

SPACE SCIENCE

Fiction Magazine

VOL. 1, NO. 2

AUGUST 1957

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SPACE SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE, Vol. 1, No. 2. Published bimonthly by Republic Features Syndicate, Inc., 39 West 55th Street, New York 19, New York. 35c a copy. Subscriptions accepted in the U.S. only, based on cover price. Application for Second Class Entry pending at Chicago, Ill. Copyright 1957 by Republic Features Syndicate, Inc. All rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention. Printed in U.S.A. All manuscripts submitted to this address must be accompanied by sufficient return postage and self-addressed return envelope. Lyle Kenyon Engel, President; Maria Ray, Manager.

THE STAR DREAM

by RAYMOND F. JONES

There was an instant of monstrous silence following the explosion, and then the sheet metal walls and high arched roof of the lab rippled like paper. Only they gave off the sound of thunder and shed panes of glass like leaves in autumn. Someone yelled out in the darkness. "Cover up! The glass—" His voice was drowned in the tinkle of a thousand falling, shining knives.

Silence took over again. It was interrupted only by the sound of men rising cautiously from where they had fallen, stepping toward one another on the glass covered floor. There was the sound of water spurting from the broken tubing that formed the giant coil of the phase shifter in the center of the room. It hissed and steamed on the hot magnets.

From behind the control panel Joel Nygren emerged. He held a handkerchief against a bleeding gash in his cheek. With the other hand he played a flashlight beam over the scene of demolition. A bubble of gray smoke and steam was filling the center of the room, but through it he could see the twisted beams and magnets of the

phase shifter that looked as if it had been caught in the closing of a giant door.

Three other flashlight beams appeared beyond the machine, criss-crossing, probing for injured personnel and further danger. Joel glanced at the beam coming from the light in his own hand. He moved it slowly like a giant, luminous bar.

That's what it was, he thought, a bar—a barrier stronger than the finest steel. Reach for the stars and you're hemmed in by a barrier of light. You can't feel it or smell it or taste it. But you can see it and know that it will never let you through.

The rage of a lifetime of lost battles against the barrier of light surged through him. He hurled the flashlight and heard its satisfying crash against the steel base of the phase shifter.

"Joel! That you—? What's the matter?" Slossen's voice came from across the room. A flash beam probed toward him.

"Are you all right, Mr. Nygren?" That was Frank's voice on his left, and the lab technician moved nearer.

Joel caught the edge of the control panel for support. The rage subsided and he regretted giving way. But five years of work had gone into this model of the shifter—

"Yes—I'm all right," he said, his breath still fast and heavy. "Is anybody hurt? Frank, get some lights on. Slossen, check everyone present for injuries. I'll handle the shifter and see that it does no more damage."

He moved into the swelling bubble of steam and smoke with the light he had taken from Slossen. For a moment he stood with his hand on the still warm frame of the massive machine, listening to the trickle of water flowing out of the coils. Frank ran cautiously toward the switch panel, his feet crunching on the broken glass. Slossen went to a nearby desk for another flashlight, then began calling the roll of personnel who had been present before the blast.

"Theobald—!"

"Here."

"Anders—!"

"Here—!"

Out of the darkness their reassuring voices came. Joel counted silently and breathed with relief when the twelfth and last man answered. At least no one had been killed.

From outside came the sudden whine of a siren. The plant's rescue and emergency squad. The rotating light turret on the fire truck threw an intermittent blood

red beam through the shattered windows as the vehicles halted with the thunder of motor and pumps.

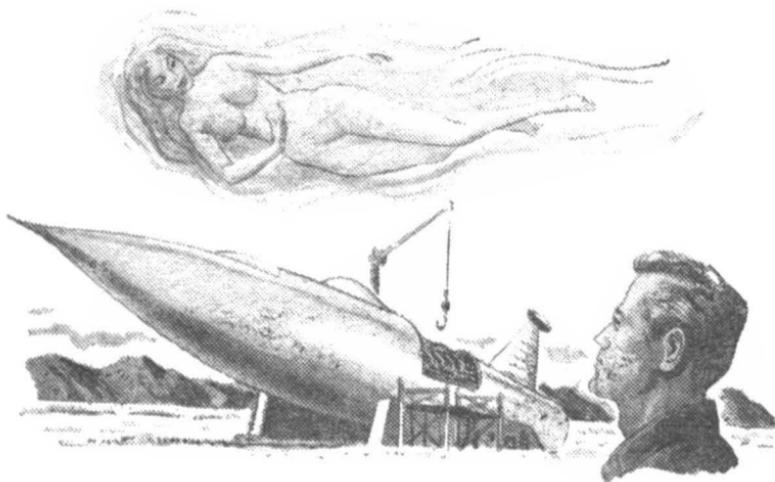
Everybody had to come to the show, Joel thought bitterly. They all had to get into the act to witness his magnificent failure. The firemen, the lab flunkies, the technicians, and soon it would be the reporters—"An unexplained explosion last night destroyed the multi-million dollar laboratory of the Weston Aircraft Corporation where work was being conducted on the secret project investigated last year by the Senate—"

Fifty million bucks over budget now. This has to be it, General Thorpe had said. The Air Force can't risk another dime on the project if there's a failure this time, too.

There had been a failure.

But there shouldn't have been. Joel looked up and poked the beam of light toward the top of the yoke thirty feet above him. This time should have been right. He knew it. What had gone wrong?

But most of all he was thinking that now he was forty-five. He had been forty when he began this particular attack on the problem. In another five years he would be fifty. What good would it do then, standing on the threshold of old age? He felt as if the sudden sickness in the pit of his stomach were drawing his ex-



tremities together, collapsing him into helplessness. He wanted desperately to cry.

The fat beams of emergency lights spread into the room as Frank supervised the hanging of a dozen of them about the walls. Slossen was assuring the chief of the emergency squad that everything was under control, and then a new voice broke over the scene. Joel recognized the booming, commanding tones of his father, Tom Nygren, president of the company.

He straightened as Tom came toward him through the fog. "Joel—! Are you all right? Your neck—!"

Joel touched the wet redness that had drained down into his collar. "A piece of glass caught

me on the face. It's nothing serious. Nothing—compared to this—"

The older Nygren peered closely at the cut to reassure himself, then followed Joel's glance at the phase shifter, crushed and squeezed almost beyond recognition. His eyes widened. "What kind of force did you have present to cause *that*—?"

Joel shook his head. "The force was there, all right. We knew that. But it was as if half the field was out of phase with the other half. It almost sheared the machine in two. And if it hadn't failed, that transmitter up there would now be on the Moon, giving us back the proof that the speed of light is only a phantom instead of a prison wall."

Tom glanced up at the ten-foot

wire basket of the transmitter atop the yoke. His mouth compressed, radiating deep lines over his face. "I'm afraid that's a proof you'll never get. Your theory is the phantom. And the speed of light is a barrier we'll never cross."

