



with an introduction by the author

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RECALLING THE PAST;

Or, Welcome to 1952

by James Gunn

Reading "Tiger! Tiger!" after thirty-two years was like revisiting a house that I had once lived in. I could remember how it was to live there, but that was someone else: I am not the same person. I remembered that I had written the story, but I didn't remember writing it. Other than a single scene (the one on the sand dune) and a few phrases, everything was as strange as if I had never seen it before.

I wrote "Tiger! Tiger!" in November of 1952 while I was living in Chanute, Kansas. I had quit a job as editor for Western Printing and Lithographing Company of Racine, Wisconsin, where I had been working on the Dell line of paperback reprints for eighteen months. I had attended my first science fiction convention, the World Convention of 1952 in Chicago, and I had learned there, from my agent, Fred Pohl, that he had sold four stories for me, and on the strength of that I had gone back to full-time freelance writing.

I had freelanced for about a year in 1948-49, financing it with money saved while stationed on Truk Island during World War II, before I went back to the University of Kansas for a master's degree and then to the job in Racine. Now I was going to risk everything once more on the whims of the gods (whose names were John W. Campbell and Horace Gold) and my own skills.

I had gone to New York in October to see them (and a few others), with the hope that I might get some ideas from them and that they might read my stories with more sympathy and understanding. It had been a good trip, and I returned with ideas, enthusiasm, and the feeling that I was not only known but a member of the great science-fiction fraternity.

Memories plays strange tricks, however. I would have said (in fact, I have said) that upon my return I wrote a short novel that Fred sold to Galaxy and a short-short story that he sold to Argosy for a total of almost \$1,000 that I would not equal as a month's income for many years. I looked up my records, and it wasn't that way. I wrote "Tiger! Tiger!" first, then the Argosy story ("The Man Who Owned Tomorrow"),

then a short story and a novelette that never sold, and then the Galaxy short novel ("Wherever You May Be").

I don't know whether I had read Arthur C. Clarke's "Sentinel of Eternity," which appeared in the spring 1951 Ten Story Fantasy. It is possible that I did, although when I read the story for inclusion in The Road to Science Fiction #3 (by then it was titled "The Sentinel"), I did not remember reading it before. In any case, the idea of aliens watching us, and even of monitoring our technological development, wasn't new. One prominent instance of its use was Ted Sturgeon's "The Sky Was Full of Ships" in the June 1947 Thrilling Wonder Stories. But I was going to write it differently.

You can judge how differently for yourself. No one jumped at the opportunity to publish it. John Campbell must have had the chance to turn it down, as did Horace Gold. I kept track of stories then on index cards, noting when they were first mailed (on 11-14-52 for "Tiger! Tiger!"), and the first positive reaction was from James Quinn's If, where, I think, Larry Shaw (who had worked with my stories at Fred Pohl's literary agency) was now editor. If wanted changes. I seem to remember suggesting that I would try other magazines and make the changes for If if I couldn't sell it elsewhere. Finally, however, I sold it to Planet Stories on 1-8-54 for \$350 at a rate of one and two-thirds cents a word. Planet Stories, however, published its last issue in summer 1955, and "Tiger! Tiger!" was in its inventory when the magazine surrendered to the competition of television and other magazines (and perhaps the demise of the American News Company).

I believe we tried to sell it again, my agent (who was now Harry Altshuler, Fred having disbanded his agency) and I, but by the time we got back the rights from whoever held them, the times and events had passed the story by. It might have been published as part of my 1958 Bantam book, Station in Space, but the stories in that book, though closely allied in spirit and period, belong to another reality. I put it away and did not take it out again until Chris Drumm mentioned publishing something of mine in his own inimitable fashion.

You, too, then are visiting the past. The year is 1952 when the short novel was written; or, if you prefer it is a portion of the Planet Stories of 1955

INTRODUCTION

or 1956, although, to be sure, "Tiger! Tiger!" was not typical Planet Stories stuff and you will be disappointed if you expect science-fantasy or adventure. I don't know why Planet Stories bought it. This was a new direction I was trying to take, a direction illustrated by my first novel, This Fortress World (already underway, although it would not be published until 1955), which tried to combine gritty naturalism and literary skills, and by the stories in Station in Space.

I had not yet taken it as far as I wanted to go--there is, for instance, the kind of romantic subplot that I thought was necessary in those days, and moments of action that I thought readers wanted. If I were writing the story today, I'm certain I would leave them out. But I couldn't write the story today.

You have in your hands an artifact. From it, like an archeologist, you can recreate a previous era. Or maybe you would prefer to think of it as a kind of time machine.

Welcome to 1952!

Lawrence, Kansas, August 1, 1984

TIGER! TIGER!

by James E Gunn

THE TIGER SLEEPS

The dream was different this time. I dreamed that the Tiger slept.

I walked through the jungle, following a dim path toward water. I thirsted; I had passed many streams, but from none of them could I quench my thirst. Perhaps at the next one I could drink.

Then, by accident, I saw him, crouched in a pool of darkness by the path edge, so nearly invisible that for a moment I could not be sure my eyes had not formed a moon creature of light and shadow.

Terror paralyzed me. My heart alone moved, thundering in the silence. And I saw that the Tiger slept.

Relief swept me like a wave of passion. Exultation followed. I would seize the Tiger while he slept, secure him tightly, study him, learn his terrible secrets.... I took a step forward.

The Tiger opened his eyes and looked at me.

I woke up, panting, sweating, cold, and I remembered....

The crash of static from the speaker was almost deafening. As quickly as it came, it faded.

"Great God in Heaven!" a hushed voice said.

"What was that?"

I grabbed for the hand mike, but Rich's younger reflexes beat me to it.

"Ted!" Rich shouted. "Have you been holed?"

"Holed?" Ted Kincaid's voice was still shaky.

"Hell, no! But I'm just as scared as if we had been. Hey, Pop! What's chances of meeting a good-sized meteor?"

I took the hand mike. "About the same as being struck by lightning on a sunny day."

"Then why-in-hell," Ted said, his voice querulous and distant, "why-in-hell should we pass within one hundred yards of something as big as an igloo?"

"That big?"

"That's what radar said. It looked as big as a house to me—big and black and—round. There's a black igloo up here in the sky, and all I got to say is 'look out below!'"

"Twenty-five thousand?" I asked, glancing at the recorder.

"Exactly twenty-four thousand eight hundred forty-three."

"Okay, Ted. Thanks and good luck," I said absently. I was busy scribbling figures from the recorders.

"Rich," I said, shoving the paper at him, "run this through the Monster."

In spite of the available evidence, the chances were great that it would not be found, for centuries anyway. In the tables of probability, locating it ranked far below finding a needle in a haystack and just above, perhaps, picking out a particular grain of gypsum on the White Sands desert.

There was plenty of evidence if you knew what to look for and where to look for it.

Item: "A possible relationship between the aurora polaris and cosmic rays was suggested today by Professor L.E. Michaelson...." *New York Times*, April 7, 1961)

Item: "On several recorded instances during the last fifteen years, routine radar sweeps picked up fleeting echoes of objects at about 25,000 miles altitude. They were then dismissed as ghosts. It is now believed that they were meteors." (David Ferrer, "Semi-Annual Report on Radar Phenomena," *Journal of Radio-Astronomy*, Vol. 3, No. 1 [1959], p. 34)

Item: "In 1942-44 R.A. Millikan, H.V. Neher, and W.H. Pickering...proposed that cosmic ray energies are released in an atom annihilation process." (Article on "Radiation," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1950)

Item: —

Go as far as you like. It was all there, but most of it was secondary phenomena. No one deduced from the waving of the tall grass and the frightened chatter of birds the shape of the tiger moving silently through the jungle clearing.

Tiger!

You passed silently through the night, and we blundered upon you. You were fear, awe, hatred, and opportunity. You were knowledge; you were the shape of the unknown. We stopped; we reacted. And our awareness of your existence changed our lives.

It began at 2141 on June 14, 1967.

We were on duty in the astrogation room, Rich Dodge and I. We were monitoring a moon flight. This was the fifth manned ship to pull away from the Platform and head for the position in the sky the moon would occupy two days in the future. Of the other four, three had landed safely and returned.

There's a tunnel through a ridge in Mare Foecunditatis. With both ends sealed off it makes a quick, easy base for building up something larger. So this trip was ferrying supplies and a relief for the man who had volunteered to stay behind from the previous trip. He'd been there a month. That's the psychologists' outside limit for what they call "the predictable sanity period."

Rich and I had nothing much to do. The White Sands astrogation room is entirely automatic—unless it encounters the unpredictable. Readings are telemetered from the ship to recorders here. As input to the electronic computer, they are matched against predicted course figures; the computer radios corrections directly to the ship controls.

The pilot and co-pilot in the ship, and the navigators—us—at the base. Supernumeraries in a machine age. But things go wrong. Out of the unknown springs the unpredictable, a leering jack-in-the-box to mock our pretensions and startle us into humility. Witness the pile of fused wreckage in Mare Foecunditatis. A good telescope can pick it out if you know where to look. It's all that's left of moon flight #2. When something like that happens, there's us. If we're quick enough. We weren't then.

Everything had gone smoothly tonight. The ship had reached escape velocity in seventy-eight seconds of thrust. With power off it was right on course and would coast until just before landing time almost two days from now. The recorders had been purring. The computer had been clucking contentedly to itself behind one wall like a satisfied hen over a chick that has just pecked itself out of its shell. And Rich had been half-heartedly trying to revive our ancient and interminable argument while I ostensibly perused the latest telemetered report from our survey missile orbiting Mars. Actually I had been wondering—as I had wondered before and would wonder again—how big a damn' fool a middle-aged man has to be to fall in love with a girl scarcely past the age of consent.

Rich is a rocket pilot, but for every day he spends riding jets, he puts in a week on duty in the astrogation room. Me? I've done many things adequately and few of them well. I worked on the first rockets which broke into space. I helped build the space platform. Now I'm an astrogator.

That's how they've got it figured. A pilot and an astrogator in the White Sands astrogation room. But Rich is young, confident, blond, and handsome, and I'm middle-aged, uncertain, getting bald, and—well—pleasant looking at the kindest.

It takes a long time to learn humility.

"Look, Pop," Rich had said. "We aren't like the fifteenth and sixteenth century explorers. Columbus was looking for the Indies and was still convinced he had found them when he died. Not us. We can see the other side."

Pop, he called me. So I could give him a few years. I had been working and dreaming rockets when his voice hadn't started to change. But he had been to the moon and I hadn't. That gave him the right to be a little superior, a little condescending.

I dragged my eye from a reading which said that the summertime equatorial temperature on Mars had reached a cool 25° C.—and my mind from a blue-eyed Jeff with dark hair who was the most un-Jefflike technician who ever wore skirts in her off-duty hours.

"See what?" I snorted. "An ant on a mountain top."

"Did we find any surprises on the moon?" He ran his hand through his short, cropped hair, making him look even more boyish than ever. "Jets no! We

knew it was dead and it was. Dead as pumice dust."

I drained the last of the strictly unregulation can of beer and shifted in the stiff, straight monstrosity designed to keep even a snake at attention. What Rich was getting at was that space flight was just a job, a little more exciting, a little more demanding maybe, but still just a job.

"The ant paces out its square meter on the mountain and thinks the rest of the world must be the same. In comparison with the rest of the universe, Rich, we could stand on tiptoe and touch the moon with a finger. It's big. Big and strange and wonderful."

"Big, yes. Strange and wonderful, no. Anything you can predict isn't strange. And that's what we are—predicters. That's what the Monster is back there." He waved a hand at the wall behind which sat Two-Ton Bertha, the Mental Marvel. "Give us an atom and we can predict the universe."

