay on this ship. That can be either literally, or figuratively speaking, I don't know. It all depends on Zark's plans for you."

Nick snorted, "Hell, Lors, it can't be any worse than whatever Imry had cooked up for me."

"It'll be better. That I can assure you. Zark is a just man, but he hasn't much feeling for Terrans..."

"Yeah, I know. The "god" theory."

Lors nodded.

"Well, look, Firstspacer," Danson said, snubbing out his cigarette. "Your concern for my welfare touches me deeply, but I don't get it. How come?"

Lors grinned. "I've been asking myself that same question, and while I can get answers that make sense to me, I sincerely doubt if they'd make sense to you.

"Why don't we just say I like you."

"That's rich, but I'll buy it. All I've got to lose is my chains..."

"And your memory."

"Come again?"

Lors sucked on the cigarette. "You can't talk about this thing to anyone except your wife."

"Who'd believe me anyhow?"

"It's bigger than that, Danson. If you talk to anyone, I'll kill you."

"You don't make sense. Why not kill me now?"

Lors sighed. "Look, Commander Imry made a booboo, to use one of your terms, and I got caught in the middle. This whole operation is fouled up because of what he did. If we don't try to put things back, it's going to be in a real tough light.

"For the first time in history, Terra is in possession of a scout ship even though it is wrecked. Not only that, but they know it. They're hot on the trail of us. And if enough Terrans get wise to us, we'll be in trouble. You've read my diaries and journals. You know what it's like up here. My planet needs Earth as a trade base, and if you people ever wake up as a race, we'll be able to help each other a hell of a lot. Maybe that's why I want to take you back to your wife. Is that good enough for you?"

Danson nodded. "I guess so. I know enough about this situation to tell that you're either on the level, or you're a damned convincing liar. What's the

plot?"

"The plot, as you put it, is to get you and Brice back to earth..."

"Brice? Nolan Brice? He's here?"

Lors nodded. "Brice found your watch where my scout ship cracked up and guessed who I was before I did. I was hiding up at your cabin, trying to figure things out when he decided to put a bullet into me. Both Beth and I thought I was you and she was trying to help me figure out what I'd been doing for thirteen months. Brice came in shooting and my people kidnapped him."

"Great."

"In any event, I think I can get Brice to the scout ship. I'm going to rely upon you to spring yourself out of here and get down to the hangar. You'll pass for me easily. Okay?"

"How do I get past the guard?"

"I'll fix it. If I can't, I'll be back."

"Okay, Buck Rogers. It's your show."

Lors grinned at him. "Keep your fingers crossed," he said and went out.

"I won't do it," Narvi said flatly. He lifted his glass and took a large swallow of the drink to punctuate the sentence. "You've got to," Lors insisted. "You know as well as I do, it's the only way to straighten things out."

"You talk to Zark?"

"How can I tell him about it? What am I supposed to do? Tell him that I love a Terran and want her to be happy?"

"Thunder and lightning! What's so important about Brice and Danson? They're only Terrans. This woman you're so silly about will find someone else. Lors, by the gods, if you take those two back they'll talk to everyone they can get their hands on..."

"No they won't, not Danson. Narvi, that's the beauty of this whole plot. Danson understands that our people simply want to begin trade negotiations with Terra; he's learned to speak and read our language and he knows how badly we want to trade with his people. He'll help us..."

"What about Brice," Narvi snorted.

"Brice can be handled by Danson. If that doesn't work, we can threaten to do all sorts of things to him."

"And you want me to take the guard's place, outside Danson's quarters, and give you time to steal a scout ship?"

"Yes."

Narvi cast his blue eyes toward the ceiling and groaned aloud. "If I keep doing all these goofy things for you, I'll never make commander. I won't even make Vice-commander."

Lors smiled. "Don't worry about it. If things work out, you'll have had a hand in opening up a new planet for our trade rockets."

Narvi sighed. "All right. I'll do it, although I should have my head examined by the ship's doctors."