"I have to cross it. You know that, Dad—"

Pain stood in Tom Nygren's eyes as the two men looked at each other in the shadowy mist surrounding them. "I know you've been afflicted all your life with an illusion that other men have encountered and fought down. You could have fought it, too."

"You don't fight the thing that gives you life and breath, your whole reason for being."

"For every illusion you kill there's a new strength greater than any you knew before."

"Let's not quarrel again, Dad—we haven't spoken of this for a long time. No one has ever argued that this drive wouldn't be a worthwhile achievement. Only a few know why I have to have it."

Tom took Joel's arm and led him away from the smoke. Outside, in the hall, they passed the row of men receiving first aid. "You ought to get that cut taken care of," said Tom Nygren.

"Not here—I'll rouse Doc Cardon and get him to go down to the hospital. I want a decent job of sewing or I'll look like some screwball who's been in a duel. Call Kathy for me and tell her I'll be home as soon as Cardon

gets through with me."

His father stopped and looked at him as they came to the entrance of the building and stepped out into the starlight. Tom Nygren's head shook slowly back and forth. "You want to keep Kathy from worrying about your absence for an hour or two—But you're willing to spend your life building a ship that will take you from her forever!"

Joel's mouth tightened. "Please call her for me, Dad." He turned away and walked out to the parking lot.

II

The metal of the car door was icy as he unlocked it. The chill of early Fall was in the air. But this was the season he liked best. The cold quiet air over the Earth let the starlight through with a brilliance that had been absent for many months.

He sat in the car without turning the key and looked through the windshield to the southern sky. Only a few more weeks now and the star would be visible this early in the evening.

Illusion, his father called it. And how could he know this was not true? He lit a cigarette and watched the sky and tried not to think, but to feel. He tried to reach out into the darkness of the city, and beyond it all the way up to the stars. There was nothing.

How do you know what is real and what is illusion? How many of the thoughts of childhood are bubble-things that burst when your fingers try to fit them into the world of reality? Other people have had a dream like yours, they told him, but they get over it. They learn it is a dream and they give up the search for the paradise that can never be real. You must do this also, they said, because you are in a real world now that contains no such dreamland as you seek.

The trouble was he didn't want to be in the world of reality. But he never told them that. By the time he understood he was truly a stranger in a strange land he could never call home he had learned the things he could say, and the things he must keep secret to himself. They had taught him very early that no man could understand or be trusted with his dream.

He remembered the winter night, when the snow was so deep it almost covered the tops of his boots. He was six, and he went out into the front yard to look at the southern sky. He wished he were alone, but his father and Dr. Matthews were behind, stepping carefully through the snow. He remembered they had left rubbers and overcoats in the house, but he was made to wear both coat and overshoes.

The sky was best on the nights

when the Earth was padded with new snow. There seemed to be such a silence everywhere that he could almost *hear*—

"Show Dr. Matthews which star it is, Joel," his father said gently.

He hesitated, his hands remaining deep in his coat pockets. The request had even then grown tiresome and hateful. None of them *believed*.

"Which one, Joel?" Doctor said softly.

His mitten-fist came out of the pocket, a finger pointing to the sky above Orion. "That one," he said.

The men crouched, trying to follow the pointing of his finger.

"His eyes must be a lot better than ours," said Tom Nygren. "Use the glasses. I had to the first time he showed me."

"Yes—I see now." The doctor put the glasses to his eyes and took them away again, but he could see nothing without their aid. "So that's your star, Joel—"

"It's not the main one," said his father. "It's just a sort of way station. Tell him what's beyond there, Joel."

"From there you can look ahead to four others like a big square in the sky," Joel said, as if making a recitation. "And near the upper right corner of this square is a big blue star. There are seven others that move around it. The fourth one of them is it."

The men rose from their squatting positions. Tom put his hands

on the boy's small shoulders.

"These other stars—you can see them?" the Doctor said.

Joel shook his head. "No—but I know they're there."

He felt the pain of disbelief in his father, transmitted through the tight hands on his shoulders. But he didn't care any longer. *They* didn't care how much they accused him of imagining and lying.

"We'd better go in," Dr. Matthews suggested. "Let's not risk a chill. I am very much interested in this star of yours, Joel, and tomorrow I want you to come down to my office with your mother and tell me more about it. Will you do that?"

He had no choice, but in sudden desperation the next morning he decided to tell Doctor Matthews *everything*, in a blind hope that perhaps he was one who could be trusted and made to believe.

Nothing happened. There were quite a few visits to Matthews' office, and for a while Joel let his hopes soar. Then it became apparent what the Doctor was doing. At home there began to be a few changes. His books were put away and he was encouraged to more outdoor play. His father took moments to play ball and go on hikes with him for the first time in his life. Nothing more was said about the star.

Fifteen years later he went to

Matthews and asked him what he had reported to his parents. Matthews' hair had grown white and he had intensified his jovial, bedside manner.

"Say, it's good to see you again, Joell. But before I answer your question I'd like to ask you one. What about those stories you told me when you were little? What do you think about them now?"

Joel shrugged and laughed self-consciously. "Kid stuff. It's all gone now, of course. I suppose nearly every kid goes through a stage like that. But I've always been curious about your opinion and what kind of a story you gave my folks."

Dr. Matthews' face sobered. "You're quite right when you say everyone goes through such a stage. But sometimes these things stay with the individual and take on the color of reality to an alarming degree. That's what happened in your case. If it were possible to explain the actual truth, it would provide an automatic therapy, but that can't be done adequately in the case of a child."

"Well, what is the actual truth?"

"They are not sheer fantasy. They are based on a definite reality."

"Then—!"

"Wait, now. Psychologists classify these fantasies under the technical heading of *déjà vu*—the already seen. This star para-

dise of yours is the Garden of Eden, the Never-Never Land. The nostalgia, the inexpressible desire to return to something you have once known is well understood. It is nothing more nor less than the archaic memory of the paradise of the womb—which we all once knew."

Joel half rose to his feet, his face suddenly white. "But I didn't know *her* there!"

Matthews' eyes narrowed. "Sit down, Joel," he said quietly. Then after a moment he went on. "So you haven't given it up after all."

"Yes, I have—but how could the things I told you have been concocted out of mere prenatal memory. I don't see—"

"It is very important now that you understand the meaning of your dream and the things I have to say. I can say them now and expect your mature mind to comprehend what your child's mind could not. First of all, you have probably never known that you had a twin, born dead, inadequately developed in the womb."

"No—I was never told that."

"It was a female. You would have had a sister."

"Then—?"

"I am sure of it. Your dream of a world of paradise which you shared with a beautiful girl—your separation from her—your feeling of having come to a place where you didn't belong, while she went to another—this yearning and nostalgia for some star-world

where she now lives—all of this is easily explainable in terms of pre-natal experience."