And so it went, with good-natured heat which helped to keep our minds from fretting about the possible fate of moon flight #5. I stressed how little we knew about what was, after all, only a freckle on the face of infinity, and Rich pointed out that everything we knew was negative. The unmanned survey missiles which were orbiting Mars and Venus, sending back the information which would make manned flights feasible, reported that "Venus is hot and dry and lifeless and Mars is cold and dry and lifeless."

We never changed. I clung to my middle-aged dreams of an inhabited universe, and Rich stood fast on his healthy, young cynicism, insisting that nothing would really change mankind. Space flight would not liberate the human spirit. Our control of space would not eliminate war. Russia, sure that we wouldn't start anything, would wait and build its rockets somewhere in the Urals and apply a little not-so-gentle pressure, and sooner or later everything would mushroom up.

Give us time, I said, and Rich replied that we had no time. No time. Man is too adaptable. We change our viewpoints only to protect our prejudices and petty motivations.

"Why get excited about space flight?" he asked. "It's a job. I like it, sure, and I wouldn't be doing anything else, but it's just another job."

"Wait," I had said. "You're the man who thinks he knows every step of the way home. Some day—maybe even tomorrow or the next day or the day after that—you'll meet something in the dark, familiar alley that will shock you and me and everyone else on this preoccupied planet into thinking like rational beings."

Which would have made me a major prophet—if I hadn't said the same thing at least once a week for the last five years.

The Monster grumbled as it digested the problem.

From the typewriter-like control board of the computer, Rich swung around to face me. "Well?"

"A meteor as big as that could blast a hole bigger than the Arizona crater."

"We can't do anything about it," Rich said quietly. "The time is too short and the red tape is too long. What is it, Pop?"

I shrugged. "Call it curiosity."

"Call it rockets! As Lincoln said, you can call a tail a leg but that doesn't make it one. You've got a good idea about it, haven't you, Pop?"

I frowned. "The angle is odd."

He looked down at the paper and back at me.

"Not half as odd as you are," he muttered.

Just then the computer clucked and chattered out a string of typewritten symbols. Rich grabbed them and scanned the tape. He looked up, startled.

"The damned thing isn't going to hit at all. It's in an orbit."

I took the tape out of his fingers. I stared at it. After a while my eyes lifted and gazed thoughtfully at the wall as if trying to decipher the cryptic message left by the plasterer. Finally, slowly, I picked up the hand mike again.

"Ted. That—uh—object. When you picked it up, were your cameras working all right?"

"Sure, Pop." Ted sounded astonished. "They didn't click off until just a moment ago." His voice faded. "Check those cameras." And a moment later. "O.K., Pop. We should have some beauties."

"Stand by," I said slowly. "New instructions, new course may be coming up." I clicked off. "Set up new pattern for getting them back to platform quickest," I said to Rich. He stared at me, open-mouthed.

He wanted to argue, but I was already busy with the base phone. "General Van Devlin," I told the operator.

"General Van Devlin is off station," she replied cheerfully.

"I know that," I said patiently. "This is astro-gation emergency. I want the General located immediately."

"I'll try-ee," she drawled doubtfully.

I slammed the phone book back into the cradle and let loose a string of soul-soothing four-letter words.

Rich spoke from the control board. "Why don't you try the Exec?"

"I know Allen," I said. "He'd sit on his hands and make us do the same."

Rich shook his head uneasily and went back to work. I sat and brooded into the distance, unseeing. I was worried—not so much about the decision I might have to make as the motives that were influencing that decision. I saw myself seeing myself, and I wanted to shout, *How can a man ever get it straight?*

How can he separate himself from what he is and what he wants and how he sees himself and how he wants others to see him? How can a decision be wise and objective?

The buzzing of the phone brought me back to reality.

"I'm sorry-ee," said the operator, sounding not at all sorry. "General Van Devlin cannot be located. Shall I keep trying?"

"Please do," I said gently, and eased the phone down. I stood there, thoughtfully, with my hand still resting on it.

When Rich came up behind me I suddenly became aware that the computer's control keys had stopped clicking.

"Les," he said. "It's set up, Les. But—"

I reached for the hand mike.

"Here it is, Ted," I said. "You're coming back. Stand by for rocket thrust."

"Coming back!" Ted exploded. The room boomed with volume. "We can't. What about Jim Martin?"

"Jim Martin?"

"At Moon Base," Ted said impatiently. "I'm ferrying his replacement."

"Martin will have to wait. Stand by."

Ted subsided, protesting. I bent over the table, scribbled for a moment on a piece of scratch paper, folded it, and walked over to the control board. Rich followed at my heels.

I glanced at the check sheet. "A little over two hours, eh? Good."

I was trying desperately to seem what I was not—cool and confident. I reached for the button marked "insert." Rich grabbed my arm.

"Don't do it, Les!" he said urgently. "The expense, the complications, the—"

"I've thought about them." I stuck the folded piece of paper in his hand.

"Good God, Les!" Rich whispered. "They'll break you. You'll never touch a rocket again. There may be a trial. You—"

"Yeah," I said, and pressed the button.

And I wish I could have been sure that I did not push it because I wanted to appear a hero—or a martyr—in the light of a pair of beautiful blue eyes.

I, Lester Blake, senior astrogator on the White Sands Rocket Base main astrogation watch from 2000 to 2400, June 14, 1967, take full and sole responsibility for all decisions made and for all actions taken during that watch....

Rich finished reading, flushed, and without a word crumpled the paper in his hand. He tossed it into the waste basket.

"Don't be a fool," I said harshly.

Rich's face was an angry red. "If I thought

you meant that—"

"Of course I meant it!" I was angry now, but not angry enough, because I admired Rich's stand while I cursed the folly and uselessness of it. "If you think you'll help me or lessen the guilt by sharing it—if it is guilt—you're mistaken. Be sensible, Rich—"

"I've never seen you do anything foolish or without a good reason," he said quietly. "You know what you're doing and you think you're right. That's enough for me."

The knife twisted as it went in. "Listen—"

"And you're wrong about what you call guilt. It's a hell of a lot better if two people share in a decision. It's ten times as hard to prove two people go mad or get panicky at the same time."

"Now, Rich—" I began, and stopped. I knew Rich, and I knew it was hopeless.

The room was almost silent. The Monster chattered a little now and then, and in the other corner the recorders scratched thinly. Far above us a rocket was braking its outward lunge, splitting the blackness with a sword of flame, and somewhere up there in its solitary orbit circled a round object, black, about the size of an igloo.

Suddenly it felt cold in the room. I shivered.

"Look, Les," Rich said with a trace of embarrassment, "you don't have to tell me anything."

I didn't want to talk about it, but I knew what was holding me back. It was fear—fear that I was wrong and had made a damned fool of myself and I couldn't keep Rich out of it. But Rich had a right to know as much as I *knew*.

"The orbit of that black igloo up there is circum-polar," I said finally. "Twenty-six hour."

Rich looked blank for a moment. Then he reacted. "That's incredible."

"That's what I thought. I want to look at those pictures. As soon as possible. And God help me if I'm wrong," I finished miserably.

"Maybe it's God help us all if you're right."

I looked at him sharply before I realized that he was thinking about a possibility that I had already discarded.

It was 2330. We ran the problem through the stand-by bank of the Monster three times more before our reliefs arrived. Each time it checked out to five decimal points.

"That damned angle," Rich muttered. "The ship only had contact for a fraction of a second."

"It can be checked easily enough. We have the orbit plotted. Radar can pick it up any time—if it's there."

"If it's there," Rich echoed gloomily.

Indecision and uncertainty pinned us silent to our chairs, weighing personal justification against a world's peace of mind. There our reliefs found us.

They listened to my briefing with deliberately expressionless faces. I mentioned the igloo in the sky reluctantly, a little sheepishly, but it was routine to run over the records of the preceding watch. When I finished, George White whistled softly, his black face glistening.

"I wish I had your guts," George said. But I knew what he was thinking. *You've really pulled one this time, a true classic. They'll quote it to all the astrogation students as a beautiful example of insubordination, unwarranted assumption of authority, panic.... Anyone who ignores regulations is a fool, and they'll have to give you the axe—even if you're right—just to discourage imitators. I wouldn't be in your shoes for a deed to Mars.*

George was still looking at me with his soft brown eyes. I tried to seem casual.

"Pending official review," I said, "I'm classifying this top secret."

George nodded. I glanced at the chronometer set in the Monster's wall.

"Right about now the moon rocket is matching velocity with the Platform. In half an hour the shuttle will start down. That will bring it in here in two hours and fourteen minutes. The field crew has been notified and is on stand-by ready."

"Very well," George said. "I relieve you."

I sighed and looked around. I would probably never see this room again.

"Who's for coffee?" I asked.

A few steps from the astrogation room, Rich pulled to a stop and snapped his fingers in annoyance. "Forgot something," he said, and turned back.

I walked on a little farther and stopped, waiting. Rich wasn't a very good actor. A cold, hard lump turned over in my stomach, and I wished I couldn't see him pulling a crumpled sheet of paper out of a waste basket and smoothing it and folding it and putting it in his pocket.

And I told myself it wasn't true, but it wasn't much use.

Memory works in funny ways. Some things you can't forget if you try. Others become as if they never were. Between the two is a whole, complex gradation, but the strangest one is the memory that keeps trying to bump itself—fishlike—through the shifting, uncertain membrane that separates the unconscious and conscious minds. You become aware only of discomfort, general, unlocalized, which will not be relieved until you search it out.

On the way to the snack bar, I told Rich to go ahead. The night-shift librarian was drowsing over a copy of some learned periodical. The pages had fallen open and inside was the July issue of the *Science Fiction Digest*. I let him sleep; what I wanted to find he couldn't help me with. It was inside my

head.

For twenty minutes I browsed among the scientific journals before I felt the mental discomfort sharpen. Then I leafed through the back issues until I found it, and the tension vanished. It was there, all right.

I stuffed the magazine in my pocket. On my way out, I filled in a withdrawal slip and left it between pages 67 and 68 of the *Digest*. The librarian was still asleep as I let myself out into the night.

The wide, concrete landing field stretched out to infinity. Over it hung a pale crescent of moon, distant and reproachful. I thought of Jim Martin, crouched in his tunnel in Mare Foecunditatis, waiting in desperate loneliness for a ship that wasn't coming, and I hoped that he didn't go mad before his relief arrived.

I had enough on my conscience already.

Just inside the door of the snack bar I stopped. Rich was seated at a table; bent close to his blond, cropped head was a dark one, almost touching, that I knew too well. They were laughing about something, and I looked at them—young and beautiful and alive—and my heart gave a twinge as if it had revolved in my chest.

I walked up behind them quietly.

"Plotting an elopement?" I said lightly.

They looked up and their warmth reached out and enclosed me, and I told myself I was an old fool.

"Jeff insists on orange blossoms and bridesmaids and long veils and all that junk," Rich laughed.

Jeff's blue eyes were shining. "Rich talks big, but I can never pin him down. Only now I have witness-es. You heard him, Les!"

"You might as well give up, Rich," I told him, sinking into a chair. "You're hooked."

"No fish ever swallowed such beautiful bait," Rich said, "or dreaded the gaff less." He got up. "You must be tired, Pop. Let me get you a cup of coffee."

A retort rose in my throat, but I choked it back. Beside these two youngsters, I must have looked as old as Mars. Anyway, tonight I felt old and weary. "Let the operator know where she can reach us."

"Already have, Pop," his answer floated back.

I looked at Jeff and looked away. I was thinking too much tonight.

She put her hand over mine. "You look solemn."

"Me?" I laughed. It sounded hollow. "When are you and Rich going to get married?"

She looked out the wall-long window onto the field. I studied the perfection of her profile—the smooth, dark, slightly raised eyebrow, the deep, quiet eye, the impertinent nose, the full, red lower lip that made you long to sink your teeth....

"What makes you think we are?"

I wondered why a girl of her beauty should be a computer technician and thought a little wistfully

of the time when girls with keen minds used them to conceal all evidence of intelligence. "I've seen you together."