Lors grinned at him and finished the last of his drink. "It'll work out, Narvi, and you'll probably get a medal."

"A prison cell, likely," Narvi snorted, "on Thista."

Lors slapped him lightly on the arm and left the ship's wardroom. He had a lot to do, and damned little time to do it in.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Lors left the wardroom and walked along the hollow, brightly lighted corridors toward the hospital where Detective Nolan Brice was being kept a prisoner. He would be the tough one of the two, because his mental roots were still very close to the witchcraft believing parents who had given him birth.

Brice was a Pennsylvanian; he was fairly intelligent, but like all Pennsylvanians he had an unconscious closeness with tradition. He was of the type who would stoutly deny he was superstitious, yet would refuse to walk under a ladder. How would he react to Lors' proposal? Would he, with typical Dutch stubbornness, tell him to go to hell, or would he co-operate? It was a difficult thing to predict.

Lors shoved the door to the hospital open and grinned at the spacer behind the desk. "You've a Terran here?" He asked.

The spacer nodded and laid down the sheets of paper he had been ruffling as Lors came in. "Yes sir, we have one. He's in the care of Doctor Zuloe."

"What are they doing to him?"

"I'm not sure, sir. I understand he was in a great state of shock when he arrived. I would imagine they're giving him rehabilitative treatment."

Lors grinned again. Apparently the method by which they had snatched the detective had completely unnerved him. "I'd like to see him," he told the spacer. "Where can I find Doctor Zuloe?"

"I'm sorry, sir. Only authorized personnel will be allowed to interrogate him."

"I'm authorized, I believe. I captured him. I'm Lors."

The young spacer flushed. "I'm sorry, sir, I didn't know who you were." He pointed to the door behind him. "You may go through there. Straight down the corridor until you reach the fourth ward."

"Doctor Zuloe will be there?"

"I think so."

"Thank you."

Lors shoved the door open and walked down the long hall toward the fourth ward, not quite sure in his mind how he could spring the Terran from the hospital and get him down to where the scout ships were hangared. But it had to be done. If he failed, and they all ended up dead, or thrown into the penal colonies on Thista, the trade program with Terra would be set back at least fifty years. All the ground they had gained, all the knowledge and plans they had formulated, would be useless. They would have to start from scratch.

The wrecked scout ship could be covered up, but the loss of Detective Lieutenant Brice and Nicholas Danson would not go unnoticed, especially when Beth Danson spilled her story about the strange events that had gone on at the cabin. Of course, Terra would never be able to corroborate what she had experienced - yet they were on the verge of space travel, and they were a war-like race. They could cause all sorts of unnecessary trouble in space.

It had to work. He had to get both of them back to the planet, even if it meant stopping a slug from an auto-rifle to do it.

He reached the door to the fourth ward and went in to look for Doctor Zuloe. The man wasn't hard to find; he was the only person in the small anteroom.

"What can I do for you, Firstspacer?" He asked. "I'm Doctor Zuloe."

"I'm Lors."

For a moment, they stared at each other. The doctor was a middle-aged man with a weathered skin stretched over a rather aquiline set of features. His small, bird-like eyes were piercing in their study of Lors' face. He smiled thinly and ran a hand through greying hair.

"Lors, huh? You the one who went down there?"

"I was in the accident. In a sense, I suppose I'm to blame for having brought Brice up here."

"You know him?" Doctor Zuloe's eyes narrowed visibly.

"Yes. At least, I think I know him better than you people do."

"Then perhaps you can help us with him. When he arrived here, he was in a state of acute shock in which he was almost violent. He kept screaming about witchcraft and all sorts of Terran nonsense. We gave him as much treatment as we could, under the circumstances, and he stopped acting like a wildman."

"How is he now?"

"Numb. He's sitting on his bed, in a special room, and staring at the wall."

"He isn't out of his mind, is he?"

"I don't think so, but he has had a tremendous strain and shock. It'll take awhile. He isn't of the same structure as the other one."