Joel shook his head, smiling wryly. "You'd have a hard time convincing me of that, Doctor. I'm willing to admit that I made it all up, dreamed it in sheer imagination. But *your* explanation is even more fantastic than the one I tried to give you when I was a kid."

Matthews' face did not change. He continued to look at Joel gravely. "Until you can understand fully the source of this fantasy, you cannot give it up. I ask you to try, for the sake of your own peace of mind.

"You were present when your twin died. In the womb you went through the most agonizing personal loss that a human being is called upon to bear, the death of his dearest loved one. Don't say that you could not be aware of this! We know better now. Words, sights, sounds, you did not have, of course. But you had feelings, emotions. You knew the emotions of intimate companionship in a world of peace and paradise. You knew the emotions of loss of that companionship.

"This death precipitated your own premature birth. You were not ready for birth. It was forced upon you. You lost your paradise as well as the companion who shared it with you. It was only natural that you should be burdened with an overwhelming nos-

talgia for that which you had lost. "As you grew up your mind fitted the external world into the matrix you once knew but could no longer identify. Paradise was not around you. It was far away. You learned of the stars, and your yearning seized upon the reality of the stars to place your lost paradise there. Likewise, it populated this far-away world with your lost companion. And so you began telling your parents of a planet circling about an invisible star where dwelt a girl you had once known in a world of flowers and clouds and sweet music. Don't you see how easy it is to understand in light of the simple physiological facts of life and its genesis?"

"No."

"Poets have known these fantasies throughout the ages. Their works are strewn with their haunting memories of fairyland, the sylvan, idyllic landscapes — the shepherds and the pipes, the beautiful sunrise in the land where there is no hate or terror. They tell of these things and build them out of the emotions they once knew deep in the mother's womb. But this nostalgia has to be recognized for what it is — and forgotten, for there is no going back to the land from which you came!"

"The poets don't forget. They keep on building with this fairy stuff."

"Are you a poet?"

Joel looked quizzically at the Doctor for a long time and at last

allowed his lips to part in a slow smile. "Maybe that's what I am, Doc. Maybe I am nothing but a poet, after all."

III

It took Dr. Cardon an hour to get to the hospital and another forty-five minutes to sterilize and close up the wound that pierced completely through Joel's cheek. It was long after midnight when he walked unsteadily from the emergency room.

"You sure you can make it?" Dr. Cardon asked. "I think you ought to have someone drive you home."

"I can make it. Don't worry about me." Joel clenched his teeth against the fiery pain that seemed to envelope his head. He reached the car and lay his head on his arms across the steering wheel for a moment. The only thought that kept hammering between the waves of pain in his face was the thought that the accident should not have happened.

He sat up sharply with a return of the rage that had driven him to slam the inoffensive flashlight against the phase shifter. Nothing could have gone wrong — everything was absolutely right, and the test should have been a complete success — unless it had been made to go wrong!

That was an utterly insane thought, yet any other made even less sense. Decisively, Joel twisted the ignition key and turned the

car back toward the plant. He approached cautiously, but everything was dark and the cars had all gone from the laboratory parking area. Only the assembly lines were brightly lit.

He brought a flashlight from the car and unlocked the door. The smell of steam and burned insulation still pervaded the room. He waited a moment to grow accustomed to the dim light that came from the assembly buildings, then without turning on his light he moved forward. The familiarity given by months and years of work in this room made it possible to move almost entirely by spatial perception alone.

Joel reached the mass of the phase shifter in the center of the lab. He paused for a moment, running his hand over the sheared surface where the halves of the five hundred ton magnet had been split and shifted like a piece of tin crimped by dull shears. The force that had been meant to shift the transmitter basket to the Moon had been expended here.

It had been *made* to happen.

There was one way to do it. No one who was not entirely familiar with the most technical details of the shifter would know how to accomplish it. Grimly, Joel moved to the panel that stretched across the opposite end of the lab, and went to the other side of it.

With a screwdriver he began removal of the heavy steel cover protecting the intricate mesh cir-

cuits which controlled the degree and direction of electron-wave phase shift. He gave a short exclamation of satisfaction and bitterness as his fingers moved over the edge of the panel. Only two of the snap-fit screws held it in place. The others had been removed.

Then he caught a faint, familiar odor behind him, different from the wet, smoky smell filling the air. He felt cautiously above the surface of the workbench. A still-warm soldering iron lay in its holder.

Joel hesitated, glancing about in the darkness. Whoever had been working here had been gone only moments. The question was whether he had fled the building entirely, or whether he still lurked somewhere in the darkness. Evidently he had seen Joel's car approaching and had hastily replaced the cover with a couple of screws, and jerked out the soldering iron cord, not thinking to take the iron with him.

Obviously, the man had hoped to restore the circuits to their normal state, so that the reason for the disaster would not be found. He would not have remained, to risk being identified, however, Joel decided. And as he turned on the light and removed the panel he went over in his mind the list of engineers and assistants who had the knowledge necessary to make the changes.

The panel fell away and he

lowered it carefully to the floor. Then he turned the light into the mass of intricate wiring, searching for the critical connections that would have to be changed —

They were three. Eighteen of them had been changed. Six had been restored before his entrance had interrupted the work of putting them back.

Joel stood motionless in long, astonished wonder, staring at the panel. What possible reason could lie behind this deliberate sabotage? Which one of the men he worked with daily, whom he considered a friend — which one of them had done this?

There was one obvious answer: it was a job of Russian spying. But he was afraid of the obvious. A spy would have been content with copying and stealing. This kind of sabotage was not a part of their program — unless they recognized the necessity of stopping the work that was so close to providing a bridge to the stars. It would take the Russians time to catch up. Recognizing the urgency of getting into space first, they might have ordered this attack.

But Joel was still unsatisfied. He knew how many other organizations had come a cropper through overconfidence, yet he still believed his guard about the phase shifter was spy proof. And that meant searching for another answer — where no answers seemed to exist at all.

The whole attack, however, was

far more than mere sabotage or military spying. To Joel, at least. It was a personal attack against things which mattered to him and him alone. It was a direct attack against his life-long star dream.

The human race had all the ages in which to reach the stars. He had only a single lifetime. Less, even — for if he succeeded only when he was an old man it would be defeat. To find *her* only when he was old would be a mockery. If he and Nahlia had nothing left of youth to offer each other it would be better that they never met.

A slight sound came suddenly from somewhere on the other side of the panel. Joel tensed and flipped off the light. The sound had been like that of a footprint on the glass-littered floor. Whoever had been tampering with the panel had not left the room, after all.

Cautiously, Joel hurried the long way around behind the panel to block the main door to the lab. It was probable that all the others were locked and the intruder would have to escape by that route. Joel wondered why he had not done so earlier. It seemed futile to remain after the tampering was discovered.