She laughed and looked at me with a greenish light in her blue eyes. "That's only youth. Sometimes I feel centuries older than Rich."

"I always do. That is my tragedy."

She was about to say something, but Rich was back with my coffee and a huge section of kringle. He put them in front of me, and I was suddenly hungry. Rich noticed the magazine in my pocket.

"What's that?"

I pulled it out. "The Journal of Radio Astronomy," I said, tossing it to him, "volume three, number one. Look on page thirty-four."

Rich leafed through the journal while I washed down large bites of pecan kringle with hot black coffee. I began to feel a little better. I watched his eyes slide down the page and suddenly stop to swivel back and forth. They looked up at me.

"Hey, that's it!"

I shrugged. "It helps. It's that much more."

He flipped to the front of the magazine. "Nineteen fifty-nine," he read. His eyes stared into the distance, unfocused. "That's queer."

"Maybe."

Jeff's head had been pivoting back and forth as if she were watching a tennis match. She put one hand on each side to hold it still. "Slow up a little, boys," she complained. "You lost me on the first volley."

"It's—" Rich began.

"Hot," I finished. "Too hot for pretty little girls with bright blue eyes. Go away. Let us think deep thoughts in peace."

She didn't move. Her long lashes flickered over her eyes. "Cat's got your tongue?"

"Bear by the tail," Rich groaned.

"Not bear," I corrected. "Tiger. See?" I pointed to my lips, demonstrating. "Sewed up with brass."

Jeff's eyes half closed, and she smiled, slowly. It was enough to make a monk forget his vows. One of us might have weakened if the loudspeaker on the wall had not broken in with a blare of sound. In spite of incessant tinkering by Electronics, it could never speak without first raucously clearing its throat. I suspected that the tinkering was merely stage dressing; the General had his own men set it back to its original hideousness.

"Lester Blake. Lieutenant Richard Dodge. Report to the administration building."

We leaped out of our chairs. Jeff followed us, more decorously. She walked with us to the middle of the field. When she left us, to make her way alone to the maidens' quarters, she gave us a flashing, enigmatic glance.

"A tiger," she said, "is just a cat. All you

have to know is where to stroke it to make it purr."

We walked on, slowly, not saying anything. Inevitably, as base personnel are prone to do, we looked up into the night sky. It was a clear night and the moon had gone down and the stars seemed close enough to collect in a net.

"Tiger!" Rich said. He shivered.

I made it mutual.

A military aide was waiting for us just inside Administration. A captain, he controlled his annoyance at waiting for a civilian and a junior officer, but not very successfully. In frigid silence, we walked along the concrete corridor behind his stiff, indignant back. He opened a door, and we stood blinking in the light of the General's office.

"That's all, Captain," General Van Devlin said in his official voice.

I felt a little happier.

By the time the door closed behind us, our eyes were adjusted to the light. The General sat behind his wide, walnut desk, looking remarkably stern and judgeline. To one side sat Colonel Allen in a deep leather chair, his face glimmering white and ghostly in a pool of darkness.

Brigadier General Van Devlin was a young forty-eight. His face was lean, tanned, and acquiline, and his figure was broad-shouldered and straight, if perhaps a little stiff in the back. Hollywood would have typed him as just what he was—today's professional soldier.

That Van Devlin was commandant of the White Sands Rocket Base was something of an anomaly. He was an ordnance man by training and inclination, but some military train of thought had linked gunnery and rockets and come up with Van. Actually, he fitted the position better than almost anyone. He was good at wangling appropriations out of Congress, and he was good at procurement. He knew how to pick men, and he knew how to delegate authority. Unimaginative, without ever knowing much about rockets, he had put a space platform in the sky, four ships on the moon (one of them a fused wreck, but that wasn't his fault), and survey missiles around Mars and Venus.

At the moment he looked as if he regretted every minute of it.

"You can consider this," he said in his hoarse, rasping voice, "a preliminary inquiry into the unwarranted assumption of authority which resulted in the turning back of a successful moon flight and the wastage of two hundred thousand dollars in fuel alone." Then his control broke. "Good God, Blake," he said violently. "I thought you could be trusted not to go off half-cocked like this. Someone as young and inexperienced as Lieutenant Dodge, here, I might not—"

I took my life in my hands

"Just a minute, General," I interrupted. "Let's

get this straight. Bringing back the ship was my own idea and my entire responsibility. Lieutenant Dodge tried to dissuade me."

"Les——" Rich tried to break in.

"Keep out of this," I told him firmly.

"Why did you do it, Blake?" Van Devlin complained, shaking his head at the frailty of men, the broken reeds upon which he was forced to lean. "How will I ever explain this to the Pentagon—or to Congress? If you'd only waited a couple of hours you could have talked to me."

"In two hours the ship would have been thirty thousand miles farther away."

"What was the confounded hurry?" the General broke out again. "Damn it, Blake, you realize that you will have to answer for this. You'll be lucky if all it means is your job. All this mess over a worthless hunk of rock."

It was typical that he failed to mention that it could, possibly, mean his job too.

"In a circumpolar orbit," I said gently.

"I don't care if it— Circumpolar?" He stopped and digested the information. He began toying with a miniature silver rocket ship that served as a paper weight on his desk. "You mean maybe it's not a hunk or rock. Maybe it's an artificial satellite?"

I nodded. It seemed better to let him reach his own conclusions.

"How big?"

"About the size of an igloo, Ted Kincaid said."

"Hell! That's not big; that's little."

"It depends on whether you're thinking of meteors or rockets."

"Or space stations. No, no. It couldn't be that. Damn it, Blake, don't make me do all the thinking. We don't have anything up there, eh?"

"Nothing even close."

"Russian?"

I shrugged. It was an easy way out. I had no burning desire to be a martyr, and once the wheels started rolling the original push might be forgotten. I was to remember, later, where the easy way leads.

"Russian." Van's face hardened. I could almost see his mind hardening too. He picked up a phone from its cradle on his desk. "Get me General Wilmer. Washington. The Pentagon will know his home number. Yes, I realize it will be four a.m. there. This is Priority AAA, Emergency Blue."

He put down the phone and lit a fat cigar, taking almost a minute to get it burning to his satisfaction. Finally he sat there like an impassive Buddha, enwreathed in his own incense.

For a moment I relaxed and felt almost human again. Colonel Allen cut it short. He leaned forward into the light from the General's desk lamp. His face seemed even more colorless than usual. His hair was so blond it was white, and his eyebrows were

invisible against the pallor of his face.

"Where is Blake's proof?" he asked in his soft voice that was as colorless as his face. I wondered if I was the only one to detect the malice in it.

"I don't like you, Blake," Allen said once, long ago.

"That's fine," I said cheerfully. I had reason to be cheerful.

"It's not just because Sally chose you instead of me. You're everything I dislike. You're brave and romantic and colorful." He made them sound like nasty words. "Going out to conquer space. But you never build anything solid, and someday Sally and the world will see you as you really are—a fool. Someday you'll fall flat on your face. And I want to be there when it happens."

Before I could answer the building was shaken by a thunderous, whining roar and a vibration that built up from nothing to a painful peak. Van Devlin jumped as if a dentist's drill had touched a nerve.

"What's that? What ship is that?"

Abruptly the noise and vibration stopped.

"That," I said quietly, "is my proof. The shuttle bringing back pictures taken of the object by the rocket's automatic cameras."

"Good God! Another hundred thousand!"

"Pictures?" Allen said. "Of an orbit?"

I struggled to keep my temper. "Pictures of the object. The orbit was calculated and checked by the computer from instrument readings of the object's speed and angle of crossing made by the rocket."

Out of the darkness floated one word, skeptical, superior, "Indeed?"

"The results," I went on, "are liable to mechanical error, as Colonel Allen suggests. There is this, in addition." I handed Jan Devlin the journal, opened to page thirty-four. He read it quickly.

"At twenty-five thousand, eh?" He looked up. I nodded. He did not check the date. At the time I was thankful.

"Also," I went on, "radar could pick up a verification at any time by use of the computed orbit."

Van Devlin smiled and relaxed a little. "Yes, of course."

"I would suggest, however, that the check be made in the form of a random sweep rather than by tracking. If the object is artificial, it might be sensitive to radar. Tracking would reveal our knowledge of its presence."

"Good," the General nodded approvingly. "Make a note of it, Allen. Now—"

The telephone buzzed.

"Yes? Van Devlin, General. Scramble three. Okay? We've picked up something, General. Moon flight number five passed within a short distance

of an object in a circumpolar orbit. Nothing of ours. God knows, General, but it looks like it's Red. That's right, Russian. Emergency Blue. Confirming photographs should be here any minute. Yes, General, I'll send you copies by messenger as soon as possible."

Van Devlin put down the phone carefully. Almost before it was in the cradle, the intercom box on the desk buzzed shrilly. The General flicked a switch. A tinny voice reached our ears.

"Prints from the shuttle are ready, General, if you want to see them now."

"Have them sent up to the viewing room under armed guard. And see that representatives of the research department are present." He groped for names. Research was something he left well alone. He glanced at Allen, but the Exec either did not notice or did not choose to help.

"If I may suggest, General," I said. "Willy Franks and Tony Fazio."

"Willy Franks and Tony Fazio," he repeated.

"Thanks, Blake," he said, but there was a reluctant heaviness to it.

I realized that Allen had been wiser than I.

The General got up and walked with a long stride to the door, Allen following silently. At the last moment Van Devlin stopped and turned back.

"I suppose you two may as well come along," he growled.

I wanted to refuse, but it was a luxury I could not afford.

The darkness was complete. I smelled cigar smoke in the air.

"All right, Sergeant," said the General tensely, "when you're ready."

The Sergeant was ready. There was a whirring in back of us. A moment later the screen lit up.

We hung motionless in space—silent, black, limitless—while the stars revolved around us. Even in this flat, poor reproduction, the old, familiar feeling of insignificance swept over me—the infinite smallness of the viewpoint and the inconceivable immensity of the universe, where the gaze travels on and on without stopping point, like parallel lines that never meet. How could anyone experience it, even second hand like this, and not be overcome by the breathlessness and the wonder of it? How could anyone see it and not feel that here was something worth doing, more worth the effort and the expense and the sacrifice than anything man has ever done? There were many. It always left me feeling a little sick.

Then, swiftly and ghostlike, something black and round and small flashed across the screen and was gone. In the twinkling of a star it was gone. The screen went blank white and then dark as the whirring ceased at our backs.

"Let's have the still, Sergeant," the general

said.

It sprang back to the screen and hung there, black and round and maybe not quite as small as it had seemed when it had flashed across the screen. The vague starshine seemed to spread out on the surface and become even vaguer.

"At one hundred yards," I mused in a whisper to Rich, beside me, "about ten feet in diameter."

My voice carried more than I intended. Behind me I heard a snort of derision. I knew instinctively that it was Allen.

I stared at the sphere. There were no rocket tubes or any other obvious means of propulsion. They could, of course, be on the hidden side. The outline of the sphere against the stars seemed to have the barest hint of irregularity.

In the womblike darkness, we stared at it longer, I think, than anyone realized. It was hypnotic, hanging there motionless in space, fixed upon the point of an instant now long past, while its reality sped on its silent, until-now-unsuspected way high above us. The cold of space seemed to suck the warmth out of the room. Someone's teeth chattered.

"Lights!" Van Devlin sighed, finally.

The overhead lights came on. We blinked, stirred. I turned around in my seat. Behind me, in leather, overstuffed armchairs, sat the General and Allen. Allen stared at me unblinkingly; I ignored him. There were two other men in the room. One—dark, small, intent, about thirty-five—I recognized as Tony Fazio, troubleshooter in the research division. The other was gray-haired, big-headed Mr. Rockets himself, Willy Franks, head of research and development and at his age just a little set in his ideas. I looked back at the General.

"Man-made?" the General said bluntly, to no one in particular. I looked at Fazio and Franks. They looked at me. We had worked together for a long time.