Lors sighed wearily. "I'll see what I can do with him. Commander Zark has plans for him."

"Another switch?" The doctor made no attempt to cover his disgust over the idea.

"An accident, I believe."

"From bad to worse, huh?"

Lors didn't answer him. He merely made a motion with his hand for the doctor to show him where the Terran was being kept. Doctor Zuloe nodded and pointed toward a door at the far end of the ward. A blue uniformed spacer stood guard before the door. He clicked his heels as Lors approached.

"I want to see the Terran, spacer," Lors said briskly.

The spacer nodded and opened the door. Lors stepped inside and listened to the lock click into place behind him.

Nolan Brice was seated on the edge of the bed staring at the wall, but Lors did not believe that he was in a state of shock. He had the knotted jaws of a man who is firmly determined to betray nothing to his captors. He sat there with his fingers laced together, hanging between his knees, his clothing rumpled and hanging loose from his broad frame.

"Nolan?"

Brice swung his eyes to the Firstspacer, the muscles of his jaws working. "I'll kill you," he said, with a horrible softness in his voice.

"Nolan. Listen, I'm here to help you."

"You've done a lot of helping, spaceman. I know what you want. Earth."

"Don't be silly. I want to help you and Danson to get back home..."

"I don't need you!"

"Shut up and listen. I'm risking my neck coming in here to help you, so you damned well better follow orders. In a minute I'm going to call that guard in here, and we're going to borrow his uniform. Then we'll head for a scout ship and get you to hell back to Terra. Will that suit you?"

"This is some kind of trick..."

"Do you want to go, or stay here," Lors demanded coldly. "I don't have time to lecture you. I'll leave that up to your friend, Danson."

"Play it your way, spaceman," Brice said tightly.

"Okay." Lors stood up and spoke through the door to the guard, pulling his auto-pistol from the holster. "Come in here, spacer!"

The guard shoved the door open and came in. "What is it, Firstspacer?"

"Him."

The guard swung to look at Brice and, as his head turned, Lors brought the butt of the pistol down hard. The guard grunted and dropped heavily to the floor, his auto-rifle falling with a loud thud. By now, if everything was working out right, Danson should be on his way to the scout ship hangar. Lors looked at Brice.

"Come on, Nolan. Get into these clothes!"

Between the two of them, the stripping of the guard was fast. In a few minutes, Brice was wearing the spacer's blue uniform and was buckling the black cartridge belt about his waist. He gripped the auto-rifle in his hands eagerly and looked at Lors.

"Hand me his helmet," he said.

Lors picked it up and straightened to hand it to the Terran. Lors saw the punch coming, but surprise prevented him from making any move in his defense. Nolan Brice's fist smashed into the side of his face with stunning shock and he flew backwards onto the bed.

"Thanks," he heard Brice snarl.

Lors rolled off the bed and onto the floor, the force of the punch making his head reel. He heard the door to the room close and the sound of Brice's running feet outside as he staggered to his feet. You damned fool, he thought. You can't get off this ship alone!

He started running after the Terran, drawing his pistol as he ran...

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Lors dashed down the hallway into the main corridor, passing the limp body of the doctor and the young spacer who had been on duty at the desk. Apparently, Brice had come into the place fast, swinging the auto-rifle like it was a club. Both of the men were unconscious, but there was no blood in sight.

"Crazy fool," Lors said aloud and slammed the door as he dashed into the corridor.

Brice was running blindly.

"Brice! Stop!" Lors fired the auto-pistol over the fleeing man's head.

Brice stopped and whirled, dropping to one knee to bring up the rifle he carried. He snapped off a fast burst and Lors dived across the polished corridor to hug the wall. He landed, rolling, his pistol zeroed on the Terran, but he couldn't bring himself to shoot.

Nolan Brice, however, had no scruples about shooting at Lors. He fired continually, cursing as the bullets missed. Beyond the Terran, Lors could see four other spacers running down the hall toward Brice. One of them fired.