As he came from behind the far end of the panel Joel glimpsed a sudden darting shadow leaving the protection of the supply racks across from the shifter. He flipped on the light. The intruder simul-

taneously flung his arm before his face to hide it, and hurled a heavy wrench in the direction of the beam.

Joel was quick enough to dodge, but in doing so he smashed the light against the side of the panel. The darkness blinded him for a moment to all sense of shape and movement. Then he was overwhelmed by the slashing, jabbing fists of his assailant.

The man was no stranger, however. In that brief moment before his upflung arm hid his face Joel had caught a glimpse of familiar features.

Now, as he fought back the vicious blows, he cried out in bewildered protest. "Slossen! Have you gone crazy? What do you —?"

The engineer's fist caught Joel on the injured cheek. He felt the newly placed stitches rip open and a flare of pain bathed his face. "Slossen —"

He stumbled and put his hands up weakly as the fresh pain dulled all other perceptions. He heard a grunt of exertion and sensed a brief pause in which he was helpless to act. Then a blow of iron crashed against his skull and he fell forward on the concrete floor.

IV

Katherine Nygren sat by the window of the darkened living room, overlooking the lights of

the city. The house was built on the slopes above town and from it she could see faintly the rectangle of light that marked the sprawling properties of Weston Aircraft.

It seemed like hours since Tom Nygren had called with news of the disaster. Joel ought to have come by now, or at least called, if his injuries were no greater than his father had indicated. She would wait fifteen minutes longer, she thought. If nothing happened by then she would start calling to find out what had become of Joel.

None of the anxiety and tension within her was apparent in her face or in the lines of her long, firm body. She sat on the sofa by the window, leaning across the back of it, obviously at ease. But her mind was envisioning a scene miles across the city. Joel had taken her to the laboratory enough times that she could close her eyes and see every desk and workbench and piece of equipment there. She knew just what the scene was like — the shaken walls and the litter of glass on the floor, the twisted, broken shifter on which Joel had spent the efforts of his whole life —

She wondered for a small, fleeing instant if she were justified, but she knew there was no room for doubt in her heart. Between her and Joel there had to be a decision for one or the other of them. There had never been a possible compromise.

It was the one thing Joel had not recognized. She had given him warning enough, however, she thought.

A sudden dark motion in the street outside caught her attention. A car drew up before the house, lights off. Katherine uttered a short gasp as she recognized the car and the figure now running toward the house.

Quickly, she ran to a cabinet drawer on the other side of the room. Then, more slowly, she moved to the door as a faint knock sounded. Carl Slossen darted inside as she opened the door for him.

"Kathy —" Slossen reached out as Katherine backed away, pushing his hands away from her.

"Have you gone crazy, Carl? What did you come here for, at a time like this? Where's Joel? What happened to him?"

"Joel's all right. He went back to the lab to investigate the damage further. But he recognized me, Kathy. He knows I'm responsible for the ruin of the shifter. We've got to get away. Right now. How soon can you be ready —?"

"You *are* crazy —"

"There's no other way, Kathy." Slossen's voice took on a pleading tone. "You've got to come with me now, or we'll never have another chance."

"You've had all the chance you'll ever have," said Katherine. She stepped to the table behind her and picked up an envelope

which she extended to Slossen.

"There's five thousand dollars cash in this, Carl. It's more than you deserve, but don't ever say I haven't been fair."

For a moment she could see the engineer's stunned, incredulous expression in the dim light that filtered through the windows from the street lights. Then his mouth distorted in bitter, obscene rage. "You dirty — little — two-timing bitch —" He hurled the envelope to the floor.

Katherine smiled faintly. "I wouldn't be so careless about that money if I were you. You're going to need it, I'm sure. It's mine. It's not marked. You'll be safe using it. As for my being a bitch — you're hardly in a position to call any names."

"If you think I'm going to let you get away with this —" Slossen advanced toward Katherine, his hands rising like fierce, white-knuckled claws.

"Stop!" Katherine raised her own hand, and in the dimness Slossen caught the glint of a polished gun barrel.

He remained looking at it hypnotically for a long moment, then his eyes looked upon her face again. "Mrs. Katherine Nygren, the typical suburban housewife," he mused slowly. "Who would ever have dreamed that behind that lovely face of yours and inside that sweet, tall body there could be generated such a dirty, vicious scheme —"

Katherine laughed sharply. "That sweet looking outside covers a pretty tough gal. Oddly enough, that's because I happen to have a few ideals, but you wouldn't understand about them — being willing to ruin your best friend, take his wife to bed with you, and destroy everything that has meaning for him."

"And what do you think you're doing?" Slossen demanded. "Everybody knows about Joel's crazy dream. What the hell kind of fidelity do you call it when he spends his life trying to get to some other woman and leave you flat? Sometimes you're so damned crazy you're sweet, Kathy, but you're not kidding anybody unless it's yourself."

"Shut up. Take your money and get out."

Slossen bent down slowly and picked up the envelope. "I guess you're right. I'll probably be needing this pretty badly. But there's just one thing more —" He took a step toward her and she motioned him away with the gun. "—You've been willing to be a lousy bitch because you love Joel even though he doesn't give a damn about you. Don't you think my motives could be at least as clean as yours?"

"Get out!"

Slossen stood looking at her out of the dimness. She could see the expression changing on his face, the rage draining away. A ragged, haunted look seeped into his eyes. "Goodbye, Kathy," he said.

She returned to her place by the window and watched Carl Slossen drive away. She wondered where he was going, but she didn't care. The thought of him sickened her. He had wanted nothing but to get her into bed with him. For that he betrayed his friend, destroying Joel's life work — and his own as well, for he had worked long upon the phase shifter and hoped for its success. With a lying promise, Katherine had been able to destroy him.

Bitch. She hugged the ugly, nasty, meaningful word to herself and let it spurt from between her lips with bitter vigor. She was all that Carl Slossen had said, and more. But none of that mattered now.

She and Joel were safe once more. And by the time he got finances and cooperation to rebuild the phase shifter it would surely be too late. Perhaps this time he would forget —

She glanced at the wall clock glowing in the darkness. If only she had some word from him now. Carl had said he'd gone back to the plant. She could call there but Joel didn't like it when he was busy in the lab. She would give him another half hour. If he didn't call by then or come home she'd phone him regardless of his irritation at being disturbed.

There was a chance he might someday find out she was responsible for the destruction of the phase shifter. It was a necessary

chance and one she was willing to take, but she didn't think it was a very great one. Slossen's work would automatically be considered a product of political sabotage. If he were caught and told the truth he would be laughed at because of its triviality in comparison with what they would believe he was hiding. Only Joel might have a moment of doubt, but Katherine was confident she could make him see that Slossen was seizing upon a plausible, drawn-from-the-facts argument of lesser magnitude in order to save his neck from an espionage charge.