"It's artificial," I said. Van Devlin didn't notice the evasion. Tony did. He stared at me curiously with his melting brown eyes.

"Do you two agree?" The General looked at Franks and Fazio.

Tony nodded. "Of course, General," Willy rumbled. Van Devlin nodded, with decision. "Why?"

I shrugged. There were so many reasons.

"It's round. Meteors that size aren't round."

"The moon's round," Allen said. I realized, abruptly, that he would hang me if he could. My refusal to call him about the decision had made him look ridiculous. I wondered if that possibility had influenced me; I hoped not.

"The moon's not in a circumpolar orbit," I said, shrugging. "It's an impossible orbit for a satellite; only slightly less impossible for a meteor. And there's the color. It's dead black. A meteor would have glints of iron or other free metals."

Van Devlin smashed his fist down on the upholstered arm of the chair. "Russian! The damned Reds have finally got something up there."

Then was my chance to speak out. But I was afraid, and I didn't know as much then as I knew later. And, in spite of everything, it *could* have been Russian. "Maybe," I said.

The General looked up sharply. "Nonsense! What else could it be?"

The question was rhetorical, but I felt compelled to say something. "General—" I began.

He didn't notice. "It won't be there long," he muttered.

That was the last word. We filed out. The General stopped in the hall.

"Everything pertaining to this subject is classified top secret, and I'll designate those permitted access to it. Understood?"

We nodded. Allen and the General stood in consultation as I brushed by them. Van Devlin was rattling off a program.

"This fellow at Moon Base—"

"Martin."

"Have Com try to get a message through. It'll take at least five days to ferry up enough fuel for another shot. Get on that. We'll have to get radar confirmation as soon as we can get Pentagon permission. Have prints ready to send out by special messenger at dawn. The report...."

I could picture the wheels beginning to turn. A little wheel turned a bigger wheel and the bigger wheel turned still a bigger wheel and so it went until all the wheels were turning, turning....

Rich and I stood by the door that led out into the night, silent, unable to leave the scene of decision.

"You have ideas, too, eh, Les?" It was Tony's liquid, musical voice, low and soft like a woman's should be but seldom is.

"Ideas? Yes. But not Van's."

"I'm sure," Allen said behind us, "that General Van Devlin will find that interesting. Especially after a recent example of insubordination."

We stared at him. He walked back over to where the General was talking to Willy Franks.

"What do you mean, Les?" Rich asked eagerly. "Don't you think it's Russian?"

I shook my head and looked at Tony. He smiled and his perfect white teeth gleamed brilliantly, but there wasn't any mirth in it.

"Impossible. Just as it can't be a meteor. Too high up. Twenty-five thousand miles! You'd need a telescope to pick up military information. Did you see a telescope?" Rich shook his head. "Or radar and communications antennae? Or rocket tubes? Why such a slow orbit? In times between inspection an atomic war could be started—maybe finished. And

why should they want to inspect the poles?"

"And how the devil," I added, "could they get that little hunk of metal up there in the first place?"

"Blazing meteors, yes!" Rich swore like that. One forgave him his affectations; as I mentioned before, he had been to the moon. "Even the third stage of a rocket would be fifteen times that size. But what-in-hell is it?"

I looked at Tony and he looked at me and we knew we were both thinking the same thing. Putting it into words was something different. I shrugged.

"Blake! Dodge!" It was the General's voice rasping across the hall. Allen was standing beside him, looking sourly satisfied. "You are suspended from duty and confined to base pending further developments."

Wordless I turned toward the door.

"Dodge!" Allen almost whispered. "I would like to see you for a moment."

Rich started. He turned to me a face puzzled and strangely worried. I patted him on the shoulder and went out into the night.

It was well after dawn before I got to sleep. Rich still hadn't come in.

I came half awake at 1600, washed with a sudden flood of guilt and fear. It was connected, somehow, with a too-vivid nightmare that had disturbed my sleep and was slowly fading away. I clung to it, as a man clings to terror so that he will not have to face the reality which inspired it.

It was night—as dense and depthless as space. Alone, I faced the night, and yet I was not alone—horribly, I was not alone. Somewhere nearby crouched a reason for fear. I looked up and froze, my hands, my face, my body in a classic attitude of terror. It crouched there above me, looking down, its eyes burning greenly. Its powerful striped body was misty, transparent. Through it I could see the stars. Its tail trailed off into infinity; perhaps out there it carelessly lashed a world or two from their orbits. But its eyes were real and terrible. Unmoving, waiting, it stared down upon me, and an unvoiced question echoed in my mind: What is it, high in the sky, that, unmanned, circles a world from pole to pole? I could not move and I waited for it to spring upon me. Because I knew the answer but I could not say it aloud, and the penalty was death....

"A survey missile," I said, and woke. The fearful tableau faded. I groaned and rolled over on my side. Rich was in his bed, breathing heavily. He looked young—young and defenseless—as he lay there. I turned over on my back and tried to sleep again, but my eyelids were on springs. I lay there, staring at the ceiling. Ted Kincaid, Jim Martin, George White, General Van Devlin, Colonel Allen, Tony Fazio, Jeff, black igloos in the sky.... Guilt....

I got up, quietly. I used Washoff on my beard to keep from disturbing Rich, although I preferred the smooth, keen gliding of a razor. "Leaves your face feeling like a baby's," the ads insisted. It always left my face feeling like I'd slept in it.

When I slipped out the front door, Rich was still sound asleep.

I had a hearty, solitary breakfast and spent almost an hour smoking over an evening paper. There was nothing new. *Malenkov in trouble. Malenkov not in trouble. New Russian purge hinted. A month-old assassination attempt in Yugoslavia, Tito unharmed. New deficit in England, which still refuses to join United Europe. French workers' riot against Italian workers reportedly Communist inspired. Continued Chinese protests against Russian control of Manchuria; Russia vetoes investigation. Browns and Senators favored to win their retrospective pennants.*

And a small item in Scoop Sullivan's "Washington Diary": *Much excitement around the Pentagon early this a.m. Could this be connected with the White Sands Rocket Base?*

Something had leaked already.

I tossed the paper aside. When I got back to the room, Rich was gone. By the time I had made both beds and straightened the room, it was dark. I slipped an anthology of English poetry from the bookcase and lost myself in it for half an hour. Then I found myself reading a poem for the fifth time and put the book down. I paced the room restlessly. I had almost decided to go out and search for companionship when the door opened.

Rich and Jeff were in the doorway, laughing. Jeff brandished a fifth of Canadian whisky and Rich carried a bottle of mix under each arm.

"Happy birthday to you," they sang gaily.

I winced and recovered. "How did you know that today is my birthday?"

Jeff stopped singing. "Is it really?"

"I've never really been certain," I said soberly. "I was orphaned at an early age and my records were lost in the San Francisco earthquake."

"That would make you fifty— sixty—" Jeff broke off and laughed. "You're joking. Come on, Methuselah, I'll mix you a drink."

Rich slumped into a chair. In the little kitchenette, I picked up the bottle of whisky and stared at it. Jeff turned to look at me.

"Is it all right, Les?" she asked hesitantly.

"Oh, sure," I said, "sure. Nothing better." I pulled out the cork. Somewhere we had a jigger. I found it, but it was covered with dust.

Jeff washed it and dried it and handed it to me and said, "It scares me, Les."

I poured the jigger full and dumped it in a glass. "What?"

She nodded toward the ceiling. "That. That

thing up there."

"Who told you?"

She glanced at Rich, brooding in his chair, and back at me. I started to say something. "Don't blame him," she said. "I wheedled it out of him. And now I wish I hadn't."

I shrugged. "It doesn't matter." I looked at Rich again. Perhaps that was what was bothering him.

"It's not just the thing up there," Jeff went on. "I'm afraid of what it will do to us. It's already meant your suspension; God knows what it will mean before...."

"Rich, too," I added.

"Of course." She glanced at me. "Rich, too. What is it, Les? What does it mean?"

There was a knock on the door before I could answer. Tony Fazio stood there, a fifth of Kentucky bourbon in his hand. When he saw that Jeff and Rich were there, he tried to excuse himself and leave, but we dragged him in, Jeff and I.

"I wonder what the vintners buy," I said, and I wondered, to myself, about the peculiar instinct which equates alcohol and unsolvable problems.

When we all had drinks in our hands, Rich proposed a sardonic toast. "To the black igloo in the sky—if it's there."

"Oh, no," Jeff objected. "Let's not."

Tony glanced at me questioningly.

"Why not?" Rich said. He sounded bitter.

"She knows," I muttered to Tony.

We drank.

"It's there," Tony said, when he lowered his glass. "That's one reason I came over."

"Radar?" I asked. He nodded.

"Sweep or tracking?"

"Sweep. I insisted on it and the General agreed. Washington okayed it. It was right on orbit."

Relief rolled around the room like a wave. We all began babbling at once, exulting in our vindication, speculating about the possible personal consequences, laughing....

"But what is it?" Jeff said. "Really?"

The floor dropped out from under us, and we were once more in the pit staring up at the night sky. Up there circled a small, black, deadly question, waiting to be posed to an unsuspecting world.

"Tiger!" Rich said, and drained his glass.

"What is it, high in the sky," I said slowly, "That, unmanned, circles a world from pole to pole?"

"That's a funny way to put it," Tony said, looking at me curiously.

"Yes, isn't it," I agreed.

"A survey missile," Jeff said. "Like ours around Mars and Venus."

We all nodded glumly.

"But that—" Jeff gasped, "but that means—"

"Aliens," Tony said. "They made it and put it there. Beings from other worlds."

We digested the idea. It was not new to Tony or me, but it was the first time either of us had put it into words. That way it seemed more concrete, more inescapable.

"When you accept that, everything falls into place," I pointed out. "At twenty-five thousand miles you can only see general details—if the thing sees at all in our understanding of the word—the rise and fall of civilizations, the growth of cities and roads, cultivated areas, large dams, big ships, air-fields, space ports—"

"You talk as if it had been there for thousands of years," Rich complained.

"Maybe it has," I said. "It was there in '59, probably. God knows how many years or centuries it was there before we had any means of detecting it."

"That twenty-six hour orbit bothered me from the first," Tony said. "It takes twelve days for the thing to make a complete survey of the Earth. What kind of time scale is that? Interplanetary, at least."

"Why," Jeff asked, "should anyone—anything—want to know what is happening on Earth?"

"Why do we want to know about Mars and Venus?" I asked back.

"You mean—they may send a ship here?"

Jeff was perched on the edge of the desk chair. Tony was squatting, cross-legged, on one of the beds, his chin in his palm; I got up from the other one to refill my glass. Rich, who had been slumped down in the easy chair, staring at his glass, looked up and laughed. "Invasion?"

"Maybe it's not so funny," I said from the kitchenette. "But it's been a long time. Maybe they just want to keep us under observation."

"Like lunatics?" Jeff said.

I smiled wanly. "I hope not. But you might be right."

"But it has to report," Rich objected, "or it doesn't do them any good. And it doesn't. We'd have noticed anything alien in radio."

"Would we?" I drained my glass. "It doesn't necessarily have to communicate by radio waves, you know. Too slow, for one thing. Worthless for anything greater than interplanetary distances."

"Greater!" Rich was shocked. "You mean this thing may come from outside the solar system, from some other star?"

"Venus is hot and dry and lifeless and Mars is cold and dry and lifeless," I quoted.

"But interstellar travel!" Rich exclaimed. "That means the things that put it there would be centuries ahead of us."

"At least. Maybe it circled the Earth when our planet was still in the carboniferous era."

"It might," Tony said thoughtfully, "communicate by some means we wouldn't recognize as alien. Which we accept as some natural phenomenon."

"Like static," I agreed. I looked up, startled. "Static! Remember, Rich? That crash of static when Ted cut in? It died away almost immediately. As soon as the thing passed the ship. I'd like to know the intensity of the radiation when it was close."