Brice whirled, spotted them, and brought up his rifle. The gunfire, in the emptiness of the hall, sounded like a machinegun being fired in a cave. Lors saw a spacer slam backwards, rolling crazily from the impact of the bullet that Brice had triggered.

The Terran was hunched over in a crouch, like an old gunfighter, shooting from the hip. Suddenly he jerked to his feet, spun crazily in two directions at once and fell flopping to the floor. The auto-rifle clattered as he let it fall.

Lors came slowly to his feet and shoved his gun back into its holster; then he walked over to where Brice was staring at the ceiling through unseeing eyes. It was a damned shame, but he had brought it on himself. One of the spacers looked at him.

"Are you all right, sir?"

Lors nodded.

"Is he a spacer?" One of them asked, looking at the uniform.

"An escaped Terran," Lors said, then he remembered that Danson was probably down at the hangar. "Don't jettison this body until I give you the orders. Put it in quick freeze."

"Yes, sir," the spacer said.

But Lors was already on his way down the corridor. He could do nothing for Brice now ... perhaps it had even been a good thing. The shooting would have drawn most of the high ranking officers toward the end of the ship, leaving a comparatively clear space between him and the hangar. He hoped that the doctor would stay out for awhile.

As the Terrans said, they weren't out of the woods yet.

He found a vacant elevator and took it down to the hangar level. As the door whirled open, he raced into the corridor, nearly upsetting a startled spacer with his rush. He had no idea how long it would be until it was discovered that Narvi had let Danson out, but he knew the escape would not remain unnoticed for long.

He burst into the repair bin area of the hangar and jerked his head toward the tubes. When a ship came into the side of the mother-ship, they entered through a large port which made it easier for the pilot of the scout ship. But to leave the starship, one had to install the smaller craft into one of the many blast tubes on either side of the big hangar.

He looked frantically about the area for Danson and spotted the Terran standing unobtrusively near the pilot entry to one of the blast tubes. Nick Danson, garbed in the blue and yellow of a Firstspacer, was a twin for Lors. He hoped anxiously that none of the repairmen would notice the trick.

Lors grabbed a mechanic by the arm. "Spacer! I'm on an urgent mission. Where can I get a ship?"

The young spacer looked thoughtful for a moment, then pointed toward a tube on the other side of the hangar. "In that tube, sir."

"Thank you."

"I'll help you rig it," the spacer said.

"Never mind, I'll do it myself. Go about your work."

"Yes, sir." The spacer turned away, a puzzled look on his face.

Lors motioned to Danson and headed toward the tube door. He could well understand the spacer's bewilderment. While it was possible for the pilot of a

scout ship to launch his own craft, it was highly impractical and not normally done. He hoped it didn't arouse their suspicions. He yanked the door open and looked over his shoulder. Danson was almost to him, running hard. Heads turned as the mechanics watched him run.

"Hurry!"

Danson reached the door and Lors shoved him into the tube.

"Where's Brice," Danson demanded.

Lors slammed the door and whirled the wheel of the spider lock. He didn't answer. He was too concerned with getting the door secured. Through the port in the heavy door, he could see spacers gesturing and pointing at the blast tube.

"Where's Brice!"

"He's dead." Lors secured the wheel and noticed that a Vice-commander had come into the hangar area. "Get in the ship! Fast!"

Outside, the hanger workers were milling about like a fleet of bees. Lors turned to Danson and saw him standing beside the ship, his eyes wild with disbelief.

"Get in the ship!"

"Not without Brice!"

Lors exploded in his native tongue. "Get in that ship, Danson! How long do you think it'll be before they come in the emergency door?"

Nick's eyes were wide and violent. "I'm not leaving Nolan up here, goddammit! Get out of my way!"

Lors shoved the Terran as he came in and watched him backpedal into the side of the scout ship. Danson muttered a curse and dived at the spaceman. Lors had no choice in the matter. He swung hard, Terran style, in what had come to be known as the "ole one-two." His left fist dug into Nick's stomach and, when he bent with the blow, Lors brought his right fist up from the floor and felt it smash into Danson's face. The Terran slammed backwards against the ship, his head striking the metal sides. He crumpled into an unconscious blue mound beside the ship.