It was as airtight as she could make it.

For a moment she felt a sting of guilt and sorrow for Carl Slossen. She remembered his face as he said goodbye, and wondered what truth there was in his protestations of love. Perhaps all the truth he was capable of, but that was not enough for her.

Joel was safe. She and Joel were safe from his crazy dream. She wondered sometimes if even she did not believe in it just a little. It was his whole life and nothing he did had any meaning outside of it. Wherever they went, whatever they did, the imaginary Nahlia walked between them.

It was a mild insanity that should never have caused any real difficulty as long as Joel's dream girl remained inaccessible on some distant star. Sometimes Katherine believed she even succeeded in be-

coming Nahlia for Joel — for a few short moments at least.

She had married Joel only partly aware of his fantasy. She knew about the star and the dream. Joel had told her all about it a week before they were married. He told her he expected to find the mythical Nahlia someday, too. That was the part that Katherine had not fully understood.

She smiled to herself in the darkness. It wouldn't have mattered anyway. She would have married Joel no matter how crazy his dreams or his intentions of making them real. But there was misunderstanding on Joel's part, too. Katherine was sure he never realized that she, having married him, had no intention of defaulting to an imagined dream girl.

It had been difficult enough in the first place, overcoming her own inherent opposition — and then his. Up until the time she was twenty-eight Katherine had no intention whatever of getting married. Like most of her sex and generation, she had long recognized what the sociologists would never come out and admit plainly without hedging—that the time-hallowed institution of marriage had completely gone to pot. She listened sympathetically to her former school friend bemoan the tragedy of being no more than the favorite playmate in an otherwise unacknowledged harem. And she watched their desperate attempts to get even by the old

principle of 'an eye for an eye', or 'what's sauce for the gander'.

And then she met Joel. It happened before the war when she was doing a series for a national weekly on the highly precarious state of the aircraft industry at that time. Joel was Chief Research Engineer at Weston. He was, in fact, the whole research staff.

She hadn't expected it to happen. All her past decisions had been set up to insure her against it for the remainder of her life. They went down the drain.

Six months later, when they were sitting in Marty's one evening and Katherine was on her fourth old-fashioned, she undertook to explain the facts of life to Joel.

"You know what's going to happen to us, darling?" she said.

"No. What is?" said Joel.

"We're going to become very good friends." Katherine touched the glass to her lips again. "When we're both about forty you'll have distinguished looking gray hair and be struggling to keep a paunch under control. You'll be famous and successful, and so will I. I'll be an accomplished journalist with my own penthouse apartment and sometimes you'll come to see me and we'll talk about old times, and you'll take me out to dinner and the theater once in a while, and people behind us will whisper behind their hands and ask each other why those nice

people never got married to each other. That's what's going to happen to us."

"Rather a gloomy outlook, I'd say," said Joel. He waved the waiter away, who had come up at Katherine's beckoning.

"Don't send him away," she said. "I've got to have another old-fashioned."

"You've passed your limit, Kathy."

"I have to go 'way past it to get said what I have to say."

Joel nodded, and the waiter went away to fill their order. "Suppose you say what must be said, and then I'm going to see that you get home and start sleeping off the grandmother of all hangovers."

"Won't you do anything to keep what I was talking about from happening to us?"

"What could I do about it? Don't you want us to become good friends?"

"No. I want us to be married. Then what I said wouldn't have to happen to us. Wouldn't you like to marry me, Joel?"

"It would be the nicest thing in the world, if I were conceited enough to think you could ever be in love with me."

"I am in love with you, and I don't want you to get the idea I say that to somebody every other week. It scares me so much I have to be a little drunk to say it to you."

"But if you were sober —"

"I'd want to say it and couldn't. I've wanted to say it for six months. I had to because you never would, even though you do like me a little bit."

"I like you a great deal, Kathy."

"That's good enough. I'll buy it that way. I'd sooner have it that way than have your undying devotion — while you spend half your nights in somebody else's bed."

"Kathy —"

"You've never slept in a woman's bed, and I swore I'd die an old maid if I couldn't have a virgin husband. To find you was more kindness than I expected fate and mother nature to supply in my whole lifetime."

"You're not bashful about anything tonight, are you, Kathy?" Joel reached out and touched her hand and took the glass from her.

"Joel —" She was starting to cry, and her fingers clasped his in desperation. "All my adult life I've been afraid of falling in love and ending up the sweet young suburban housewife—who has to kick half the Country Club bitches out of her bed before she can get in with her own husband.

"I've never seen anything else. And then you came along. Don't ask me how I know about you. I can tell. Maybe there's something wrong with you that you haven't had a lot of other girls. I'll take a chance on that. But maybe you were kind of looking for some-

body like me —"

Joel came around the table and took her in his arms and kissed her tear-streaked face. "Maybe that was it," he whispered. "Maybe I was looking for somebody a lot like you."

She had been awfully drunk that night. She wouldn't have said it otherwise. And in spite of the alcohol she could still remember every word of their conversation. She was so very sure of her and Joel that night — and the next one, too, when she was cold sober and blushing furiously in his presence over the memory of what she had said.

And then almost a month later he had told her about his childhood dream that he could never forget. About Nahlia.

At first she couldn't believe he was serious, but his face was so sober she couldn't laugh at the fantasy of it. She only waited calmly and patiently until he finished and then glanced at her with a wistful smile on his face.

"Now you see why I can't let you be in love with me, why it would never be fair to you —"

"Maybe you think that changes things," Katherine said quietly. "But it doesn't. I can't be honest and at the same time say I believe or even understand this dream that you belong somewhere else, *with* someone else. But I'm not laughing at you, Joel. Everything I have said is true. I

never wanted any part of this sex or marriage business for myself. And then I had to run into you. You're the sweetest guy I ever knew and I don't care if you *are* crazy. I'm not going to let you get away.

"Even if I haven't ever tried it I know I can be plenty darn good in bed. And Kathy in bed is better than Nahlia on a star umpty million light years away."

"You're drunk again, Kathy darling."

"It's wonderful, isn't it? I can say all the nasty, sweet things I want to say to you and you can't scold me a bit. I'll be any kind of girl you want — Cleopatra, Madame Pompadour, Priscilla — you name her and I'll be her. I'll even be all of them, one after the other. A different one every night of the week."

It had worked out better than either of them had supposed. Katherine knew she was one of those girls born to spinsterhood. On her wedding day every nerve in her being seemed to scream out that she was making a mistake, that Joel would betray her. But he never had, and she kept her promise to him.

Only when the war was over did she learn the basic purpose of the research on which he had labored so intensely during all their years together. She had taken for granted it was aeronautical research. And then he had told her that it was a faster-

than-light space drive and he believed he was on the right track with it.

Nothing was said then of Nahlia or the star or of Joel's dream. That had been a mistake. They should have talked about it. She should have let him bring it out, instead of keeping it bottled up.

