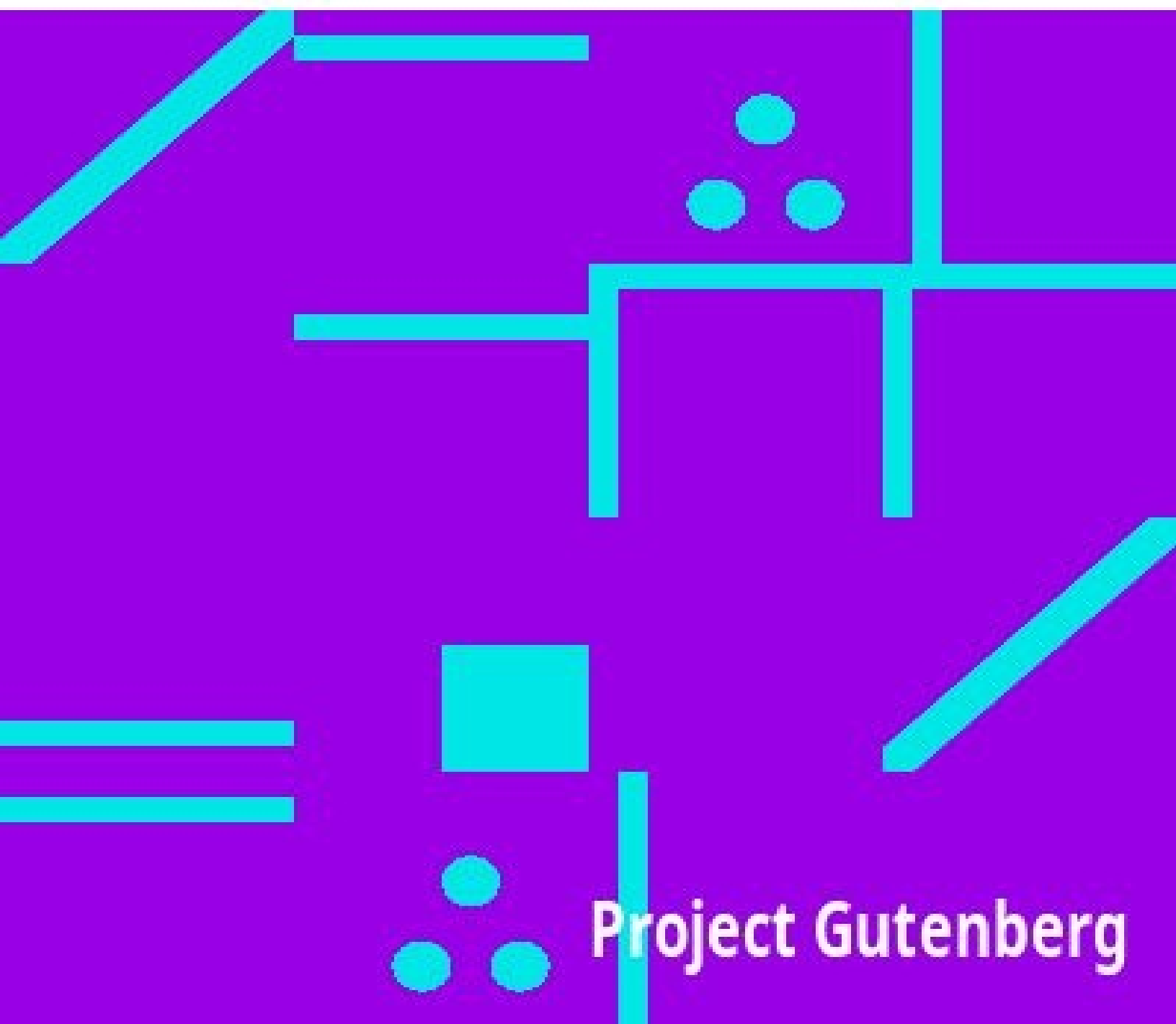


Next Door, Next World

Robert Donald Locke



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**NEXT
DOOR,
NEXT
WORLD**

**By ROBERT
DONALD
LOCKE**

*Almost any phenomenon can be used
—or act—for good or ill. Mutation
usually brings ill—but it also brings
greatness. Change can go any
direction.*

Illustrated by Douglas

H

JNGRILY, the cradled vessel's great steel nose pointed up to the distant stars. She was the *Cosmos XII*, newest and sleekest of the Space Service's rapidly-expanding wing of interstellar scout ships, and she was now ready for operational work.

Major Lance Cooper, a big man with space-tanned features, stood in the shadow of the control bunker and watched the swarm of ground crewmen working at last-minute speed atop the loading tower. Inside him burned a hunger, too.

Hunger, and another emotion—pride.

The pride swelled Lance's open-collared khaki shirt, as he envisioned himself at the ship's controls within a few minutes. Finally, after long years of study, sweat and dedication, he'd made it to the Big League. No more jockeying those tubby old rocket-pots to Luna! From here on, he was going to see, taste, feel what the universe was like way, way out—in Deep Space. The *Cosmos XII*, like her earlier sisters, was designed to plow through that shuddery nowhere the cookbooks identified as "hyperspace."

Lance's glance shifted upward, scanning the velvet backdrop of frosty white points of light against which the slender, silverish, almost wingless form stood

framed. More stars than a man could visit in a lifetime! And some already within grasp!

His exultant feeling grew, and Lance kept his head tilted backward. Alpha Centauri, the most popular target, was not visible at this latitude; and Barnard's star, besides being far too faint, lay on the other side of the sun. But there shone Sirius, just as bright as it had glittered for the Greeks, and frosty Procyon, a little to the north. Both orbs twinkled and beckoned, evoking strange and demanding dreams!

One day, Man would be able to make landings. Teams of scientists outfitted to the eyebrows and trained to cope with any environment or emergency, would explore unknown jungles, *llanos*, steppes; tramp up and down fertile vales and hills under blue-hot alien suns. Perhaps, they might even contact native species boasting human intelligence: mammalian hunters and fishers, city-building lizards, sky-probing arachnids—who knew what?

But now, of course, all that Headquarters permitted of flights was the most furtive of reconnoitering. You hoisted your scout ship aloft under high-gee, cleared the ecliptic, then swung out of normal space and *jumped*. When you materialized in the new sector, you set your cameras clicking, toggled all the other instruments into recording radiation, gravity pressures, spectroscopy, at slam-bang speed. The very instant your magnetic tapes got crammed to capacity, you pressed six dozen panic buttons and scooted like a scared jackrabbit for Home, Sweet Home.

Adventure? It wasn't even mentioned on the travel posters, yet.

But, adventure would follow.

Some day.

Meanwhile, at the taxpayers' expense, you—the guardian of the Peace—had enjoyed the billion-dollar thrill of viewing our Solar System from light-years and light-years of distance. Or so the manual said, right here on Insert Page 30-Dash-11-Dash-6.

Lance thought about those veteran hype-pilots who'd already poked around in the great black Cold out there. How was it they were always compensating for their frustration?

Now, he remembered.

Having few tall tales to spellbind audiences with when they swooped back down on Home Base after their missions, the hype-pilots got around it by bragging up Terra itself, and how at least you could always depend upon good old Earth to come up with something to relax this Warp-Weary generation!