He wasted no time. Casting a glance at the lifeless panel that was the emergency door at the far end of the blast tube, he grabbed Danson under the arms and hauled him up the short ladder to the cockpit of the ship. If they came through that emergency door, he was finished. He could not push the button in the wall that would open the huge port in the side of the starship.

They would die if he did!

It would be one thing, to free an alien, but to intentionally kill members of his own race would mean disaster. Thirty seconds after he pushed the wall button, would open the port at the end of the tube and send the void of space rushing into the chamber. Anyone who did not have adequate pressurization would be a fond memory.

He stuffed Danson's body into the cockpit seat and buckled the strap about him. Lors left the cockpit canopy open and leaped to the floor of the tube. How long do I have? A minute? Two? Keep them outside, he pleaded, and dived for the button.

"Lors!"

The shout echoed hollowly in the tube. He glanced toward the door and saw three mechanics inside the tube. Thunder and lightning! One second after he had slammed the button and all the doors would have locked automatically and the port would have opened.

Panicked by the sight of them, he whipped out his pistol and fired. In the tube, the weapon sounded like a firecracker going off in a steel drum. The unarmed mechanics stopped dead, whirled and ducked back through the door. In another four seconds, the armed guards would show up.

Lors shoved the weapon back into the holster and slammed his hand against the button. It would lock them out now! He had his thirty seconds now. He dived for the ship, dropped into the cockpit and slammed the canopy forward, twisting the lock into place.

His fingers moved over the controls and the engines whined into life as the port opened before him. He was on his way! He revved the engines impatiently as the big door rolled away and the stars burned in at him. Then he shoved the speed control forward and the scout ship surged out into the blackness of space. His feet kicked at the pedals and his hands worked the stick. The scout ship rolled over and streaked toward the lighted ball of the earth.

He turned his head, looking over his shoulder at the mother-ship. Tiny flashes of brilliant light speared from the starship. They lifted, fluttered and followed him like a swarm of bees.

They were giving chase!

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

He had thought there would be a pursuit. He kicked at the rudder pedals and threw the stick; the scout ship rolled over and plunged toward the ice cap at the north pole of the planet. At 16,000 m.p.h., the rocket was little more than a guided missile and he knew that when he reached the ice cap, he'd have to throttle back - but then so would his pursuers.

Beside him, on the seat, Nick Danson's head rolled from side to side as the ship streaked toward the earth. The four scout ships were fanned out behind him and trying to close, yet he was holding them at bay with a mere 16,500 m.p.h. He wished frantically that he could have figured out a way to stymie the chase, but starships were not built to be sabotaged. The designers had done a damned good job on them, fitting them with every device known to prevent crippling, or damaging by the enemy, whoever it may be.

The four ships were hanging on him.

I've got to lose them, he thought feverishly. I've got to lose them long enough to get Danson back to the cabin and get the hell out again. After that, they can have me. But not now. He looked behind him, trying to determine whether or not they were getting set to fire on him.

They didn't look it, but he couldn't tell. Weapons were not a scout ship's strong point. Each ship was armed with a large rocket launcher, but it was seldom used. Speed was the greatest weapon they needed and the military designers of the home planet had poured all their energy into the fast maneuvering of the craft.

The heavy caps of ice that covered the continent of Greenland loomed up before him and he hoped that he could lose them in the white wilderness. He would have to throttle back when he reached the jagged waste of ice, but then so would the four behind him. They saw what he was attempting, and poured all the power they could into their ships.

Lors flattened the ship out in a shallow dive and pushed the throttle control until it stopped. The needle on the airspeed indicator leaped violently. 24,000 m.p.h. The ice rose against the windshield swiftly. One of the scout ships closed and fired a rocket.