Tony was staring at me. "Somehow we'll have to find out."

"It'll be on the records," Rich said.

"Watching us," Jeff said dully. "For years and years and years. Watching us. Everything we do. Watching and judging."

I took the empty glass from her hand and refilled it. "Here," I said, putting the glass back. "Drink!"

She drank. Her smooth throat worked convulsively. She put the glass down empty. When she looked back at me her eyes had lost their look of dazed horror. "Who could it be, Les? Who?"

"Probably we'll never know," I said. I'd thought about it all day. Martians, maybe. Call them Martians, wherever they may have come from within our solar system. Suppose they conquered space while we were still in caves. Suppose they left the thing there to watch us and then gradually died out. But the survey missile still circles up there, tirelessly, sending back information there is nothing to receive, no one to read.

"Or maybe it's dead up there. Maybe it wore out ages ago and is just as lifeless as a meteor."

"Or maybe some race from the stars left it here to report to them by some faster-than-light means. They'd have to have that for interstellar travel. And maybe, in some gigantic information center, they're still receiving information from here and elsewhere, studying, comparing. Or maybe they're dead, too."

"Perhaps there's a galactic civilization or alliance. And that black igloo is a sentinel. If we do the wrong thing, if we threaten that civilization, maybe we'll be wiped out."

"Good God!" Rich broke in. "Maybe space flight is forbidden!"

"What a beautiful hunk of mechanism," Tony said lovingly. "Ten feet in diameter—twelve at the most—and packed in that sphere are instruments we needed a hundred-foot rocket to carry. And no rocket tubes, no antennae, nothing." He turned to me with professional enthusiasm. "Did you notice the slightly rough appearance of the surface?"

I nodded. "It seemed almost pitted."

"That metal must be hard," Tony mused, "harder than anything we can imagine. How long would it take meteoric dust to pit it like that?"

Jeff shuddered. "How can you sit there and talk about it so cold-bloodedly! Something—some *thing!*—made that missile, with all its superior skill and

knowledge and strange senses, and put it into an orbit around Earth, and now it's long dead—maybe ages dead—and the missile goes on and on, watching and reporting. Watching!"

"Tiger!" Rich said, and the room grew silent.

I poured myself another drink and as I lifted it to my lips I realized why that word had risen from my subconscious.

*Tiger! Tiger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

Jeff looked up at me, and I realized that I had said the words aloud. I was standing behind her chair and my free hand had slipped down to rest on her shoulder. She reached up, patted my hand, and smiled.

"Survey missile, black igloo of the sky, I christen thee 'Tiger.'"

I laughed and took my hand away hastily. Rich was watching me. I gave him a self-consciously fatherly smile and went back to my seat on the bed.

"We've got to do the right thing," Rich said.

For a queasy moment I thought he was talking about something else.

"But there's so much we don't know," Tony said.

"Is the thing functioning? If it is, is the race that made it still collecting reports or even still in existence."

"If it's not working," I said, "we can do anything we like with it. Blow it out of the sky or—infinitely better—keep it for study."

Tony's eyes got distant and his hands closed tightly around his half-empty glass. "What secrets that little sphere must hold! If I could only have a year with it—or a month or even a week—in a laboratory!"

"Only," I pointed out, "we'd have to take care that it isn't booby trapped. We couldn't take a chance on bringing it down. We'd have to study it out there—and even then it might do some damage if we touched it off."

"Damage!" Tony shrugged it off.

"But if it's working?" Jeff prompted.

My glass was empty again. I looked at it and shrugged and went back to fill it up.

"Then the race that built it is still in existence or it isn't. And we can't know. We can't ever be sure that they aren't."

"But we can be sure that they are," Rich said. Everybody looked at him. "When they get here. Then we'll know."

"We have to act," I said, "as if the race were still alive. To act under the other assumption might be—dangerous."

"Dangerous?" Jeff echoed.

"We wipe out rats, don't we?" Rich said recklessly.

ly. "We exterminate cockroaches."

"Not that," I said slowly. "I don't think so. The race must be old and civilized."

"Destroy it!" Jeff said wildly. "I can't bear to think about it."

"We aren't voting on this," I said steadily. "The majority isn't always right."

Jeff took a deep breath and leaned forward, her eyes on my face. "I'm sorry, Les. We'll do what you think is right."

I looked at her and looked away, miserably. "We've got to keep it. I don't think we could destroy it without informing its makers. And it's probable that they don't know we are aware of its existence."

"If we launched an atomic warhead at it," Tony said, "the Tiger would certainly have time to send word of the attack before it was destroyed."

"And perhaps just as important," I said, "is the tremendous boost it could give our technology." How far are the aliens ahead of us? Centuries. Millennia. Ages. We've got to be able to meet them—if they're still out there—on something more like an even footing. For whatever we do—they are likely to come, though it may take them years or hundreds of years. If it's still working and the race is still alive and we do the wrong thing, they'll come. Or—better—if we don't do the right thing.

"What is wrong? What is right?" asked Rich. he brooded over the questions like a philosopher.

I looked at my glass. The outline was a little blurred, but I could see that it was empty again. *After five years, I thought. Surely after five years it will be all right.* I filled it up.

"We can't be prag—pragmatic about it," I said. "We have only one case to work on. Pure theory. Blowin' it up is wrong. Sure thing we knew it was there and were 'fraid of it."

Jeff looked puzzled. "But wouldn't going out to investigate it be just as wrong? It would be even more of a give-away."

"At least we'd have the advantage of our research," Tony said.

"Something to counter—counterbalance it," I agreed. "Bes' thing would be to sim-u-late accidental destruction. Or failure of sendin' device. Blanket communication or somethin'."

"But we don't know how it sends or if it sends," Jeff said.

"'Zactly."

After that things got blurred in an alcoholic mist. All I can remember before rolling into bed—or being rolled into bed—is someone shaking me ("Sally!" I kept saying, "Sally"; but that was silly; Sally has blond hair) and saying over and over again, "You've got to stop, Les. You've got to stop drinking."

And my own drunken voice kept repeating,

"In what distant deeps or skies

Burnt the fire of thine eyes?

* * * *

What the hammer? What the chain?

In what furnace was thy brain?

What the anvil? what dread grasp

Dare its deadly terrors clasp?"

I awoke slowly, drugged, but filled with a deep remorse. There is a book of some years ago called *The Lost Weekend*. For three years after Sally left me, my life was one lost weekend after another.

Lost weekend, hell! I never knew what happened to the summer of '62. That was when I swore never to get drunk again; for me that meant not drinking at all.

I opened my eyes. I was surprised that it was still dark. I lay there, wondering what had awakened me. Then I heard the knocking again and the terrified, whispering call outside the door.

"Les! Les!"

I got up. I staggered, almost falling, as the room tilted and slowly began to spin around me. With infinite care I put one foot ahead of the other, trying to fight off reeling senses and nausea. Finally I got to the door. I swung it open.

There, in the starlight, shivering in a thin robe thrown over pajamas, was Jeff. Suddenly I was sober.

"Oh, Les!" she moaned and threw herself against me. By instinct my arms went around her. "Oh, Les, I've had the most horrible dream."

"Jeff!" I said. "You shouldn't be here. If anyone should see you—"

But I held her close and felt her shaking and she was smaller than I had thought. I wondered why it had been my name she had called, and I glanced at the other bed. No one was there. It hadn't been slept in.

"Where's Rich?" I asked.

"He went back on duty," Jeff got out. "They let him go back." I nodded. "Oh, Les! I dreamed that I was all alone in the night and there was a huge eye in the sky, looking down at me accusingly, and I couldn't move I was so scared. It was like I was before some terrible court and the eye was judge, jury, and executioner, and I was guilty of all the black sins ever committed by man. And suddenly, with a terrifying certainty, I knew whose eye it was. It was the eye of God!"

I held her tightly and said soothing things and gradually her shivering died away. She lifted her head and I could see tears glistening in her eyes.

"Not God," I said. "Something else, just as fallible, just as imperfect as we."

That helped to calm her and she sank into a chair, still clinging to my hand with icy fingers in the dark room. Ruefully I reflected that it was fallibil-

ity and imperfection that caused most great disasters. I, for one, would rather that it was the eye of God. But I kept the thought to myself.

"I was so scared," Jeff was saying. "I couldn't think. It seemed too real and true."

I sat down on the floor at her feet, still holding her hand and looked into her face. Even without makeup it was beautiful; or perhaps it was only the flattering light of the stars coming through the window. Impulsively I bent forward and touched my lips to the back of her hand. Before I drew back, panicky, I even thought I felt a light touch on the back of my head, where I still have hair.

"Why did you come to me?" I asked.

"Oh, Les!" she said once more, but this time it seemed impatient. And then, "You seem so strong, Les."

"Strong?" I echoed.

"Like a rock."

A rock, I thought bitterly.

"Even after last night?"

"Anyone can get drunk," she said.

"Not like me."

"You won't get started again." She was very confident, too confident.

"You know—?"

"About the lost years?" She nodded. "Rich told me."

My friend! It wasn't a secret, exactly, but I would as soon have kept it from Jeff.

"I asked him," Jeff added.

"Oh," I said, as if that explained everything. And maybe it did.

"Who is Sally?" Jeff asked.

"A girl," I said. "A girl I knew once. How did you get back to your quarters last night?"

"Rich walked with me."

I had a sudden insight. "And he got talking about the Tiger?"

She nodded. It was a vague movement in the darkness. Her hand was warm in mine. I no longer had an excuse to hold it, but I did. Its warmth and that of her leg against the back of my hand, separated only by the thin cloth of her pajamas, seemed to flow up my arm and through my body. In spite of my hang-over, it didn't feel as old then as I knew it to be.

"Sometimes Rich is a fool," I said.

"I got to thinking about it and about what he and Tony said Van would do and I couldn't go to sleep for a long time and when I did—"

"What is Van going to do?" I broke in.

"He's convinced it's Russian," Jeff said. "He's pressing Washington for permission to blow it out of the sky."

A little later I walked Jeff back to her quarters. We didn't exactly sneak across the field, but we were

careful to keep in the shadows. I was, at least; Jeff didn't seem to care.

We didn't say much. I was thinking, and Jeff either respected my silence or had thoughts of her own. Only at her door was the silence broken. She held out her hand.

"I'm sorry I was so silly," she said contritely.

"Silly?..."

"It seemed so horribly real, then...."

"Of course." I patted her hand, feeling more fatherly than I cared to. "I've had dreams, too. If I'd been a little more scared or a little less inhibited, you'd have had me banging on your door."

"Any time." I could sense a smile in the darkness.

A little silence grew between us. Neither of us moved.

"What are you going to do?" Jeff said finally.

"What do you mean?"

"About Van Devlin—and the Tiger..." Her voice trailed away.

"I don't know," I said hopelessly. And then, "If I were only younger." It was a double-edged wistfulness.

"Oh, you fool," she murmured. I think she said "fool."

And then she leaned toward me and I felt her lips on mine for a moment and her hand was gone from mine and she was gone and the door closed silently and I was standing alone in the darkness trying to understand what had happened.

My hand was still warm where hers had rested. My lips tingled where hers had touched them. My ears still listened for the sound of her voice. *Fool*, did she say? I stood there in the night until I began to shiver. When I turned and walked back across the field I had something else to think about.

The room was a mess, and the intoxication of Jeff's presence had worn off. I felt lousy again. The lights were too bright after the darkness, and I wanted a drink. In the kitchenette the bottle of Kentucky bourbon had a couple of inches left in the bottom. As I raised it to eye level, I could almost feel it going down my throat, burning its way into my stomach where it would send out glowing tendrils, and I would feel warm and a little happier and more like thinking and....

I wasn't fooling myself. I wanted the drink bad and not for anyone's benefit but my own. I walked over to the sink, still holding the bottle, and turned it upside down and watched it gurgle out of the bottle and down the drain. When I set the bottle down empty, my hand was shaking. *You damn' hero*, I whispered. *You god-damn' hero!* And I felt a sudden pang of regret for the good whisky irretrievably down the drain.