"Something, for example, such as we now hold in our hand, brothers!" Lance could hear them now. "Namely, one of these superbly-programmed cocktails, as only Casey can turn out."

(Casey was the Officers Club barkeep and much-beribboned mixologist.)

"A real 'Casey Special'—look at its pristine beauty! What better consolation can a man ask, for not having gotten to land at the apogee point of his orbit?"

"Besides"—this usually came out after two or three more tongue-loosening toasts had been quaffed to the beasts of Headquarters—"what's so blasted special about landing on some God-forsaken rock *out there*?"

"Hell's bells! Earth is a planet too, isn't it? And when you've been cooped up in a parsec-gobbling pot for a very, very long two weeks, any planet looming in your viewscope cries to be set down upon. Your own prosaic hunk of mud is good as any!"

Lance Cooper's rambling thoughts broke off their aimless tracking to swing one hundred and eighty degrees in midspace and dart right back to Earth.

Here at this very moment—and less than a hundred yards away—came Terra's foremost attraction for him. His hammering heartbeat would have placed him on the "grounded" list immediately, had there been a medico with a stethoscope hanging about to detect it.

The attraction's name was Carolyn Sagen, and she was hurrying directly across the concrete apron.

Even under the incandescent work-lamps of the crew scrambling up and down the ladders, she looked as fetching as a video starlet making her first personal-appearance tour of the nation. Only the fact she was Colonel "Hard-Head" Sagen's family pride and joy kept the helmeted and half-puckered up techs on the rungs from whistling themselves dry in their enthusiasm.

Now, she had completely bypassed the work area. Here, the lighting did not

reach and the paler illumination of starshine took over. It seemed to render the girl's soft blond hair and her full warm lips more intimately something belonging to Lance Cooper alone—and he liked that. He saw that she had turned up the collar of her tan coat against the night wind.

While still a step or two distant from him, Carolyn halted. Her worshiping eyes rested fully upon the big pilot. Lance thought he detected a troubled expression.

Then, the girl managed a tight smile that conveyed her outward resignation to all Man's absurd aspirations to own the galaxy:

"Don't worry about 'Security,' Lance. Dad wrote me out an O.K. to skitter up this close to the Launching Area. You know"—she gestured self-consciously—"big crucial moment ... lovers' farewell ... I pulled all the stops, but it worked."

"Matter of fact," she added, in an obvious attempt at facetiousness, "Dad opined he'd have walloped the daylights out of me, if I hadn't put up a struggle to get near my man."

Then suddenly, she was not at all brave, anymore.

Suddenly, she had burrowed into his arms. "Oh Lance, had there been no other way, I'd have clawed right through fence and revetments to get to you! Men, men! Just because something's *out there*, as you say ... why is it so important to build ships and go out and look at it?" Her fingers dug into Lance's shoulders. "Women are saner ... but maybe that's why men need us." The grip of her fingers shifted, tightened. "Kiss me, you big baboon."

Lance kissed her. A tender kiss, yet gusty enough that he lifted her from the ground and her high-heeled shoes kicked in free fall.

The pilot found his girl's breath warm, loving. Yet her cheeks seemed colder than even the crisp air should account for. And her body was trembling.

He planted a second kiss, then set her down.

"Hey! This is no way for a Space Service brat to carry on. Why, you're just about to—"

"To cry, Lance? No, I wasn't. It's just that ... you'll be gone so long."

He punched her playfully. "Two measly weeks out, two weeks to astrogate her back home. And once I've got my feet wet at it, it'll be like shooting ducks in an

alley."

Carolyn reached out, brushed a windswept tuft of hair from above the rock-steady eyes that looked at her.

"I know, Lance. I even realize that just ten years ago, women had to put up with separations from their sweethearts or husbands that lasted months. When the old pioneer ships used to limp back and forth to Mars and Venus. But I'm different, I guess. Weak, maybe. Or just plain scared—"

This didn't sound like the blithe-spirited girl he'd pursued for a year, then wooed and subdued. Lance studied her, then said slowly: "You're scared. About what? My first flight?"

Carolyn's head bobbed timidly.

Lance flashed a reassuring grin. "Everything has to be a brand-new experience, at some time or other. Me, I prefer to look at hype-flight from the point of view of the service. A routine thing. Just takes training. Otherwise," and he shrugged, "it's no more a risk than hauling groceries upstairs to some weather satellite."

"Is it, Lance? When one or two ships out of every ten never make it back at all. Just disappear ... somewhere ... while the others—"

"One out of thirty or forty, you mean. So hyperspace is a little tricky."

"And there's always pilot error to blame, too, I suppose?"

"Now that you mention it."

"Only my man is immune from everything?"

Lance smiled, a little wryly. "Any pilot can make boo-boos, Carolyn. I'm determined to try awfully hard not to." He added a slight qualification to his statement. "I've always been pretty lucky up to now, at not getting lost."

"I thought the guidance systems and the autopilot computers took care of all the astrogation corrections?"

"On a theoretically perfect flight, yes. It's equally true, however, that hyperspace's geometry doesn't always resemble the sort of lines and angles you find in our own universe—"

Lance abruptly stopped, realizing he was quoting text; his mind groped for a better way to explain. But Carolyn plunged in first:

"You see, there do sometimes develop special situations."

"Sure, sometimes." An exasperation crept into Lance Cooper's voice, despite his effort to keep it out. Hell, he was just a pilot; not a rated mathematician. He'd fly hyperspace by the seat of his pants, if he had to.

"Lance," said Carolyn.

"Yes?"

"You feel it too, don't you?"

"Feel what?"

"That there is danger involved. That something dreadfully, dreadfully wrong *can* happen to you while you're out there. No matter what the eggheads say about it." A paroxysm of sobs suddenly racked the girl's slender body. "Oh, darling, don't go!"

"Honey, honey!" Lance patted her thin shoulders.

"I love you so much."

"Love you, too, Carolyn. You know that."

"We shouldn't have postponed the wedding. It was wrong to set the date back."

Lance shook his head. "Sorry. I couldn't see it any other way."

He hugged the girl to him; she seemed more desperately frightened than he had realized. And again, as always when it came to comforting somebody, he felt as awkward and clumsy as some big lumbering repair-tug out in space—say—trying to patch a small trim patrol craft.

But especially, he felt helpless in the presence of this frail, clinging, lovely piece of femininity he wanted so dearly. Nevertheless he could keep on trying—blundering though his words and gestures might be.

"Carolyn, you think I wanted to chance making you a widow twenty-four hours after you became a bride?" Lance took a deep breath. "So I did maintain the percentage wasn't great. Still, it does exist. I'm aware of that. I just don't let it

concern me. But you, Carolyn—don't you see, hon? Lance Cooper couldn't let anything bad happen to his best girl."

"I'm trying to understand," said Carolyn.

Lance's blunt, serious face peered into hers. "Tell you what I will promise to do."

Hope cleared away some of the mistiness in Carolyn's eyes. She looked up at him. "What, Lance?"

"Once I've knocked off my shell-back trip through the hype, we'll stage the fanciest wedding this old space base ever goggled its eyes over. I'll even see to it, the chaplain samples the spiked punch. And you remember what a raconteur the padre proved to be when Light-Colonel Galache got spliced?"