Not that she believed in Nahlia any more than she ever had, but she *did* believe now that it was possible for Joel to go to the stars, and if he did he would never come back. The obsession was too strong. Once out there, he would speed from star to star in search of the fulfillment to a blind, fruitless dream, and all that had been between Joel and Katherine would be forgotten.

It was a sick dream, a little disease that robbed part of his mind of its rightful function, but in all the rest of him there was nothing evil or sick or wrong. There was nothing that was not justified to combat this sickness, to keep it from robbing her of Joel forever. She was justified in destroying his work, in destroying Carl Slossen.

But even as she looked out over the city toward the lights of the aircraft plant and contemplated her victory she knew it was no victory. She had lost. She had been defeated from the beginning. She and Joel had been good lovers, and she had given him every kind of woman he could

have wanted. But even while they embraced she knew his mind was filled with an unreal image out of a dream. Their marriage had always been adultery, because Joel had been mated elsewhere from the day of his birth.

Hastily, she wiped the tears from her face as the phone rang. She ran across the room and picked it up in breathless anxiety. It was Joel's father.

"Katherine, you'd better come down to the hospital," he said. "Joel's been hurt. We need you here."

V

He seemed to be looking back, across a great gap in time. It was dark and blank where it should have been filled with a thousand important happenings. Uppermost was the thought of a message whose importance staggered him with its immensity. But the message itself would not come. His muscles knotted and sweat glistened on his face in the effort to recall.

"Lie still and rest, now. Everything is all right."

The annoying voice came out of a growing brightness that seemed to surround him. It interrupted the exhausting effort of his body and mind. Enraged, he renewed the struggle.

And then he had it. A word

burst from his lips as if a dam had shattered within. "Slossen!" he whispered fiercely. "Find Slossen. He's the one!"

"Be still, now. We'll find him just as soon as we can."

Out of a great, dark peace he became aware that another day had passed, and now he could see the room and those about him. His father and Katherine were there. They were talking in low voices to Dr. Cardon and another man Joel didn't recognize.

Katherine was the first to become aware that he had opened his eyes. She had been looking at his sheet-covered form for several seconds before the change in his appearance seemed to register.

Then she jumped to her feet and ran towards him. "Joel — Joel!"

He pressed his hand against her back and felt the familiar texture of her dress and the delicate pattern of her rib bones. The warm moisture of her breath and her tears was pleasurable against his neck.

He pushed her back gently with his hands on her shoulders. "I've got a feeling it's been an awfully long time since I last saw you. What happened anyway? How long have I been here?"

"You've been here six days. You were found on the floor of the lab with a fractured skull."

"Yeah." Joel's eyes seemed to shift focus to something far away.

"It was Slossen. Did they catch him yet?"

"No." Katherine's voice was so low he didn't hear. As if recognizing its inaudibility, she repeated, "No. No one thought to look for him until you mentioned his name yesterday."

The shadow of Tom Nygren's dark-suited figure moved up behind Katherine, and Joel looked over her shoulder to his father's face.

"Hello, Dad. I guess I made even more of a bust of things than we thought at first."

"How do you feel? If you'd rather not talk, we can come back later."

"I'm all right — outside of a head that feels slightly larger than this room looks. What about Slossen? Do you know anything about him?"

Tom Nygren shook his head. "No one has seen him since the day of the accident, but the same is true with most of the other lab men. We haven't called them back. After you mentioned Slossen's name yesterday we tried to locate him, but he's disappeared from his apartment. What makes you so certain he's the one responsible for this?"

"I saw him the night of the accident. I went back to check on the equipment and he was still there. I got a good look at him before he managed to land a chunk of lead cable against my skull. He tampered with the

phase circuits. Whether he's operating as a spy or not, I don't know. But there was nothing wrong with the equipment itself that night. It would have operated successfully if Slossen hadn't altered it."

"We'll get the police to intensify the search at once. It seems impossible, however, that Slossen could have been the one. He was checked out at the gate after the accident, and the guards insist there is no record of a return since that time."

"He got back somehow. But more important than finding Slossen is restoration of the phase shifter for another try. Can't you get something started in that direction before I get out of here? How long have I got to stay, anyway?"

Tom Nygren shook his head once more. "You know General Thorpe's position. I'm afraid there won't be any more test. The Government won't allot more funds to the work."

"Then we've got to do it with our own money, Dad!" Joel struggled to raise his head and shoulders from the bed. "Can't you see that it would have worked except for Slossen? We can re-use the equipment we've got, if we have to. The yoke and magnets can be realigned. The coils can be rebuilt."

"I don't know, Joel. You've got to understand that I've never had faith in this research. I don't feel

justified in risking the funds which have to suffice for your mother's and my retirement —"

"Then get General Thorpe down here! Let me talk to him. If we can get it through his head that the failure was due solely to sabotage he ought to be willing to recommend the additional funds. If he won't, I'll hock everything I own to get the shifter back in working condition."

"I'll talk to the General," Tom Nygren agreed. "Perhaps I can do some good. If not, we can talk later. For now, it's more important that you get well. I'll see you tomorrow." He turned to Katherine. "I think we'd better go now."

She had risen and was standing by his father. He was startled by the cold fear marking her face and eyes as he glanced at her again. "Don't look so unhappy, honey," he said. "I didn't get killed."

"But you might have," she said, trying to conceal the agony in her voice.

After they left, he lay staring at the light green paint on the ceiling. The mystery of Slossen's attack was already fading in importance. Its effects would be overcome. They'd revise and increase the security of their guard. Perhaps the accident had set them back a year. It was not too much compared with the setback that total failure would have given them.

Another year to prove the drive. Three more to build a ship. He'd be forty-nine then —

He closed his eyes and tried to draw a blankness over his mind. But that was no good. There was no running away from the decision that had to be made, the decision about Kathy.

Once, no decision was necessary. It could be taken for granted that no earthly thing or person had a hold on him. He was a stranger who did not belong, and nothing nor no one would make claim upon him.

He wondered when that had been. It had to be before Kathy. The moment he first saw her she had seized upon him with a hold which seemed beyond his power to break. He had no right to her love.

But in those days the chance of correcting the error that brought him here seemed so remote that it was easy to put off the question of his right to Kathy — or his fairness to Nahlia and to himself. Now the question had to be faced. He had to recognize that he had done something irreparable to the lives of all of them.

Forty-nine years old.

To whom did he owe the most, he wondered. Kathy, who had given him all her life and love? Or Nahlia, with whom he had exchanged such fervent vows in a fairyland so long ago that it might never have existed?

Sometimes he wondered if it actually did exist. Sometimes he wondered if *they* were right, if he only longed for his mysterious, unknown *déjà vu* of the womb. It had been so long since he had been able to reach out across the starways and touch the mind of Nahlia and know that she was there. He had been able to do it when he was a child. She had begged him to come and find her, and he promised so faithfully that he would.