I put on a pot of coffee and sat down to think. By dawn the coffee was gone, the ash tray was piled

high with butts and ashes, and I was still sitting and thinking and I might as well have gone to bed.

I used Washoff again. I couldn't hold a razor steady. Rich still hadn't returned. I went out for breakfast. I took a paper to my table and let my breakfast get cold. It was in the headlines.

MYSTERIOUS OBJECT SIGHTED IN SKY

The paper had few facts, but it made the most of them. The story skillfully skirted around the "who" and "how" and "why," but it had the "what" and "when" fairly accurately. It wasn't given the flying saucer treatment; it was played straight. And it didn't come right out and say that the object was Russian, but it discarded all the other obvious possibilities.

The story had leaked. I didn't think it was an accident. There are more ways than the chain of command to get a decision out of Washington.

I forced myself to eat a slice of toast, but that was all I could stomach. I walked to the administration building and presented myself to Van's secretary. It was weak, but it was the only thing I could think of. The secretary, a blond minx of twenty or under, thought it was weak, too.

"Urgent?" she repeated. "On a matter of *policy*?" The way she glanced at me and curled her pink, kittenish, little tongue around the last word was eloquent. "Yes, Mr. Blake. I'll tell him when he comes in."

I sat and waited in an uncomfortable anteroom chair. And I waited, and waited some more. Whether the secretary ever told Van Devlin about me, I don't know. Other men and officers breezed in and out. The place was a beehive with Van as queen, but I was bringing no pollen and I got no honey. And, about noon, I remembered, bitterly, that the General's office had another exit.

Then came my break, and I made the most of it. The door to the inner office opened, and Van Devlin himself stepped out. I jumped to my feet and was halfway through my speech before he got his right foot into the anteroom.

He looked at me sourly and said, "All right, Blake, but keep it short. I'm due at an important luncheon in five minutes." He looked ostentatiously at his watch.

As we went into his office, I shot a look of triumph at the secretary. She hated me with her eyes.

I wasted no time. "If you are going to act upon the assumption that the object up there is Russian in origin, you are going to make a serious mistake," I said bluntly.

He took it calmly. He sat down, stripped a cigar, and lit it. He listened to me as I rehearsed all the arguments we had hashed out the night before, and he nodded gravely. I was coldly logical, I was philosophical, I was passionate. Van listened and

nodded and said, "I see. Yes. That may be right." He listened....

Van looked at his watch and got up. "You've made some interesting points," he said heartily. "And we'll certainly take them into consideration. Now, if you'll excuse me—"

And I realized, suddenly, that he was humoring me. Humoring *me*! He hadn't been listening at all. On that subject his mind was closed, tight, like the doors of an asylum.

How to get through to him! "One last word, General," I said. "What would happen if the Russians shot down the Platform?"

"Good God, Blake!" the General exploded. "There's only one answer to that!"

"Exactly," I said softly. "This thing is public knowledge now. And if that object is Russian, I'd think twice before I started anything."

And I walked out the door, leaving him chewing the stump of a cold cigar and staring thoughtfully into the distance.

"The radiation level ran clear off the top of the chart," Rich said, "in a steep curve."

The four of us were seated over the remains of our dinner, around a mess hall table—Rich, Jeff, Tony, and me. Tony was studying his plate, but Rich and Jeff were looking at me. Rich was puzzled and worried; Jeff—I glanced at her—was calm. They both expected me to come out with something wise and definite.

"What the hell does that mean?" I said savagely.

"The top of the chart is calibrated for the energy level of uranium fission," Tony said.

We all stared blankly, trying to absorb the information.

"I extrapolated from the chart," Tony went on, still looking at his plate. "The peak comes about thirty times that high."

"But that's the cosmic ray range," I said.

"Yes."

"You mean the Tiger communicates by cosmic rays!" Rich said excitedly.

Tony shook his head. "They're non-directional. It's more likely a by-product of communication or the energy source."

"Atom annihilation in a ten-foot sphere!" I breathed.

Tony raised his eyes. They were hard and glittering. "If we let this opportunity slip by we'll never have another. Out there in that sphere is our ticket to the stars."

"If we can read it," I said.

"Time," Tony groaned. "We've got to have time. And more minds working on it than the few we have here. We must work slowly, cautiously, like an archaeologist digging out an irreplaceable relic. Only a

million times more so. That's not our past out there. That's our future."

"But I thought cosmic rays come from all parts of the sky," Jeff said.

"The intensity varies from place to place and time to time," I said. "And the Tiger is directly over every spot on Earth in twelve days. Or maybe"—a thought struck me—"it means that there are a lot of them scattered through space—if they're the sole source."

Tony pulled out his billfold and extracted a ragged clipping from it. "I've been doing some research. You might find this interesting."

At the top, in Tony's precise printing: NY TIMES 4/7/61.

A possible relationship between the aurora polaris and cosmic rays was suggested today by Professor L.E. Michaelson....

I skimmed through the rest of the short, factual account, and looked up. "Radar says it was there over eight years ago. Cosmic rays have been observed for half a century. But the aurora borealis—that goes back to earliest recorded history."

"And we can't prove a word of it," Tony said gloomily. "Van Devlin's going ahead, and he won't listen to anyone who disagrees with him. Outer space belongs to the U.S., he says, and he's going to blow that Russian satellite out of the sky if it's the last thing he does. The hell of it is that Washington's beginning to agree with him."

"We've got to stop him," I said.

"How?" asked Jeff.

That stumped us.

"Kidnapping?" Rich suggested.

We all frowned at him.

"Assassination?" he said hopefully.

We ignored him.

"If we could only get Washington to see the other side of the problem!" Tony brooded.

"That's it!" I shouted. And, more moderately, "At least that's the idea. If we can only implement it, as the directives say."

"You can't do it through channels," Jeff pointed out.

"There are other ways," I said. "Van Devlin found one."

"What do you mean?"

They all looked at me. I pointed out the significance of the newspaper account. The evening papers had followed through. They reflected the growing public demand that somebody do something about the mysterious object, whatever it was. Washington refused to comment. Russia said nothing. Quasi-official quotes were available only from a few perennially headline-hunting politicians. Like the general public, they were convinced that the object was Russian and were demanding that a strong line be taken. Luckily

it was not an election year.

I got up. "The best way to start is the simplest way."

I walked to the telephone booth, lifted the receiver, and dropped in a dime. "I'd like to speak to Washington, D.C.—" I began.

"No outside calls are being accepted without official authorization," the operator said briskly. "Your name, please."

I hung up, quickly. My dime clinked into the return cup, and I fished it out absently. A few steps took me back to the table.

"Let's get out of here in a hurry! Try not to draw any attention."

Within thirty seconds we were outside. No one had looked up. It was already dark, and I pulled the others into the deep shadows of an adjoining building. Jeff started to say something, but I put a hand on her arm and she subsided. Two seconds later twin headlights swung up in front of the mess hall. Their beam missed exposing us by a few feet. It was a jeep. Three armed M.P.s piled out in a rush and vanished into the hall. The driver kept his place.

"Come on," I whispered, and drew them back between the buildings.

"What did that mean?" Jeff asked when we were well away.

"No outside calls," I sighed. "Very definitely—no outside calls."

"I could have told you that," Rich said. "This base is worse than a prison. Anyone who comes in, stays in. Nobody goes out. General's orders."

We stared at him, suddenly hopeless.

Our gloom was even deeper when we saw the size of the guard. Four soldiers were at the gate. And there was an armed guard for every fifty feet of the flood-lit wire-mesh fence which was strung along the top with three strands of barbed wire.

"How the devil am I going to get out?" I groaned.

"You!" Rich exclaimed. "You can't go! You're confined to base!"

"Who isn't?" I pointed out glumly. "If anyone goes, I go. I'm the one with the least to lose. I'm due for dismissal, anyway. The rest of you have to stay here to carry on with something else if I fail. And I'm the only one with a plan; I don't intend to tell it to anyone."

There was a rush of objections.

"Not you, Tony," I said. "You still have some influence. Not you, Rich. As a pilot you might be able to do something. And not you, Jeff. Even if you got out, it's a five mile walk to town. That leaves me."

Everyone was silent.

"But how the devil am I going to get out?" I repeated.

After a short pause for concentrated thought, I interrupted someone's heartfelt version of "If I had the wings of an angel...." "I can only think of one way that has any chance of success. We've got to create enough excitement to draw the guards away from the gate."

Rich snapped his fingers gleefully. "I'll tear off Jeff's clothes and chase her screaming past the guards."

I laughed and shook my head. "I'm afraid that would end any possible usefulness for either of you. And it has to be more widespread than that."

Rich thought for a moment. "Suppose I ran the pilot transport jeep into the fence."

I started to veto the idea and thought better of it. "Maybe. But it would put you on the spot."

Rich shrugged. "I could be drunk, couldn't I? All it'll cost me is a few weekend passes."

I studied him. "All right. But it's still a little thin."

"What about that pile of paper and waste behind the mess hall," Tony said, "waiting to be touched off at dawn. Suppose I toss a match into it and phone in an alarm. Then we'd really have excitement."

"Good," I nodded. "See if you can get the jeep, Rich."

He spun and went off at a trot. Tony went to inspect the refuse incinerator. Standing orders forbade the burning of waste after dark. With the floods on the fences, it made no difference now, but that huge accumulation would make a frighteningly realistic holocaust.

I was left alone with Jeff. She took my hand; her palm felt hot and moist.

"I wish there was something I could do," she said.

"Just being Jeff is enough. 'Jeff'—I never found occasion to ask you before. How did you get a name like that?"

"My mother called me Jessica, but my father—until he died—insisted on calling me Jeff. Dad wanted a boy—he thought a boy could be brought up to do more good for the world—but mother died within a year after I was born. I— Les! You might get shot!"

I shrugged away the possibility, but she took hold of my arms in a hard, tense grip and looked up into my face by the reflected light of the fence floods. Her lips worked.

"Take care of yourself, Les. For me."

"For you?" I stared down at her. "But what about Rich?"

"Rich is fun," she said. And then softer, "But you— Oh, Damn you!"

And suddenly she was in my arms, kissing me hard and fierce, and I was kissing her, not knowing how it had happened and not caring. Then a darkened jeep

nosed into the alley between the buildings. We broke apart.

"All set," Rich said. His voice seemed strained and tight.

Tony appeared, gliding softly. "I found a gallon can half full of gasoline. That incinerator is going to blaze!"

We compared watches and settled the time schedule.

"Good luck," Tony said, and faded away.

Rich and I whispered together while we waited, ironing out the last minute complications. Then we waited silently, wondering what had gone wrong. I looked at my watch. Only one minute had elapsed since Tony left. Thirty seconds more. Two minutes.

In front of us, behind some buildings on the far side of the gate, the sky reflected a dim red glow. It brightened quickly until it seemed as if the whole group of buildings was aflame. It was impossible that it should go unnoticed, but except for the guards the base slept. Now there was some movement among the guards. One turned to point at the fire; another raced into the guard shack. A siren in the administration building started to moan and worked up to a shrieking, sobbing clamor. Lights came on. Figures began to scurry. A red jeep sped past. Then a small, clanging fire truck. Life on the base seemed to be mounting, like the fire, into feverish hunger.

"Now," I said to Rich.

He handed me an oblong package. He picked up a bottle from the seat beside him, unscrewed the top, lifted it to his lips, took two large swallows, and let a little dribble from his chin to his shirt. The engine roared, and the jeep jumped through the alley, picking up speed as Rich shifted into high. When it passed the gate, the jeep must have been doing sixty.

Thirty feet farther, it swerved, as if the left front tire had blown. The jeep lifted a little on its right wheels. For a moment I thought it was going over. But when it settled back, it was heading straight for the fence.