Carolyn Sagen managed a wan smile.

Lance revved his pep-talk up a few hundred r.p.m. "After all, think of it this way. Suppose I hadn't beat my brains out to get into hype-training? I'd never have wound up at this base. You and me would never have met. I'd never have fallen for you like a ton of space-ballast."

"Oh, I know you're right," said Carolyn, clinging more tightly than ever to Lance's solid frame. "You're always right, just like the Space Service is always right. But I have a woman's intuition. And I ... I sense—"

Unable to finish, she released her grasp and once more withdrew into herself.

Lance's big muscular hand reached out, tilted the girl's chin upward. Her face was tear-stained for sure, now.

"Honey, this won't ever do."

"I can't help it."

"You're torturing yourself with useless premonitions." Lance wiped the briny shine from the girl's cheeks as he talked, his own voice getting hoarser. "Carolyn, I love you so much that I ... well, you know I happen to hunger for you more than I do that Christmas tree on my control deck. But I just couldn't give up a chance to solo out to the stars. I couldn't, baby. I'd probably be court-martialed, anyhow," he added.

"No, Lance. They wouldn't do that. Not unless you actually got into space, then turned back. I asked Major Carmody."

"Carolyn! You didn't?"

The girl nodded, affirming the truth of what she said. "Lance, I had to. T-there are some things I know about that you don't." A note of sudden urgency now tinged her voice. "Strange unfathomable things. Many of the other pilots who've come back have not been right. I think it has something to do with their having been outside of normal space—"

He stared at her. "I just now realize you're trying to tell me something."

"Lance, I happened to overhear Dad telling Mother something one night. Apparently, he'd been rolling and tossing in bed, couldn't sleep. And Mother's looked after him so long, she just had to know what was wrong. They went downstairs and she poured him a stiff drink. Then in return, Dad poured out his troubled soul to her. And Lance—"

"Yes, Carolyn?"

"The most probable reason why some hype-pilots never quite make it back to our world is that the men involved—"

"The men? You mean, the pilots?"

"No, the brass. They haven't told the pilots about the fissioning of anything that gets into hyperspace—"

Carolyn's breath gave out in a sudden gasp. Her eyes moved away alarmed, and Lance's own glance turned simultaneously. He saw Colonel "Hard-Head" Sagen and two other officers coming across the area.

Time had run out on them.

"Carolyn," Lance said, hurriedly. "I've gabbed with quite a few vets of hyperspace. At the Club and in my training, both. Sure, a man feels like he's been crammed into a concrete mixer when he's burning up light-years in a hyper ship. But after a while, I'm told, even your brains get used to being bounced around." Lance took the girl's hands and squeezed them between his. "So let's not worry, huh?"

Carolyn started to say something in rebuttal, but her father and his aides were

already upon them.

Colonel Sagen was a tall thin man of erect military carriage. His features were crisscrossed with radiation scars and his voice boomed out like a military drum. Yet when one got to know him, he wasn't so gruff. On the base, he commanded two thousand military personnel and half that many scientists and techs: a tough job, and one that he was giving his best.

After returning Major Lance Cooper's brisk salute, the colonel unbent and gave his prospective son-in-law a hardy handshake.

"Lance, I hope you'll be able to keep more of a rein on this little space-filly of mine, than I've been able to. She was determined to see you off."

"I was glad to see her, colonel."

The colonel smiled. "Can't think of a man on this base I'd rather turn Carolyn over to."

"Thank you, sir," said Lance.

"Been counting the minutes to take-off, I suppose?"

"He's hardly had a chance to, Dad," Carolyn broke in. "What with me in his hair!"

One of the colonel's aides glanced at his watch, then opened up a brief case and took out a sealed envelope. The colonel relieved him of it and handed it to Lance.

"Your flight orders, Lance. Got the preset tapes installed and checked?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, you should know your onions now, if you're ever going to. Best of luck, son."

"Thank you, colonel."

Lance turned. "Good-bye, Carolyn. Just four weeks now, like I said."

"I'll be waiting."

"First jump's always the hardest, I hear," spoke up the second aide, cheerily. Like

a great many other execs, the officer boasted no active space rating, though he did wear the winged moons of an observer.

But Lance and Carolyn were again quite busy, and did not hear.

Inside the shell of the *Cosmos XII*, Lance, sitting flat on his back against gravity, looked up at the sweep hands on the control deck clocks and hurried through his pre-jump check list. Tension mounted inside him. He contacted the Operations people in the bunker over the radio net. Colonel Sagen's voice came in clear: "Five minutes, Lance."

"I am receiving. Area cleared?"

Traffic broke into report: "Take-off will proceed on schedule."

The function lights on the "tree" in front of Lance shone green. Gyros were caged; the tapes were set to roll. Lance's big hands hovered lightly near the manual over-rides. He was ready to fly, and the autopilot lights were already winking out in count-down. But you never could be sure until the last moment.

What had Carolyn been trying to tell him?

Before he could pursue the thought, he felt the pressure of the rising ship take hold; gently at first as she cleared the ground; then heavier and heavier, until his face felt like a rubber mask under the acceleration and his heart commenced pounding.

It didn't take long these days for any ship to build up a tremendous velocity in space. Lance cleared the ecliptic by a hundred million miles; then with the Solar System spread out flat below him, he opened up his flight orders. His destination, he discovered, was Groombridge 34, a visual double star. Right ascension: zero hours, thirteen minutes. Declination: forty-three and four-tenths degrees. Nearly twelve light-years distant.

Since the star's apparent location was nearly halfway up the sky from the celestial equator, Lance could begin the jump any time and not worry on his way about skewing too near the gravitational field of any large-massed body in his own immediate vicinity.

He permitted himself one brief glance at the blazing universe that hung all about him: the bright fixed lights that were innumerable suns against an eternal

blackness, and the luminous dust in between that was even farther-flung. Confusion and chaos seemed to dwell here; if a man gazed too long, he could quietly go mad. But even more insane, he anticipated, would be the thick, writhing nothingness of hyperspace.

Lance Cooper made one final check of all the ship's operating components; then crossed his fingers and cut in the hype-drive.

Instantly, his teeth crashed together and clenched; his strapped-in body was jerked back in its cushioned seat; sweat beaded his brow. A thousand needles prickling his skin couldn't have been worse. He had been told once that the switching-out from this known universe into an unknown one would feel just like a ten-thousand volt jolt in an old-fashioned electric chair; and now he could believe it. Every cell in his body had begun tingling; his stomach pitched under a racking nausea; and an involuntary trickle of saliva dripped from his mouth the moment he got his jaws working again.

But Lance fought the nausea, fought the sickness, and gradually as his flesh accommodated to the change, he felt better.

It was then that the most disturbing phenomenon of all took place. He felt for a moment as if he had been split into two persons. No, four persons, eight, sixteen, an infinity of other selves. They were all beside him, in him and out of him. His eyes ached. He shut them.

When he opened them again, everything was almost back to normal. The other selves had vanished. Only the constant throbbing vibration of the ship remained; yet it was a discomfort that had to be endured for four solid straight weeks now. There was no other means known, by which a man-made vessel could travel faster than light.