But that's the way old Dr. Matthews had said it was. In childhood these things of the *déjà vu* are strong and insistent. With maturity they fade, and the world of reality takes over.

No human being had ever offered him a moment's belief. To all of them it had been a thing of fantasy — or insanity. His mother had thought him queer, his father had tried to ridicule him out of it, Dr. Matthews had explained it away so carefully and scientifically. Kathy had tolerated and fought it silently, but she had never believed.

There were other men, however, whose judgment would have been less severe. In his early years he had searched them out frantically to find some confirmation, and he had found it — among the poets Dr. Matthews had spoken of. And among the prophets. They knew and wrote of the things that were real to him.

He remembered still the ecstasy that swept over him at the first reading of Wordsworth's lines:

"Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:

The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,

Hath had elsewhere its setting —"

He was enraged at what he considered the poet's cowardly, later apology for advancing a theory of Man's pre-Earth life, but now he thought he could understand the forces that had demanded such an apology, and he sympathized with Wordsworth.

He exulted in the sonorous declaration of Jeremiah: "— the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee —"

Robert Chambers knew it, suggesting life upon the Earth is the "sacrifice

Of those who for some good discerned

Will gladly give up Paradise?" And Goethe knew the land of faerie where men once lived.

"Knowest thou the land where the lemon blossoms into flower,

Oranges glow like gold in a dark and leafy bower?

Where marble statues stand and at thee silently gaze? —"

He could quote them all, the hundred or more who had not

been afraid to declare the vision of what they had seen and known. Were it not for his own bitter problem he could have laughed at the absurd explanations of a Dr. Matthews, searching myopically for Paradise in the dark and sticky womb.

But he could not laugh when he thought of Nahlia. With gratitude he observed that her remembered image seemed clearer now than at any time since he was a child. But it was not Nahlia herself he could see as he once had. It was only memory.

He wondered if she had given up.

Or had she succumbed to the persuasion that the land they had once known was no more than a myth? How could she have forgotten, he wondered? How could she have forgotten that land of music and bright skies, of peace and freedom where no evil was done or dreamed? He remembered a day there, on a green hill, beneath a wind-touched tree. They had learned they were to go out of Paradise, and they clung to one another the whole day through, fearful, expectant, vowed promises to meet again no matter where they went. And after that night came he never saw her again in reality.

He couldn't remember it all, but he had screamed at the Gods in his anguish at the error they could not rectify. He and Nahlia were destined for the same star.

They had been promised. But he was not sent.

There was an error. He did not know whose. But it could not be changed, and he was born a stranger in a land to which he did not belong, in which he could never find a place to call home. And Nahlia was across a gulf that even the Gods themselves could not bridge.

Forty-five years, he thought. What had become of her in that time? Had she done as he had — found a degree of happiness in trying to forget their impossible vows to each other? Or perhaps, was she dead? He did not know the meaning of death. There was nothing to tell him that they went back to the same Paradise from which they came. If Nahlia were dead, all hope was gone. He refused to think upon it.

And always there was Kathy. He owed her more than he could ever pay. He owed her all the happiness he had found in a land that was not his. Could he sacrifice her now even to claim fulfillment of the vows he and Nahlia had made —

He was exhausted by the indecision. For a long time he lay, trying to impress all thought out of his mind. And now it seemed he succeeded. His organism seemed to take unto itself a new course and he was like a distant observer watching a strange destruction creep in.

He was vaguely aware that he

ought to stop whatever it was that was going on, but it seemed so much easier not to. At last he forced open his eyes and felt about. Panic seized him. He touched the light button at the head of the bed and called out, "Nurse!"

He heard her in a moment, crisp, efficient, hellishly self-righteous. "You'll have to be more quiet, Mr. Nygren. The Doctor—"

"I can't see! What's happened to my eyes? There's nothing but a fog. It's hot as hell in here. Do something about the heat."

He clawed at the pajama collar and wiped at the thick film of sweat on his face. The nurse touched his racing pulse for a moment and gave a faint gasp. Then she jabbed a thermometer in his mouth and started for the door. "Just hold that, Mr. Nygren, and I'll call Dr. Cardon at once."

VI

Katherine watched the thick rain from the window of the hospital consultation room. Beside her, Joel's father sat staring idly into space. Since Joel's brief moment of consciousness they had spent three more days in this room, with scarcely a break—and with almost no words between them.

But now Tom Nygren spoke. He had just hung up the phone

on a call from the plant.

"Joel was right in one thing, anyway," he said in dull tones. "That was from Preston, Captain of the Plant Guards. Slossen did go back that night. He picked a time just as the guards were changing. He checked out, then told the guard he had forgotten something and persuaded him not to bother with checking him in and out again since he was coming right back. Knowing him, the guard let him get away with it and went off shift. So we know Joel didn't dream up that part of it."

Katherine shook her head in despair. "None of that matters now! Why can't they find out what's wrong with Joel? When are we going to know—?"

They turned at a sound from the doorway. Dr. Cardon had opened it quietly and entered the room. "I think you will know very soon, Mrs. Nygren," he said sympathetically. He sat down beside Joel's father, facing Katherine.

"It's very difficult to say what—"

"Please say it as bluntly as you must," said Katherine. "We want to know."

Dr. Cardon hesitated, his face bleak. He looked into her eyes. "Of course you do. And there's no other way, really—except to say that Joel has virtually no chance at all."

Katherine gave a sharp cry and

turned from them, pressing her palms brutally against her eyes.

"We located Mr. Slossen yesterday, according to your directions, Mr. Nygren. He was in St. Joseph's hospital across town, where he had been taken the night he collapsed in the airport administration building. Last night he died."

Katherine turned again, a look of incredible bewilderment on her face, as if not knowing whether to give way to grief or thanksgiving.

"We have also located all of the other men present at the time of the disaster. Most of them are now here in the hospital. Half of them appear to be within a few hours of death. Two have died already."

"But the cause!" exclaimed Tom Nygren. "What is the meaning of this illness? Did it have to do with the accident at the plant?"

"As near as we can tell—and all of the qualified men in the city have been called in on this group of cases—it is a form of radiation illness. But it's a kind with symptoms differing markedly from anything previously encountered in this category. Perhaps you could enlighten us in regard to the specific physical cause, Mr. Nygren."

Tom Nygren shook his head. "Then men who are sick are the only ones who really understand it. And what happened was en-

tirely accidental, unplanned. Any radiations involved were unlooked for. But is there no medical procedure you can use that will offset these effects?"

"The science of radiation medicine is very new. We've tried everything we know and each of the men continues to deteriorate. The red corpuscle count is diminishing at a fatal rate. We've given repeated blood transfusions. The process continues. I can offer you no hope at all, outside the performance of some unexpected miracle. I'm sorry, Mrs. Nygren, and Mr. Nygren. I wish there were something else I could say, but there is nothing."