He kicked at the rudder pedal and threw the ship to the left. The scout ship responded like a nervous horse and fluttered away as the rocket burned and arced beneath the underbelly.

He pulled the throttle control back, cutting the speed of the ship and shoving on the rudder as he hauled at the stick. The maneuver was too fast for the ships behind him. They tore past him in silver flashes, trying to correct their error. He streaked off toward the Azores Islands, slicing into the atmosphere viciously, while he watched the other ships whirling off to come back at him. They would soon have to break radio silence, or they would never get him. It was almost impossible to close on a quarry at these speeds, unless each man knew what his buddy was doing.

At 15,000 miles per hour, a micro-second of delay before acting, could slam two ships together with a violence that would atomize everything. Still they refused to make radio contact with each other.

Lors watched them coming back at him, minute silver specks on the radar sweep. He shoved the stick forward and dived for the ocean in a shallow plunge. He had the biggest advantage, in that they had to anticipate *his* moves, in order to get him into their sights. One of them got him in his sights and fired.

He watched the rocket spearing toward his ship and slammed the stick over to the right. The discus-like scout ship flipped over in a slow roll, the rocket barely missing the ship. Lors felt a little sick. He eased the throttle back, flattening the ship out not fifty feet above the water of the Atlantic Ocean. Then he shoved the throttle to the wall and raced north.

The Scout ship speed indicator swung crazily and stopped at 24,500 m.p.h. Behind him, the other four were firewalling their throttles just to keep within range. They couldn't possibly fire at him, because going away at speeds like they were using, he could outrun any rocket made. Not only was that in his favor, but should one of them fire, they would fly into their own weapon.

He glanced at Danson. Nick had awakened and was staring wide eyed at the ocean that was spinning past them as they streaked north. Then Nick's mouth opened and Lors looked ahead. They were almost on the freighter!

Lors lifted the ship and whipped over the spars of the ship in a rush that had probably broken lines and smashed windows all over the vessel. Behind him, the others were streaking over the ship and Lors could imagine the

terrified crew-members who had probably been knocked flat by the wash from the scout ships.

Danson had fainted.

Ahead of him was a heavy cloud cover. He streaked for it, with his four buddies in hot pursuit. He hit the cloud cover and began dodging recklessly through it, changing his course constantly to throw his pursuers off. He burst out on the far side of the bank of clouds and couldn't see the other four ships. He streaked for the cabin in the mountain country of Pennsylvania, with Danson still out.

Lors throttled back and hovered over the cabin. It was deserted. In the sunlight, it looked like a child's toy house in a miniature clearing. He settled the ship in another small clearing, in the woods beyond the house and shut off the engines. He threw back the canopy and removed the belt from around Danson.

He slung the Terran over his shoulder and headed for the cabin. Still nothing moved about the place. Lors breathed a sigh of relief. All he had to do now, was dump Danson and get out. Nick could tell his wife everything and get things straightened out. Brice could be reported as missing in the woods and the wrecked scout ship could be covered up by the men in Washington.

He eased his way into the house and flopped Danson's unconscious body on the couch. He had started to pull off Danson's borrowed uniform when he heard the footstep. He whirled about!

Beth!

CHAPTER NINETEEN

She stood there for a moment and stared at the two of them, and he could see from her face that she was not sure which one was her husband. Lors came to his feet and looked at her, not quite sure what to say or do.

"Beth..."

"Don't explain, Lors," she told him. Her voice was as calm and as unruffled as though she found men from outer space in the cabin every afternoon.

"I brought him back," Lors began and felt silly. He wondered vaguely how she had known about him and his being a spaceman.

She came into the room and up to where he stood, her eyes boring into his. "Why did you bring him back? You could have come back by yourself and continued the whole thing."

The realization of her words dawned upon him slowly and he blinked. "You *know* about me? How..."

"I'll tell you later. Why did you bring him back?"

"You want him, don't you? It couldn't work out. Any fool can see that." He reached out and gripped her shoulders firmly. "It wasn't supposed to happen this way, Beth. It was all supposed to go like clockwork; we never figured on the scout ship being wrecked, and I never figured on falling in love with you..."