Funny about that four weeks, too, thought Lance. All distances in hyperspace were the same, no matter where you wished to go; it required no more than fourteen days and no less, regardless of whether you jumped one light-year or fifty. Lance had always understood there were equations on file at HQ, which explained the paradox. But not being a math expert, he had never missed not being allowed to see them.

He flicked a switch and opened up his viewports again. The starry universe had vanished. The *Cosmos XII* was riding through a gray void. Alone and—

No, it wasn't alone!

Again, Lance's vision suffered a wrenching sickness. Out there in the colorless vacuum, hundreds of replicas of the *Cosmos XII* rode along beside him, above him, below him, stretched out in all directions.

There had been nothing in the manuals about this.

Lance stared at the meaningless phenomenon for a long time despite the fact it made his brain ill. At last, he decided it was harmless, whatever was causing it. He shook his head slowly and closed the ports down. He hoped Groombridge 34 would be less taxing.

The system was.

After the ship reverted to normal space in the vicinity of Groombridge 34, Lance hovered about it exactly twelve hours, following all the instructions in his manual to the letter. He started up the cameras and other recording instruments. All went well, there were no incidents, no vessels disturbed him; though had the two components of the binary been at periastron, it would have simplified the work with the position micrometer. If anything else of interest had been detected, it would have to be deciphered from the film and tapes later. You can get as close as four billion miles to an Earth-sized planet in space—and it'll still show up fainter than a fourteenth magnitude star.

Somewhere in the galaxy, Lance supposed, there must be other races building spaceships and guiding them from sun to sun. But thus far, the scout ships from Terra—for all their magnified caution—had never run into signs of any.

The old veteran hype-pilots had the best philosophy after all. Earth was the choicest hunk of mud you were going to find. *Enjoy it, brethren.*

Well, he would certainly live it up when he got back, Lance swore. He would have his wedding; import Casey from the Club to spike the punch; and, perhaps after he'd gotten in his required number of scout-missions, he might even settle for a chair-borne exec's billet, himself.

Exactly twenty-eight days and twelve hours from the time of his departure from Earth, Lance Cooper was back home again. The *Cosmos XII* re-materialized out of hyperspace in the neighborhood of the Solar System with its fuel tanks scarcely a third depleted, but its pilot a drained man. Lance, truthfully, not only

felt weary and torpid, but a great deal disappointed.

He contacted Traffic, asked for and got a landing trajectory. A few hours later, he had coasted home and the trip was over.

He scrambled down out of the ship, hungry for Carolyn.

The base hadn't changed any in a month, that he could see. A couple of new floodlights put in, perhaps. Some brass were emerging from the control bunker. Colonel Sagen, several others. He recognized them all. Two were SSP's—Space Service Police.

When the colonel got close, Lance tossed off a salute and an insouciant grin: "Well, the Prodigal made it back home, sir. Hope that pessimistic daughter of yours is stashed around somewhere. Otherwise—"

"Otherwise, what?" returned the colonel, unsmiling.

"Why I'm liable to go busting right through that fence," said Lance. "And say, if anybody's worrying about the *Cosmos XII*, she flew like a dream, colonel. Matter of fact, she—"

Colonel Sagen's jaws snapped together. Wheeling, he barked at the two SSP's: "Spacemen, arrest this officer! Immediately!"

Lance couldn't believe his ears.

"Hey, wait a minute!" he protested. "What have I done?"

Nobody answered. Not at first.

"Well?" Lance asked again, a little more uneasy this time.

"I have no daughter, major," Hard-Head Sagen growled, standing with his legs braced apart and his ramrod shoulders looking businesslike. "I never have had."

The space cops sprang forward. One drew a pistol, held it on the returned pilot, while the other quickly moved behind Lance and pinioned his arms back.

"Is this a joke, colonel?" Lance demanded, struggling. "If it is, I don't appreciate it. You know you've got a daughter, and I'm going to marry her!"

The colonel's jaws clamped tight; and he shook his head from side to side, as if

he were dealing with a person suddenly out of his mind. Then he acted.

"Put this man under close confinement," he ordered Lance's guards. "Allow no visitors of any kind." The colonel's tone was harsh and worried. "I've got to buck this matter to HQ. We can't have it blow up right now, God knows."

The space police nudged Lance. "All right, major. Let's go."

Lance's anger seethed to a boil. Hunching his shoulders, he rammed back against the guard holding him, sending him tumbling. What was inside his mind to do if he managed an escape, he couldn't have told. He only knew he had to get away. The colonel had flipped.

And where, by the way, was Carolyn? It seemed impossible she could be in on it, too.

He stood free for a moment, watching warily.

"Hold him!" shouted Colonel Sagen. "Don't let him run loose."

"We got gas pills, colonel," suggested the space cop Lance had bowled over. The man was rising to his feet.

"Use them."

Lance started to run. Over his shoulder, he saw the guard reach inside a small pocket in his webbed pistol belt. The man gestured to the others to duck back out of harm's way. Then, his throwing arm reared back and sent a pellet sailing in a high arc. It landed at Lance's feet and burst instantly. Yellowish gas billowed out. Its acrid fumes penetrated Lance's throat and nostrils. He began coughing. Then, all the fight suddenly ebbed from him. His knees buckled. He was stumbling, falling. The sky reeled.

And very indistinctly, from far away, came the colonel's voice, barking: "Put him in the brig until he recovers. I repeat, let nobody see him. And another thing—I declare everything that's happened here today classified information. If a single word leaks out, I'll have every man-jack among you placed in solitary and held for court-martial."

Then, Lance knew nothing more.

When at last he recovered consciousness and was able to sit up in a kind of

groggy stupor, Lance found himself, for the first time in fifteen service-devoted years, on the inside of a guardhouse looking out.

With sardonic melancholy, he recalled times on his O.D. and O.G. tours when he had inspected various prison areas, peered into the cells, and often felt mildly sorry for some poor spaceman doing time for some minor infraction. There had never been very many offenders. Discipline on space bases was not a pressing problem: the corps was an elite branch and intransigent candidates were weeded out quick.

Well, now he was a prisoner, himself. He, Lance Cooper, Major, Space Service, stood behind bars. And no matter how hard his face pressed against those bars, he could only see as far as the corridor extended in either direction.

It wasn't far enough.

Nor would anybody talk to him. He couldn't even get the time of day.

Not since his probation as a plebe, had he consorted with such a bunch of "hush-mouths." Had he no rights as a commissioned officer and a world citizen? He still didn't know why he was incarcerated, or what regulation he had broken.

But that wasn't his most nagging worry.

What preyed on his mind most was Carolyn.

Where was she?

Where? Where? WHERE?

He could have lowered his head and pounded it to a pulp against the wall, in his rage and frustration at being confined. But banging his brains out wouldn't help. Besides, he was going to stand deeply in need of his gray matter, if he hoped to get out of this one.

At evening time, a guardhouse trusty brought him his supper on a tray. Also, the man tossed him half a pack of cigarettes when Lance sought to bum just one. But when the pilot started pitching questions back, the trusty looked scared and unhappy and quickly limped away.

The night dragged on, as unending seemingly as one of Luna's two-week darkouts. Lance smoked, paced the cell from wall to wall, occasionally plopped down on his cot and went over everything that had happened, trying to find some

pattern to it.