With an almost explosive crash, it hit, metal screamed, wire split and tore apart. The jeep stopped, half through the fence. Rich was bent forward over the wheel, still. I took a deep breath, prayed he was not badly hurt. The guards stood at the gate, irresolute.

A hand that touched mine reminded me, with a shock, that Jeff was still beside me.

"Be careful!" she said. "Come back!"

I started to run. I ran toward the wreck, trying to make it seem only coincidental that the gate was that direction too, and thirty feet closer. The guards hadn't moved yet. *What's the matter with them?* I thought frantically. *Move!* They started running toward the wreck, as if they had been waiting for my mental command. A moment later I saw why. The

jeep had started to burn, flames licking back from the crumpled hood toward Rich.

I prayed and kept running and before the guards had taken a dozen strides toward the burning wreck, I was through the gate, waiting for a yell and then a bullet in my back. My spine crawled, waiting for the impact. I felt the light fading away behind me. There was still no sound meant for me, no bullet....

Then the light was gone and I was in the darkness of the desert and my hot, strangled breath was burning through the lining of my throat.

Half a mile down the road and five hundred feet from it, I stopped to rest. I sat down in the white gypsum sand with only a tumbleweed for company. As my breathing grew easier, I opened the package Rich had handed me. It was a pint of bourbon. I looked in the direction of the camp as I unscrewed the cap and put the bottle to my mouth and raised the bottom toward the infinite New Mexican skies. The lurid glow was gone now, and I took two swallows from the bottle and let it eat its way down my throat to my stomach. I felt warm inside and a little happier, and I wanted to just sit there in the night and finish the pint. But I screwed the top back on and carried it to the road, in line with a dune almost fifty feet high, and buried it there, only the neck sticking through the sand.

I began to walk toward town. I walked on the road. It was too much work to walk in the sand, and there wasn't likely to be any traffic with the base closed up. If there was, I could see the lights a long way across the desert.

There wasn't. I walked and walked and walked. Toward the end I was running a little just to keep warm. When the sun goes down in New Mexico, the temperature plummets. Like a fool I had forgotten to bring a coat, and the pseudo-warmth of the whisky had worn off long ago.

I thought I had covered the five miles three times over by the time the long-despaired-of town rose up from behind a dune. I stopped to look at it. It still seemed raw and new, not quite fifteen years old, all of it. The construction workers had built it for themselves while they were constructing the base; afterwards some businesses moved in to supply the demand from the base and the rocket factory. It grew, and the barracks-quality was disappearing, but you could still trace its origins.

As I trudged along Main Street, scuffling through the thin layer of white sand blown in by the day's breezes, I tried to locate some place that was open. Everything was dark; with the base shut up, the town had gone to bed.

I stopped at a corner, irresolute. Except for the small hotel with its red neon sign, the business section was black. I didn't want to go to the hotel;

clerks have nothing better to do than remember things. Down a side street, I saw a dimly lit glass front. I walked to it and peered in the grimy window. It was a dirty little saloon; almost half the business district is saloons, but this was the only one open. It had one customer, a drunk asleep over a glass of beer. I pushed open the door and went in. The bartender was almost asleep, too. I had to tap him on the arm to get a shot of bar whisky. He poured it sourly, slopping it over the top and onto the bar.

"You better drink damn fast," he snarled. "I'm closin' this joint pretty damn quick."

I tossed him a ten and told him to give me the change in quarters. Before he could say anything, I poured the drink down and strolled over to the slot machine. It was one thing that hadn't changed in the last twenty years; it was just a fancier coin trap. I fed it a quarter and pushed the button and came back to the bar. The thing whirred and clicked several times and then jingled behind me.

He had my quarters counted out for me, and I scooped them up and walked back. There were three quarters in the pay-off pocket. I put one of them back in and got two cherries and a lemon. The other two I added to the ones I had in my hand and walked to the telephone booth in the back.

I slid into the booth and stopped acting. A nickel got me the operator. I gave her the Washington number. I could hear her get El Paso; the operator there dialed. The Washington phone began to ring before they cut me out of it.

I waited and it was hot in the booth and I was nervous. I wished I could see the front door, but all I could see was the end of the bar. The bartender was leaning on it, hating me. I turned my back to him, and then the operator had me dropping in coins until the booth sounded like a convention of Swiss bell ringers in a juke box.

Just before the operator told me to go ahead, I heard a motor roar down Main, and I remember wondering who else could be out on a night like this.

"Bob?" I said. "Bob?"

When I heard the squeaky voice, familiar even across more than two thousand miles of wire, I felt suddenly relieved, as if Atlas had just taken the world back onto his own shoulders.

"Listen, Squeaky," I said. "This is Les. Les Blake. I'm working at White Sands, and I've got something hot for you. This is no joke. I'm not pulling anything like we used to. Dead serious. O.K.?"

He stopped exclaiming with surprise and told me to go ahead. Behind his voice I could hear the clicking of a typewriter and the heavier clatter of a teletype.

"Have you got any influence in the Pentagon?" I asked him.

"Who do you think I am, Scoop Sullivan?" he

squeaked.

"I was afraid of that. Neither have I. But get to somebody, blackmail him, threaten him, anything! If you have to, print this, but only if everything else fails. That mysterious object in the sky, Bob, we picked it up here. It's artificial, all right, but it's not Russian. It's ten times more dangerous and a million times more valuable. We've got to take it slow, Bob, and General Van Devlin won't listen to reason. He's going to blow it out of the sky. Wherever it came from, it wasn't made on Earth. Bob, are you listening?"

"I'm listening. But where's your proof, man? You need proof."

"There's no way to get it, unless you can black-jack the Army into releasing it. But ask any astronomer. Any scientist. Give him these facts. The thing—"

The line went dead. I jiggled the hook frantically without results. I swore at it and the operator and the telephone company. Then, slowly, I stopped cursing and started to think. I eased the receiver back onto the hook and stood up. I slid open the folding door.

The phone rang. I hesitated, half out of the booth. I have never been able to resist a ringing telephone. I stooped down and took the receiver off the hook.

"Were you cut off, sir?" the operator was saying. Her voice sounded strained and mechanical. "Just a moment, sir, and I will reconnect you with your party."

I slipped a match underneath the hook, and I set the phone back on it. I stepped out of the booth and headed for the front door, not running but walking fast. At the door I stopped, like a man struck by indecision.

A pair of headlights were swinging around the corner from Main.

I turned. I walked back along the bar. The drunk was still asleep.

"Men's room?" I muttered at the bartender.

He jerked his head toward a door at the end of the bar. "I'm closing—" he began to growl.

"O.K.," I said, passing. "I'll only be a minute."

The door stuck. I put my shoulder against it and it flew open. A dim yellow bulb glowed nakedly in the ceiling. The place stank of stale urine and dirt and vomit. I shut the door and slid the bolt into its socket in the door frame. I took two steps to the window. It was closed. I reached up and unlocked it. Distantly I heard the squealing of brakes.

I tugged up on the window. It was stuck, too. I pulled again. It felt like it was built into the frame. I looked around for a lever. Nothing. I stepped up on the toilet seat and from there got both

knees on the window ledge. When I pulled at the window this time, my back was in it. Paint began to crack around the window. Then it popped and moved an inch and stuck. I pulled once more. The window stopped sticking and slid all the way up with a crash that shook the building.

I hesitated a fraction of a second to listen. I thought I heard voices in the bar. I slipped out of the window and crouched on the bare, sandy soil outside. I was in back of the building, in an unpaved alley dimly revealed by the yellow light from the john and the faint glimmering of stars. Behind me I heard someone begin to knock on the door I had locked.

I crossed the alley into what seemed to be the back yard of a house. I walked carefully, silently. My toe struck something metallic. It made a little ringing noise. I did a dance to keep from knocking over a garbage can. A moment later I was walking between two houses.

There was a sound of running feet in the alley.

"Stop!" someone yelled in an official voice.

I didn't think I'd been spotted. I walked a little faster. I was almost to the street. The footsteps had stopped.

"Stop or I'll shoot!" another voice shouted.

They're bluffing. I started to run, quietly, making the turn along the length of the dark street. A .45 cracked to my left. Simultaneously a bullet whistled close by and thunked into a house front. It was like the spur to a horse. I broke into a full run. Feet started running behind me. I ducked between two barracks-like buildings, across another alley, between two houses and out into the next street. It was a minor miracle, in the dark, that I escaped stumbling over something. Back of me I heard a crash and a series of metallic clangs and someone stumbling and cursing.

I ran along the street to my right this time. I was tired already, and my breath came hard and fiery. I was running like a rabbit now, twisting and dodging on impulse. I ducked in beside what looked like an apartment building. I cut across the ground in back. Something rose up black against the lesser black of the sky. It stopped before I slammed into it. I ran my hand along it. It was rough, seemingly constructed of concrete blocks, and about seven feet tall. I felt along it until I came to a wide opening, and I knew what it was.

I was trembling. My gasping breath felt like a rusty file in my throat. I clenched my teeth and stepped into the large incinerator and prayed while I leaned against one of the walls. It smelled of ashes and old smoke.

The feet running in the night swelled louder until they seemed to be inside the concrete-floored box with me. Then they passed, and I could hear them

breathing and that died away and their footsteps diminished until they stopped, suddenly.

I took a few more deep breaths, wondered what the hell I was doing dodging bullets in the night, and slipped out of the incinerator and tiptoed down the alley toward Main. I reasoned, hopefully, that they would not suspect me of heading back toward the better-lighted section.

I stopped at the mouth of the alley and peered out. The street seemed deserted. Directly across the street was the hotel. Through the glass door I could see the night clerk dozing at his desk. Just as I braced myself to make a dash across the street, I heard a screech of tires on pavement and two headlights swept the street. I shrank back into the sheltering darkness and watched a jeep speed past. Only two men were in it. Beside the uniformed driver sat Colonel Allen, his pale face like a beacon under his visored hat. They did not look my way. Ahead the tires screamed again as they took a corner.

When the street was quiet I sprinted across, swung open the glass door, stepped inside, and eased it shut, holding my breath. I glanced out. There was no indication that anyone had seen me. I looked at the clerk. He still had his head pillowed on his folded arms.

To the left of the small lobby there was an even smaller sitting room. I crept across the tiled lobby floor toward its doorway. As I was directly opposite the desk, the clerk snorted in his sleep, stirred, and lifted his head. He stared blearily around the room for a moment. I held my breath again, standing statue-like in the shadows. He sighed and let his head sink back on his arms.

I slipped into the sitting room. As I had remembered, there was a desk, feebly illuminated by the red glow from the hotel sign coming through a street window. I seated myself carefully at the desk, pulled out paper with the hotel letterhead, and looked around for something to write with. All I could find was an old-fashioned pen holder with a steel point. I dipped it in the bottle of ink on the table and started to write, cursing myself for not having thought of the necessity for something like this before I left the base.

The pen point scratched loudly in the silence. Surely it would wake the clerk. I turned. From where I was I could just see one arm and part of his head. They were motionless. I turned back to the desk. I started writing again, barely able to see that I was not writing one line on top of another. I included every fact and bit of proof I could think of. By the time I had finished, there were five closely written pages in front of me.

Quietly I folded them and stuffed them in an envelope. I sealed it and addressed it to Squeaky at his home address. Then my heart plummeted. A

stamp! I had no stamps. Desperately, I took out my billfold and pulled everything out of its pockets. I pawed through the mess. There! One three-cent stamp. I licked it and stuck it on and continued my search. Regular mail might be too late. There was nothing else. I poked into the billfold's pockets. My finger struck against something, and I shook it out. It was another stamp, crumpled and dirty. I smoothed it out and stuck it on and prayed that it would stay. I picked up the pen again and wrote "air-mail" across the front of the envelope.

As I finished the "1," a car raced up outside and came to a squealing, tormented stop. Before the brakes and tires stopped screaming, I was on my feet. I peered out the window.

Allen and two soldiers were charging for the front door. The neon light painted them blood red.