"That's why you brought him back? Because you love me?"

He nodded, trying vainly to brush aside the trembling emotion that lifted within him at the touch of her flesh. It was a weird feeling.

"I thought about taking his place, Beth. I thought about it - but I knew it wouldn't work. It was a half crazy thing in the beginning. I ... I'm sorry."

A faint smile tugged at her lips. "Don't be. I'm not the least bit sorry, but I'm glad I know the truth. Now it doesn't seem so ridiculous - Brice disappearing into thin air." She looked about the room. "Where is he?"

"Dead."

"Dead?" Her eyes widened.

Lors nodded. "I brought your husband back against my Commander's orders. When I tried to get Brice out of the hospital, he went berserk and began shooting things up. One of the spacers killed him."

"Poor Nolan," she whispered and he could see the tears welling in her eyes. Then she looked at him sharply. "You acted against orders?"

He nodded again.

"What will happen to you?"

"Nothing. It'll all come out all right. But, Beth, how did you know? Who told you about this?"

"I did."

Lors whirled about, his eyes swinging against those of the husky blond in the dress suit who stood in the doorway of the cabin. Automatically, his hand dropped toward the pistol at his side, but the blond stopped him.

"Don't bother with that, Lors," he grinned. "I'm not about to draw."

"Who are you," Lors demanded.

"Here, I'm Cartwell, of the Secret Service. But actually I'm Firstspacer Nesso of the 6th. Terran Command."

"You told her?" Lors asked, amazed.

The blond nodded. "I had to. I came here to check on Brice and found her ready to call the police because first Nolan had disappeared and then you had. I had to think of something to keep her quiet, and the only thing I could think of was the truth. I'm a lousy agent," he added grinning.

Lors nodded and bit his lower lip. "How do things stand now?" He asked.

"Not too bad," Cartwell told him. "I've made arrangements to have the wrecked ship hauled out of the area for study. This will be hush-hush for awhile, then left to dissolve of itself. Everyone will forget it..."

"What about Brice?"

Cartwell pursed his lips. "That was a rough break, but unavoidable. We can cover up by saying that he was searching the wooded area with the rescue squads and apparently became lost. After searching and finding nothing, we can let the people draw their own conclusions."

"Risky," Lors told him.

"It'll work, unless you have a better idea."

Lors shook his head. "You can handle things down here, Cartwell. I have my own problems up there." He pointed at the ceiling to indicate the starship. "And I'd better get Danson's uniform off and move."

Beth caught his arm. "Let him keep it, Lors. It won't get into the wrong hands. I promise."

Lors looked at Cartwell, who nodded. "Let them have it," he said. "They're on our side anyhow."

"All right." He paused. "I'll be going..."

Beth linked her arm in his. "I'd like to walk to the ship with you."

"I'd like that."

He grinned at Cartwell and led her outside into the afternoon sunlight. They didn't speak until they reached the small clearing where the scout ship waited for them. Then Beth pulled his head down and kissed him.

"Good-by, Lors," she whispered.

"I'll come back, Beth, I'll come back. One of these days both our people will be friends and we'll meet again."

"I hope so."

He glanced up at the sky and saw two of the scout ships flashing about, high above the clouds. "My escort," he told her grinning.

"You'll have trouble..."

He kissed her lightly on the mouth. "No. I'll marry the Commander's daughter and it'll all be okay."

"Is she beautiful?"

"Yes." He caught the sudden flash of womanly hurt rise in her eyes and smiled. "Almost as beautiful as you."

He kissed her lightly again and leaped to the cockpit of the scout ship. He motioned her away from the blast area and eased the ship up above the trees. She waved to him and looked very small among the trees. He lifted a hand to her, then swung the ship upward, slamming the throttle forward to head back to the starship.

And Jela.

THE END

Transcriber's Note

Punctuation preserved as originally printed.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SEX LIFE OF THE GODS ***

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