But there was no pattern.

Next morning, he splashed up and shaved beard away from a tired, red-eyed face in the mirror. Then, he waited. No one came.

Finally, at noon a new officer checked in for duty at the guardhouse. Lance recognized him as a young ordinance captain he'd met before. He called out to the man. The officer, striding down the hallway, wheeled at the sound of his name and came back to the cell. His eyes bugged slightly, when he saw Lance: "Holy smoke, major! What've they got you in for?"

"Search me." Lance was overjoyed to find someone, at last, who didn't dummy up. "I thought maybe you might have a notion."

"I just came on duty. But if there's a charge sheet lying around, I might dig up something from it."

"Would you try?"

The captain held up two fingers and grinned. "No sweat."

Lance waited some more.

The captain did not come back, however, until several hours later. After Lance's evening meal, in fact. His face bore a puzzled frown.

Lance stood at his cell door, gripping the bars. "Well?"

"I checked. Seems the brass are holding you for observation until some headshrinker gets in from HQ. A specialist in hyperspace medicine."

"Then, how come I'm not in a regular hospital? Why the jailhouse?"

"Beats me, major. I can tell you this, though. You're not the first hype-pilot who's been dragged in here screaming."

"But I wasn't screaming! I was perfectly calm and collected, when I climbed down out of my ship. All I did was ask about Carolyn."

"About who?"

"Carolyn Sagen. Old Hard-Head's daughter." Lance felt a sinking feeling. He stopped, cocked a wary eye at the other officer. "Don't look at me that way, man."

The captain had been staring hard at Lance. Now, he began shaking his head back and forth, slowly and sadly.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Lance asked.

"It means Colonel Sagen doesn't have a daughter."

Lance snorted. "Don't tell me that. I'm engaged to her."

"Sorry, major. I've been around the colonel and his wife since I was a kid. He got me the appointment to the Academy. They've never had any children of their own."

"Why, you—" Lance reached through the bars and grabbed the captain by his shirt collar, jerking him against the bars. "It's a lie! A conspiracy! Maybe you think I'm nuts. But I'm not!" He commenced pummeling the captain with his free fist. Then he thought of something better. He snatched the captain's gun from his holster and leveled it.

"I'm getting out of here," Lance announced. "Open up this door—or take the consequences!"

The captain, his face ashy white, submitted and unlocked the cell door. Lance stepped out, got behind the officer, and prodded him into the cell. Tearing a sheet into strips, he tied the man to the cot and gagged him. It took a very short time.

Then, he softly padded down the hallway. He caught the sergeant of the guard napping in his chair. In a moment, the sergeant, too, was trussed up, gagged, and whisked into a spare cell. Lance then tucked the captain's pistol inside his shirt and ventured outside.

It was a moonlit night. A patrol jeep was parked on the drive, begging to be commandeered. Lance hopped in. There was something he had to find out for himself, and only one way to do it: Go to the place where they kept the answers.

Wheeling the jeep along the military street fast as he dared, Lance headed for the base housing area. Colonel Sagen's trim two-story brick residence was where he hoped to pay a call. He knew the route by heart. He'd been a guest there often

enough.

The colonel's driveway was empty of cars, he was happy to notice, when he reached the house. He parked, sprinted up to the porch, and knocked on the door.

Presently, footsteps sounded inside and the door opened a few inches. But it was not Carolyn whom Lance saw peeping out at him. It was another woman, older. He recognized Mrs. Sagen.

Lance was blunt. "I've got to see Carolyn, and I haven't much time. You'd better let me in."

An apprehensive, almost shocked expression briefly flitted across the face of Carolyn's mother. It was as if she had never set eyes on Lance Cooper before. Even the gold oak leaves on his shoulders seemed to reassure her but slightly. She kept the door chain in place between them.

"I'm sorry, major. I'm not sure that I understand you."

"Don't malarky me, please. You know who I am and who I want. Carolyn, your daughter."

"Oh," said Mrs. Sagen. It was said in a way that revealed nothing.

"Look," said Lance, impatiently. "You do have a daughter. I've dated her. So, all right," he waved his hands, "she's been spirited away for some reason. I still think I've got a right to know why."

"Oh, my!" said Mrs. Sagen, and her hand flew to her face. "You must be that scout-ship pilot who showed up yesterday. The one who—"

"Yeh, the one everybody figures for psycho. But I'm not, Mrs. Sagen. You know I'm not." Lance took a deep breath. "Can I come in? I just want some facts. After all, this crazy farce can't go on forever."

The colonel's wife still looked doubtful, but Lance Cooper had a way of pressing a point hard when his interests were at stake. He began talking rapidly and convincingly.

He got in.

The light indoors was better. Lance's eyes squinted, as they adjusted from the

gloom of the porch. Somehow, Mrs. Sagen didn't look quite as he remembered. Her hair was much darker now; he was sure of that. Maybe she had dyed it. Yet her features were certainly harder and bonier. More like a replica of her husband's. And her breath smelled alcoholic. Could a mere month have made that much difference?

The house had been refurnished too, Lance noticed. The living-room decor was more severe and functional. And the pictures on the wall were garish. Not Mrs. Sagen's type, at all.

Hey, wait a minute! he told himself; *speaking of pictures*—his glance skipped to the far corner of the room. A triptych of photos of Carolyn had always been on display on the mantelpiece. *They would prove that—*

Lance's jaw dropped.

The photos had been removed.

"Can I get you anything?" Mrs. Sagen inquired. A little nervously, Lance thought. "A cup of coffee?"

"No, thanks. I'd rather hear about Carolyn."

"Coffee won't take a minute. I was just making some fresh in the kitchen."

Lance shrugged. "Well, O.K., if you've already got it ready."

Mrs. Sagen's mouth managed a fleeting smile; then she disappeared through a swinging door. Lance sat down in a wrought-iron chair. Finding it not comfortable, he sprang back to his feet and paced the floor. There sure was something wrong about the colonel's house. Something very oddly wrong. But he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

Suddenly, his quickened hearing caught the faint murmur of a human voice. Was it Carolyn? The talk seemed to be issuing from the kitchen—where her mother had gone. Lance tiptoed across the room, pushed the door slightly open.

Mrs. Sagen was on the phone. Her voice was excited; she was obviously straining to keep it at a low level. "I'm telling you, he's here! Right in our living room. And he insists I know somebody named Carolyn ... Yes, that's right. But do hurry ... Please. He's acting much odder than the others did."

Lance had eavesdropped enough. He turned away, glided rapidly out the front

door and into the night.

Where should he go next? The jeep would serve to hustle him around the base for a while—but eventually he would be chased down and recaptured. And as for crashing any of the exit gates and thus attaining to greater freedom, he knew they would all be barricaded and heavily manned by now.

Lance was still burning over Mrs. Sagen's double-cross. Did he want coffee? she had asked. *Coffee!* his mind repeated, disgusted. What he needed was something stronger. A good stiff drink.

That was it! The Officers Club. Casey would be on duty at this hour. Lance would ask him to mix him a double for old times' sake. Then, he'd meekly surrender and quietly go crazy in his cell, until the headshrinker came and confirmed it for real.