Katherine had stood motionless, almost as if she had ceased to be alive. Now she took a slow step toward Dr. Cardon and put out her hand. "May we—see him before—Is there any chance of his regaining consciousness?"

"As I left him just now it appeared that he might be conscious shortly. If so, I will have the nurse call you at once. Otherwise, you may come as you wish—as it appears that he is close to the end."

"Thank you, Doctor. We'll wait for your call, if you think there is a chance of seeing him conscious," said Katherine. "There is something I must ask Mr. Nygren before we see Joel."

"Of course." Dr. Cardon turned and left as quietly as he had entered.

Katherine faced the window and the gray sky again, a fragment of her mind aware of the dark sheet of rain spilling down the glass. "When this is over," she said carefully, "I want you to know that I will go away. You will never see me or be reminded of me again. But until then you will have to see me and endure the knowledge that—" She whirled as if to face the attack she knew must come. "—you must know that I am the one who killed Joel!"

"Kathy—" Tom Nygren rose from his chair and came toward her. "You're hysterical, Kathy. Nothing you have done is remotely responsible for Joel's condition. There's no reason for blaming—"

"Listen to me, and see how much blame you will have for me. I love Joel so much that I'd do anything in my power to trade places with him right now. He's the only one I've ever loved. But you know what our marriage has been. From the beginning I've had to fight this ghost that haunts his mind.

"You don't know what it's been like! Living with him, loving him, wanting his love—and always, when he began to let himself believe he loved me, the ghost would beckon. Constantly, I had to go after him, call him back from this sick world in a little corner of his mind into which he retreated. It was as if he couldn't endure to

let himself be possessed by anything in the world, as if he were afraid to love or be loved—"

Tom Nygren put his hands on her arms and drew her towards him. "I know, Kathy. Don't you think I know what you've gone through? Joel's mother and I went through it all in the years before you knew him. I've admired you and loved you for what you've been willing to endure, and for the love you've given my son. No other woman would have done what you have. He was born with this sickness in his mind. Because of you, I'm sure he has lived longer and happier than he ever would have otherwise. This nonsense about your going away —"

Katherine pushed herself away. "You haven't heard it all. When he appeared on the verge of completing his faster-than-light drive for a spaceship, I knew I was faced with the loss of all I'd fought for. Joel was mine by right of all the years of our marriage—not this dream-witch, Nahlia, who would never let him rest. But I knew that if he did go out into space, he would never come back. He would look for the mysterious star where he thought Nahlia lived. When he failed to find her there he would go to another, always believing he'd made some error. Do you understand? Don't you see that this is what he would have done?"

"Yes—I knew this, too."

"I wasn't going to be robbed by a delusion. I did the only thing possible. I determined to destroy the means of searching for that delusion."

"Kathy—"

"I hired Slossen to destroy the ship. I paid him with promises and cash. Through his hand I killed Joel."

For a moment Tom Nygren appeared stunned, not wanting to believe what he heard. But there was no other course except to believe. A throbbing rage came over him as he looked into her dark, defiant eyes and the white, stretched skin of her face. He felt a swift urge to press the slim, white throat between his fingers—

Then the emotion vanished. He felt a weakness consuming him. His legs trembled and his hands fell to his side.

"You did the thing you had a right to do," he said softly. "You had a right to fight Joel's phantom for possession of him. Don't blame yourself, Kathy. I never will. I'm proud of your love—and your courage."

She stared at him a moment and then the mask that held back her emotions crumbled. She let him enfold her in his arms while deep sobs shook her body.

"I don't know—I couldn't have known—" she cried. "Carl Slossen told me there would be no danger. He wouldn't have exposed himself if he'd been lying."

"Of course you couldn't know.

None of us could have," murmured Tom Nygren.

When her sobs diminished, Katherine raised her head and looked at her father-in-law. "I didn't think you knew how it was with me and Joel. I didn't think you could look upon me without hating me. But I had to tell you."

"It's all right, Kathy. I think perhaps we ought to go in to Joel now."

"But—if he wakes, should I tell him? That's the thing I had to ask you. Do you want him to know what I have done to him?"

"No. Joel would understand, if he could comprehend all the factors, but it's too great a burden to put upon him in the last minutes of his life. Please don't tell him, Kathy."

Even as they turned from the window, the nurse entered the room and beckoned them. "Mr. Nygren is partly conscious now," she said. "Dr. Cardon thinks you should come in."

"Thank you, nurse."

Silently, they followed the rapid steps of the nurse along the corridor. At the entrance to Joel's room they paused. Joel stirred, his face turned toward them, and he smiled weakly.

"Come in—Dad—Kathy—"

Slowly they approached the bed on either side. Joel reached out a hand to them, but his eyes seemed to be concentrating their gaze in the direction of the window.

"I know what the score is," he said in a faint voice. "I know I'm not going to pull out of this. Doc said something about the radiations at the time of the accident. That was it, wasn't it, Dad?"

Tom Nygren nodded. "I guess it was, Joel."

Joel smiled again, an expression of serenity and contentment on his face. "It's not bad. I don't mind a bit." He turned suddenly. "But I haven't been fair with you, Kathy. I shouldn't be leaving you like this. You gave me all your life and all your love—and I gave you nothing."

"You gave me everything, darling—all the happiness I ever hoped for."

"It wasn't fair," he repeated, turning his head back toward the window. "But I didn't know what else to do. Nahlia and I—I just didn't belong to Earth, to you—it wasn't my fault."

"You didn't ever believe in Nahlia, did you? I don't blame you much. It must have sounded like something out of a nightmare. But now I'm learning a lot of things I didn't understand before. I know why I didn't hear anything of Nahila for so many long years. The thing I had feared so much I would consider it had actually happened. Nahlia couldn't get across to me any more. Now she can—"

He glanced intently at the bright rectangle of the window.

"She wants me to be sure to tell you I understand what you did in destroying the phase shifter, Kathy, that I have no blame in my heart. She—"

Katherine felt a swift chill caress the length of her body. She gripped Joel's hand fiercely. "Joel—"

"It's all right, Kathy." His voice strained with emphasis. "It's what you had to do, darling. I'm just glad you had the guts—"

He relaxed and sagged deeper into the pillows. Katherine fought for something to say, while her own eyes strained toward the bright window.

"There's something you can tell old Thorpe for me, Dad," Joel whispered hoarsely.

"Yes—"

"Tell him I really did find something that travels faster than light—so fast he would never believe—"

"What is it you have found, Joel?"

There was a sudden spasm of coughing that seemed to exhaust the remaining energies within him. But after a moment he struggled to rise on his elbows. He smiled happily toward the brightness of the window, and nodded as if to someone they could not see.

"An angel's wings, Dad. An angel's wings travel so much faster than the speed of light."