The pilot got back in the jeep and drove on. When he reached the Club, he wheeled the vehicle around to a rear entrance where bushes made the grounds shadier. Parking, he got out, strolled into the building as sneakily as if he'd been an inspector-general paying a surprise call from out of Space Service Headquarters.

Few officers lounged about. Most were at tables and engrossed in their own imbibing. Lance strode up to the bar, perched himself on a high stool. Casey, whose hair was red as a Martian desert, was rinsing glasses. He stopped at his task and came over, wiping the counter with a wet towel. "What'll it be, major?"

"One of your Specials, Casey, my friend."

"Beg pardon?"

"You know—one of your Casey Specials. Where you start off with half a glass of Irish whisky, add a dash or two of absinthe, a drop of—"

"I don't stock no absinthe, major." Casey's freckled face was abruptly hostile. "You know that. It's against regulations."

Lance fought down a tremor. Everybody was in on it. Everybody. He compromised for a minute: "Give me a slug of Teacher's on the rocks, then."

Casey measured out the drink for him.

Lance downed it. His hand gripped the edge of the bar. "Casey, do you know me?"

He watched Casey study him. The thick reddish eyebrows knit. "It's a pretty big base, major. Lots of faces. Sometimes, I kind of forget the names."

Lance's blood pressure gave a spurt. "I'm Major Lance Cooper! Hell, you've rung up my chits often enough!"

And his mind added: *How could you forget?*

"Major." Casey's eyes narrowed, while the uneasy suspicion in them grew. "We don't have no chit system at this club."

Lance's head felt like it would explode. He could take no more.

"You're lying!" he shouted. His big hands reached over the mahogany counter and shook the bartender like a squawk-box that had refused to function properly. "Tell me you're lying in your teeth. If you don't, I'll push them down your throat —"

Suddenly, Lance sensed people behind him. A firm hand clamped down heavily on his shoulder.

The pilot stretched his neck around. What now? His hands did not relax their murderous grip on his victim.

The arresting party had entered the club quietly. Now, they were ganged up around him: Colonel Sagen, his two aides, a fourth man Lance recognized as Major Carmody, the base legal officer—and a fifth man too, who wore the insignia of the Space Surgeon-General's Department. A psychiatrist.

"Better come peacefully, major," rasped Colonel Sagen. "You've been 'cleared' for an explanation—and if you're smart, you'll listen to the spiel and play ball."

The way it was said made Lance feel he could trust the Old Man for that long. Anyhow, what choice did he have?

"It's about time," Lance sighed. He set Casey down, to the latter's greatly exhaled relief. "Only how come all the suspense?"

"It was very necessary," broke in Major Carmody.

"Was it? Well, you had me about to crack—if that was your object. Now then,

would any of you mind easing my worries about Carolyn. She's O.K., isn't she?"

His glance shifted from one to the other.

"Isn't she?"

Nobody would reply—neither Colonel Sagen, nor any of the officers bunched-up around him.

Sweat suddenly broke out on Lance's brow. The chilly feeling went through him that if and when an answer was provided him, he wasn't particularly going to like it.

Not in the slightest.

Shortly afterwards, Lance was driven across the base by his captors and escorted into his commanding officer's private office. The two aides were dismissed, but the psychiatrist-officer, who also wore eagles on his shoulders, and Major Carmody remained.

Colonel Sagen seated himself behind his desk.

"Major," he began, clearing his throat, "you imagine me to have a daughter. You're positive of it. You even visualize her so well, that you remember something about how you were going to marry her."

"You're not going to talk me out of anything on that score," Lance shot back.

"Perhaps, we don't intend to. Colonel Nordsen, here," Sagen indicated the psychiatrist, "has flown in from HQ to chat with you. He can explain the technical aspects of the phenomenon that has thrown you better than I can. I'd advise you to listen to him. He's just what you need."

"Just what I need? What else do you intend to do? Hypnotize me, so you can erase all my past?"

The colonel scowled. "Look here, major. You co-operate and learn to keep your mouth shut, we may be able to restore you to duty. But if not ... well, what happens then will be entirely up to Nordsen. It could mean a padded cell. The development of hyperspace exploration has to go on, whatever happens to you."

"I'll tell you one thing to your face, colonel," Lance replied, hotly. "I'm not off

my rocker."

"No one has maintained you were," broke in Colonel Nordsen. "But Colonel Sagen had to throw a curtain around you fast."

"Why?"

Neither officer answered.

Finally, Colonel Sagen said, "I think you'd better continue with him, Colonel Nordsen."

Nordsen was a youthful-looking man for his rank, yet prematurely balding. He wore thick-shelled glasses.

"Major Cooper," Nordsen began, "let's go back to when you put the *Cosmos XII* through its first jump through hyperspace. How well do you recall your experience?"

"I'll never forget it. You Earthbound kiwis should try it sometime."

"Did you experience a feeling ... perhaps, rather uncanny ... that the whole thing had happened to you before? What psychologists call the sense of *déjà vu*?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Perhaps some other type of phenomenon was manifested? A feeling you'd been split in half, maybe."

"That did happen."

"Describe it."

"It was more than just being split in half. I felt like I was suddenly hundreds of selves. I could see other replicas of 'me' all around."

Nordsen nodded, thoughtfully. "That was what we call the 'Infinite Fission' syndrome. All those other 'you's' were personality matrices of yourself in alternate worlds. Did you notice anything else?"

Lance nodded, grudgingly.

"What?"

"Look, colonel. If I answer your questions, will you answer mine?"

"Any reasonable ones, yes. That's what we're here for."

"Well, there was the disturbing thing about the *Cosmos XII*, itself. I saw images of the ship riding along beside me, out there in the hype. Where nothing material could possibly exist. Where not even light could reflect back, or any other wave propagation." Lance shook his head, recalling the experience. "What could have caused a hallucination like that?"

"It was no hallucination, Lance. It was real and has happened before. We can rest you easy on that point."

Colonel Nordsen removed tobacco from a pouch, stuffed his pipe, lit up. Bluish smoke formed a halo about him.

"Lance, the Space Service has been sending ships through hyperspace for nearly two years now. Only recently did anybody notice something was seriously wrong with the pilots who came back. Up until then ... oh, a pilot might act a little queer for a day or two. But who wouldn't, cooped up alone in a steel projectile for four weeks? We thought very little of it."

"Uh huh," was Lance Cooper's only comment.

Nordsen transferred his pipe to his hand. "But eventually, even the Space Service gets around to putting two and two together on the slipstick. The incidents kept piling up. A pilot comes back from Epsilon Eridani, for example, and insists on giving everybody left-handed salutes. Another has taken a scout ship to 61 Cygni. He insists at the Officers Club that Colonel Sagen here has a nickname of 'Old Hard-Head'. Nobody else on the base is aware of any such thing. Then, still another pilot—"

"Wait a minute!" Lance interrupted. "Hasn't he?"

"Hasn't what? I don't follow you."

"Colonel Sagen. Hasn't he got that nickname? I mean, it was a term of respect and liking, of course. But—"

"No," said Nordsen.

"No?" Lance echoed, disbelieving. "Since when?"

"Not since *ever*, major. Not on this particular track."

"Colonel Nordsen, you're losing me."

"Patience, please. I was about to tell you that still another pilot lands on our base, and he wears a blue tie. Claims the Space Service has always worn blue ties."

"I take it back," said Lance. "I'm a pilot and all pilots are slowly going nuts." Then, it occurred to him to evince more interest or they might ship him back to the brig sooner than expected. "A blue tie, huh?"

"And blue suede chukkas, to match," Colonel Sagen's hoarse voice broke in. "Most unmilitary-looking uniform I ever saw on a space officer."

Colonel Nordsen, the psychiatrist, set his pipe aside. "Gradually, we began building up a file of such weird discrepancies. Another pilot landed wearing a handle-bar mustache. He couldn't possibly have grown so much lip-hair in a month. Yet, the man claimed he'd sported the mustache for years; and that every officer in his squadron was decked out with one, too."

"Tell me just one thing," Lance pleaded. His nerves were gradually getting more on edge. "What has all this got to do with Carolyn Sagen? Why is she being kept from me?"

Nordsen's eyebrows met, evincing a little displeasure. "Don't you get the drift, major? I've been trying to accomplish two things at the same time. Cushion a shock for you—and explain why what has happened has happened. There is no Carolyn Sagen. The colonel and his wife have always been childless."

Lance got belligerent. "Say that again!"

"There is no Carolyn Sagen here."

"What d'you mean, when you say 'here'?"

Nordsen took off his shell-rimmed glasses, wiped them, restored them to his boyish face. "I would advise you to brace yourself. By 'here,' I mean on this particular time-track."

Lance stared at him.

"Doesn't the word have any significance for you?" Nordsen asked.

"Time-track? Sure, I've heard of the concept before. It's a theory that parallel worlds branch off when ... hey!" Lance's tone rose to a shout. "You're not trying to imply that ... that I'm on a diff—?"

"That's right. We're trying to tell you that you have obviously landed in another time-track. One that is parallel to—but just a slight bit different from the one you formerly knew. To you, we seem to be the same officers as in that world; but of course, we're not. It isn't the same universe. Hyperspace is tricky stuff, as our men are finding out. You've just got bounced around by one of the trickiest things connected with it."

Lance groaned. "Now, I'm told!"

"I'm sorry. It's nothing new, only the information is classified top-secret in our world; and evidently in yours, too. It has to be withheld from hype-trainees, otherwise they might deliberately flunk their course. We're running pilot classes here on our track, too. We have to keep them filled."

Lance was stunned. He hardly knew what he should say or do next.

Finally, he put forth a faltering question: "Is there any way I can get back to Home Base? *My* home base?"

All three officers in the room shook their heads in unison.

"You might as well look for a pebble in the beach," said Nordsen. He elucidated: "As a matter of fact, this *is* Home Base for you. The differences between one track and another are not usually too great; the resemblances are many. Sometimes even, the returned pilot accommodates himself to the new time-track without suspecting in the slightest what's happened to him."

"And in those cases, you seldom bother to enlighten him, I suppose."

"Naturally not. Security frowns on it."

"But in my case, you couldn't cover up."

"Your case manifests a much more serious slippage. Your path, evidently, warped to a track several million or billion worlds further over than anybody from your world had previously experienced. Consequently, your luck has really been unfortunate. You've materialized out of hyperspace into a universe where someone you apparently knew quite closely simply was never born."

"But Carolyn did exist before ... where I was? I'm not dreaming."

"No. Both our worlds are equally real."

Lance, though he felt the truth slowly and inexorably sink in, still could not quite grasp all its implications. He turned his numbed face to the other two officers in the room. Colonel Sagen and Major Carmody inclined their heads.

For one despairing moment, Lance felt almost like hurling himself through the window. Then, he straightened up. His mouth compressed into a thin line. "If I must face the facts, I must. But," his tone edged off into irony, "it sure isn't easy. You'll have to give me time."

Colonel Nordsen stood up, held out his hand. "I'm sorry, major, believe me. This is a hard blow to take and I wouldn't care to be on the receiving end, myself. But you'll adjust. If you like, I'll recommend you for convalescent leave. You understand, of course," the psychiatrist went on, "that we expect you to keep tight-lipped. Our hype-classes are still too small. We need a lot of sharp men, and they have to be volunteers. Right, Colonel Sagen?"

"Right."

Lance dropped the proffered hand. "I get it. Let the word get around how hyperspace messes you up, all your bright young jets will bug out on it. That's your main worry, isn't it? Not what happens to me."

"Frankly, yes," Nordsen acknowledged, without blinking. "But the Space Service is also concerned about individuals. Don't worry now, major. We'll look after you."

"Don't bother!" An uncontrolled bitterness crept into Lance's reply. "Far as I'm concerned, the Space Service can go to hell. What reason have I got to stay in it? You've conned me out of all that meant anything in my life."

Nobody said a word.

Lance rose to his feet, unsteadily. His sardonic glance swept over them. "I suppose it's back to the guardhouse for me now, huh? Well, I won't be sorry to go. I'll find better company. And I refuse your bribe of special leave-time."

Colonel Nordsen seemed unaffected. "You're making a mistake," he said, calmly.

"Am I?"

"Major, we're offering you a chance to get adjusted and assimilated. Take it or leave it. We can hold you in the brig until you see reason. But you're a good man. We need you."

"For what? More flights through that hyperspace muck?"

"If you can pass our mental stability tests, yes."

"And if not?"

"You'll be grounded."

Lance made a sudden decision.

"I want to go up right now."

"What?"

"You heard me. I want to go up in the *Cosmos XII* right now, tests or no tests. Ground me—and I'll never have a chance again. Don't you think I'm hep to that?"

"We'll see that you're not grounded," broke in Colonel Sagen, from behind his desk.

But Lance didn't believe him.

"Don't try to kid me, colonel," he snapped out. "You write me out flight orders for the *Cosmos XII*, or I'll blab everything I know. You can't hang me, you can't tear my tongue out—and I know I'll bust out of your guardhouse one way or another! You'll see! And then, how will you fill up your precious training classes? Then, how will you get new chumps to pilot your ships to the stars? The stars! Ha, ha! That's the biggest joke of all!"

Colonel Sagen began to splutter. Lance, watching him carefully, decided there wasn't much resemblance between the old boy and the fine Colonel Sagen he'd known in his own world. Maybe it'd been having the softening influence of normal family life and a growing daughter that had made old Hard-Head human.

"You'll never get away with this," Sagen warned. "We're three against one."

"Won't I?" Lance's hand darted inside his shirt. "Maybe this'll equalize us." He brought out the pistol he'd taken off the captain in the guardhouse. Sagen, Nordsen, and Carmody backed off from it.

"The *Cosmos XII* is still two-thirds fueled," Lance said. "And well-stocked on provisions. Besides, I'm a light eater in hyperspace—as who isn't? I intend to take that ship out again, and you're going to help me, gentlemen."

Lance flicked off the safety and waved the gun back and forth, to demonstrate what he meant.

It worked.

Lance got his ship, using Colonel Sagen as both shield and go-between after he had first tied up the other two officers in a closet. He kept a close watch, of course, for the SSP's and their gas pellets; but apparently an alarm was not raised soon enough for the base police to hurl into action.

After having the colonel authorize a space clearance for him by contacting Traffic directly over the ship's mike, Lance finally released him.

The colonel scooted down the ladder. Lance gave him time to clear the pad, but little more; then he went to work pushing buttons on the manual desk. The *Cosmos XII* blasted loose from her moorings and soared aloft into space.

At five thousand miles above Earth's surface, Lance re-checked his tapes. Groombridge 34 was the only possible destination the autopilot could take him to. Somehow, he didn't mind taking one more look at the double-star system. He cut into hyperspace as quickly as he dared; then sat back and relaxed. That is, as much as any man could in hype.

When he reached Groombridge 34, all Lance did was pop out into normal space long enough to assure himself he had reached the proper checkpoint for turning back. The tapes were in good order, and there had been no hitches. Grunting, he threw in the switch-over and once more found himself plowing through hyperspace. Only this time, he was homeward bound.

If he were lucky, just real lucky, he told himself, there might be a Carolyn Sagen alive and waiting for him in whatever time-track he wound up in this time.

At last, he materialized again in the Solar System. Or *some* Solar System, anyhow. As far as he could tell, all the planets looked unchanged. It was just four weeks to the day, since his escape from World Two. This would be World Three. He had been gone eight weeks and two days from World One.

Lance cut the ecliptic at a different angle than before, and Terra was farther along in her journey around Sol. He needed a new landing trajectory. His eye swept his panel, to see if anything had been preset. There was no green flashing on the deck, where there should have been green.

Oh, well. There could have been cruisers waiting in space, too, to pot him with ship-to-ship missiles. He'd taken one chance, he could take another.

Lance opened a switch and called Base Traffic's frequency. "This is the *Cosmos XII*, Major Lance Cooper piloting. Just broke out of hype. Can you read me?"

He repeated the message for several minutes.

Finally, he got an answer. A startled voice whipped back at him through crackling static: "*Cosmos XII*, this is Traffic. Who did you say you were up there?"

Lance hardly knew whether he felt more like laughing or crying. He was fairly close to home, anyhow. They did have space traffic here. And being pretty much of an optimist, he also decided that it was a time-track where he had been known. Only being so long overdue, he had probably been given up for lost.

On this premise, he could visualize all the consternation and excitement now in progress downstairs; the personnel were likely falling all over each other in the stampede to pass the word around.

"I'm Major Lance Cooper," he announced over the mike.

There was a long pause.

"Repeat that, please."

"This is Lance Cooper, Major, Space Service. I'm up here in the *Cosmos XII*."

"B-b-but you can't be."

"Who says I can't. Say, what's the matter with you monkeys? I want to come in."

Another voice took over on the channel. "The lieutenant's right. You actually do sound like Cooper, whoever you are!"

Lance laughed openly. "I've lived with him all my life, why shouldn't I? You think I'm a ghost?"

"Well ... no. We know you're real. We're getting a blip from you. Only thing is —"

"Let's talk about it when I get down," Lance interrupted. "I need a program fast. Get those G.S. computers working and read me an orbit."

"W-will do."

"And one more thing: Is Colonel Sagen around?"

"Not today, major. He had to fly to Luna."

"How about his daughter?"

"Who?"

Oh, no! Lance felt his heart almost stop. Had the big try been for nothing? He chanced a repeat.

"His daughter. Carolyn Sagen."

This time, he got results.

"Oh! You mean Hard-Head's daughter. The one who ... say, wasn't she all set to marry you?"

"You bet your last commendation ribbon she was. And she's going to! Hey!" Lance shouted. "Anything wrong with her? She's not sick or—"

The voice of the first operator at Traffic came back on. "The captain had to take off. No sir, major. She's not sick. We just don't know how she's gonna take this, is all."

"With bells on, Junior. Wedding bells! Get her out to meet me when I land, will you? And snap it up on that trajectory."

Again, the traffic crackled in Lance's ear. There seemed to be a great deal of excitement going on down there. And then the great night rim of Earth swung

under him, blocking out further radio communication.

Presently, a relayed beam from Luna came in. The Luna spaceport read him a series of figures to punch into his autopilot. The new orbit would edge him in close enough to Terra, that he could pick up an assist from the G.A. system of his home base.

Lance rubbed his hands together in his joy. He was cooking on all burners, now. At last.

Six hours later, the *Cosmos XII* settled down in her landing cradle. Major Lance Cooper kicked open the air-lock door and began climbing down to solid ground.

It was just barely twilight. Ordinarily, there would have been long purplish shadows at the far ends of the field; but now the entire space base was flooded with lights. Were the beacons sweeping back and forth just to welcome him? It hardly seemed possible. Yet, the apron itself, was swarming with people. Here they came now! A whole mob racing towards him, and the noise of their swelling shouts preceded them, rolling forward like the breakers upon a shore.

Oh, oh! What was that in the far corner of the field? A big pile of crumpled metal, already rusted and ready for the bulldozers. Some poor devil had crashed his hype-ship. Lance wondered vaguely which of his buddies it had been. Then he shut it out of his mind.

A jeep swung out ahead of the advancing crowd and came speeding down the concrete. Brakes squealed; rubber tires bit in hard, and the vehicle plunged to a halt near him. Lance recognized Major Carmody in the driver's seat. Or another Major Carmody. What difference did it make? None, now that he was able to identify so very well the other figure in the jeep—a slight blond figure in a trench coat seated next to Carmody.

Carolyn!

He saw her get out. He saw her commence walking towards him. But too slowly, he thought. And he was too paralyzed to move.

"Lance?" she called to him. "Is it you? Is it really you, darling?"

The girl's step almost faltered. Major Carmody's hand reached out, steadied her.

Something was wrong again. But what? He could not guess.

Lance came out of his paralysis. He began running towards her.

And in a moment, they were in each other's arms without caring why or how: Lance Cooper and the girl he loved. Kissing, hugging, unable to believe for a moment in each other's reality.

Then, Carolyn had to have breath and she drew apart for a moment. Then, she kissed him again. And Lance, for the first time, listened and made sense out of the welter of hysterical sobbing words that were pouring forth:

"Darling, darling, darling Lance! I cried so much, and now it's all over. I don't care if you're not real. I love you, I love you! I don't care if you are somebody from another time-track like Major Carmody says! You're my Lance and you belong to me. It's you I love and want now; no matter how shameless I sound!... Yes, darling, it's you I want, not that poor broken thing we buried two months ago. Not the—"

Lance's feeling of impending horror was great, but not so great that he shrank from the question that now rose and beat and beat at his brain. The overwhelming question that had to be asked.

"Carolyn!" He held her so tight he thought for a moment he'd cracked her ribs. His half-shook gaze penetrated her retreating eyes, forcing her to meet him.

"Carolyn! What do you mean—it's *me* you want now, not that poor broken thing you buried? Tell me. TELL ME!"

"Don't you know, darling Lance? When you took off that night eight weeks ago, that night I kissed you good-by, your ship ... oh don't you comprehend?... Your ship, it—"

"Tell me, Carolyn!"

"Your ship, Lance, that's it over there—the wreckage of it! The *Cosmos XII* crashed on take-off that night, Lance. You were killed out-right. We buried you two days later."

THE END

Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from *Analog Science Fact and Science Fiction* April 1961. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note.

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