The noise had brought the clerk fully awake. He was standing up when Allen and his M.P.'s got to the desk.

"Has anyone come in here within the last hour?" Allen asked. His voice was as flat and colorless as ever.

"No-no," the clerk stammered. "No, sir."

"You're sure."

"Y-yes, sir. We've only got two men registered at the present time. Both salesmen. Went to bed—"

"All right," Allen said. "We're searching for a spy who escaped from the base this evening with important information...."

I stood in the shadows, rigid, so stunned that I missed the rest of what Allen was saying. *A spy! They weren't hunting me but a spy!* I went so weak with relief that the next shock almost sent me reeling. Someone had spoken my name.

"Blake, sir?" repeated the clerk.

"Lester Blake. Light brown hair, getting bald in front. Blue eyes. Six feet tall. About 170 pounds. Rangy...." Allen went on giving my description, but his voice seemed a million miles away. I was numb.

Lester Blake, spy. Communist spy. Filthy Red spy. They shoot spies. They take them out in the cold gray dawn and shoot them. The dawns are very cold in New Mexico....

How did he know? How had he found out so soon that someone had escaped from the base? Even if they had searched the whole base and discovered that I was the only one missing, they couldn't be sure, they couldn't know what I was going to do. Only three people knew that. Jeff. Rich. Tony....

I shook my head in the darkness. Savagely. Allen had found out some other way. I tried not to think about it.

"If you see him or hear anything, call the operator. She will know where to get in touch with me.

This is of vital importance. The security of the nation is at stake."

I managed a smile. *Ah, Allen, Allen, you couldn't resist that last touch, could you? Flat and colorless as you are, you see yourself in a hero's part. Underplayed, but all the more dramatic for that.*

Then Allen and his men were gone, and I was left standing there with the precious envelope in my hand and a wakeful clerk watching the mail chute and the only exit. What a resourceful, daring man would have done, I don't know. What I did was neither resourceful nor daring. I stood in the dark for half an hour, and the wakeful clerk went back to sleep.

I rescued my belongings from the desk, slipped the envelope into the slot, and tiptoed out the door. The streets were dark and empty. My difficult moment came when I reached a fork in the highway. One road went toward Alamogordo, the other went back to the base.

Should I run, try to escape, hide? Or should I go back to imprisonment, trial, possible execution?

I hesitated for only a moment. I don't take any credit for the decision. To run would brand me as everything Allen had called me. It would brand my ideas with the same iron. Run? Where could I hide that they would not search me out? They would hunt me down with a great halloo. The newspapers—with great joy and many words—would try me; the public—in an ecstasy of virtue—would judge me; the government—gratefully accepting the opportunity for general entertainment and edification—would execute me.

I headed down the sandy road toward the base. I was a civilian. They would have to try me publicly. They would have to prove me guilty. They would have to prove my ideas false. It would be much more difficult.

But I was not particularly gay as I reflected that I was taking what were likely to be my last free steps for many months, if not forever.

When I neared the fifty-foot dune, I began to watch the sand by the side of the road. In a few minutes I spotted the neck of the bottle. I pulled it out of the sand and looked at the dune rising beside me. Slipping, sliding, I climbed to the top of the dune and sat down and opened the bottle and let a couple of swallows trickle down my throat. I laid back and looked up at the sky. Up there somewhere was the Platform I had helped to build.

Man needed a place to stand, I thought, and he built himself a platform in the sky. Man needed to see clearly and he swam up out of the thick air until there was nothing between himself and the universe. Up there he stands upon the threshold of infinity, all life, all wonder and adventure and experience, all creation within his grasp if he can prove himself worthy.

And some men would like to be up there to spy upon their neighbors. And some men would like to stand upon that platform to throw rocks at their enemies.

I took another drink and looked to the east. The moon was a plump sickle.

Are you still there, Jim Martin? Are you still imprisoned in your cave in a ridge in Mare Foecunditatis, eternally guarded by impenetrable night and the hungry void? Are you still sane, Jim Martin? Or have you traded the companionship of loneliness for that of madness? I do not know. I have forgotten your troubles in my own. I have forgotten you, but I can never forget my guilt. We are much alike, you and I. I, too, have my prison. Perhaps you are the lucky one, Jim Martin. You are not eternally tantalized by the never-fulfilled promise, the seductive illusion of understanding and communication and companionship and love.

Did you mean what you seemed to say, Jeff? Did you mean it when you kissed me? For a moment, I thought you meant it. Then I knew that you would have done as much for anyone about to risk his life for something you and he believe in. And I think if he came back you might pretend that you meant it for more than the moment. You would stick by your bargain, even if it killed your soul. But it takes two to make a bargain, Jeff. I will not hold you to it.

I raised the bottle to eye level. There was only a couple of inches left. I tilted the bottle to my lips, and when I let it sink again there was only an inch.

And up there you circle in your eternal round, small, black, and deadly. Older than civilization, older, perhaps, than man himself. Tiger! You speak and we cannot understand; we hear only your snarl. And yet you speak in other ways, and you say many things. You say, "I am the enemy." You say, "I am Fury; I am judge and jury." You say, "I am opportunity; I hold secrets old when you were young; I am your passport to the stars." You say, "You are not alone."

Tiger! Touchstone. We see you passing in the night, and we flee in terror or reach for a rifle. We try to tame you or befriend you. Or we try to study you, to riddle out our likenesses and differences to learn what you can teach us. Or we fall down before you in adoration. Judge us with wisdom; sentence us with mercy.

*Tiger! Tiger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?*

Just William Blake and me. There should be something significant there, but it was just another lousy coincidence. William died without issue.

I stood up and drained the bottle and threw it

far out over the white sands. Outside I was cold but a fire flamed within me and I turned and ran down the steep dune with giant strides.

Five minutes later I weaved up to the lighted gate. The jeep, I noticed out of the corner of my eye, was gone; the fence was pushed back together.

"Wash thish?" I said, blinking owlishly at the two guards coming toward me. "Welcoming party?"

They took hold of my arms firmly and led me toward the guard shack.

"Shee here!" I objected. "Can't man take little walk, take little drink, without having submit to these 'ndignities?"

The sergeant stepped out of the shack.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Blake. I have to put you under arrest."

They put me in a cell in the guard house. I sat on the edge of the iron bunk and waited. Half an hour later, when they led me into a larger room to face Allen, I was almost sober. Besides the M.P.'s, there were two men with Allen.

"That's the man," said the bartender vindictively.

The drunk agreed. He could hardly stand. "Thash him, all right."

Allen smiled. It was like a slit opening in a lump of dough. "Take them back to town."

"What is this?" I asked quietly. "What am I accused of?"

"Espionage."

"On what grounds?"

"Revealing top secret information to the enemy."

"Nuts! Where's your proof?"

"You were out of the base tonight against the express order of General Van Devlin confining you to the base and against the general order forbidding anyone to leave the base."

"I was drunk. I was wandering in the desert."

"We have witnesses who can swear to your presence in town."

"Those?" I laughed. "Their evidence is useless in court. They had no one else to choose from. And even if I was in town, which I do not admit, that itself is not proof of espionage."

"You made a long distance telephone call to Washington."

"Personal."

Allen smiled.

"If," I went on, "I should admit making such a call."

Allen went on smiling. "We have other witnesses." He turned to the M.P.'s. Take him back to his cell."

I went back to my cell and to sleep, in spite of the hardness of the bunk. The next day I spent alone with my thoughts. They were not pleasant company.

The second day began even worse. I was awakened

by the sound of large motors and clanging metal. I rushed to the window. Workmen were setting up a three-stage military rocket. I watched them all morning and until they finished in the afternoon. It stood there gleaming in the sunlight, towering, deadly, complete. Poised and phallic, a symbol of man's destructive potency, it waited for the impulse that would set it free. Cataclysm, leashed, but not too well. Soldiers paced out the safety limits to prevent an accidental tripping of the emergency switch in one massive support.

I closed my eyes and leaned my head against the bars, but I could not shut it out of my mind. Standing out there was failure—mine and man's.

I heard a woman's voice. I turned quickly. A guard was opening the cell door. I walked to the door and pulled it back shut. The guard looked at me in surprise.

"I'll choose the company I have in here," I said harshly.

He turned to the woman with him and shrugged. Sally walked up to the bars—Sally Allen, the colonel's lady, who was sister to no one. She was just as beautiful as ever—and just as cold. Her blond hair—artfully retouched—was a golden halo around her head. But I could see the beginning of crow's feet around her eyes.

"Hello, Les," she said in her low, throbbing voice. "I'm sorry to see you in a place like this."

I felt my face become frozen and expressionless. With this woman I had spent six months of what I thought was heaven; for her I had spent three years in what I knew was hell. "I told you I never wanted to see you again."

She took hold of the bars with her gloved hands. Instinctively I took a step backward. "Did you? What's the matter, Les, do I still bother you? You really should try to forget me."

"The only thing that bothers me," I said grimly, "is that I was ever married to you."

"You know, Bill has never forgiven you for marrying me first," she said, glancing at me slyly.

"I've never forgiven myself. Say what you want to say and leave me alone."

"That's not very friendly, Les, after all we've been to each other."

The guard had retired to a respectful distance.

"We were poison."

"You're in trouble, Les. I could help you get out of it."

"What do you want?"

"I? Nothing at all. But I hate to see a husband of mine in jail awaiting trial—even an ex-husband."

"What do you want?"

"General Van Devlin has been relieved from duty."

I sank down on the edge of the bunk, unable to conceal my surprise. I could feel her watching me,

but for once I didn't care. "Why?"

"He's out of his head. He was going to disregard the latest order from the Pentagon—"

"About the three-stager?" I was getting control of myself.

It was Sally's turn to be surprised. "Yes. How did you know?"

I waved it aside. "Go on."

"He insisted that the message wasn't authentic, that it was a trick. When Bill restrained him, Van started to rave."

"Good old tactful Bill," I muttered.

"He's been placed in house confinement, under guard. Washington just confirmed Bill's appointment as temporary commandant."

"He finally made it."

Sally's eyes got hot. "He's got the job, Les, and he's going to keep it. I won't let anything stand in his way."

"What has that to do with me?"

"Don't do anything to stop him." Sally's voice softened. "Use your influence, Les, and Bill will see that all charges against you are dropped."

"Influence? Me?"

"You don't have to pretend with me, Les. We know you have some connections high up."

"I don't know what you're talking about, and I don't much care. You can't understand," I said slowly, "anyone getting something without knowing somebody or knifing somebody in the back. Like Bill knifed Van. You never could."

"Will you do it, Les, for old time's sake?" Sally said softly.

I looked at her coldly. "No."

The bluntness shocked her, but she recovered quickly. "I've always liked you, Les. If you're still angry because I left you—"

I felt sick. "Don't!" After a few seconds, "Did Bill send you here?" She shook her head, but I had my doubts. "Eight years ago you told me to choose between you and space. I made my choice then and I've never regretted it." That was a lie. I'd regretted it for three years with every drink I took. But it wasn't a lie any more.

She shook the bars, as if she were the one inside. "Bill has worked for this chance for years. I won't let you stand in his way. Do you hear? You'll rot in jail—if they don't shoot you—"

"Get out!" I said. I went back to my bunk and lay down.

She stopped. A moment later I heard her leave. I sighed. It was ironic. Sally had divorced me because I wouldn't give up my work. It wasn't danger so much. The pay was good, but not good enough to save much. Insurance companies laughed at us. And there was no future in it, Sally said.

Now, many years too late, a girl like Jeff could

fall in love with a rocket pilot and not be afraid to marry him.

Half an hour later they let me go back to my room with a single guard.

Tony was waiting outside the guard house. He had an arm full of papers. Tony glanced at the soldier, and he dropped back a few paces.

"We've done it," Tony said, in a low, gleeful voice. "Look!"

He stuck a paper in my hands. Squeaky had done a good job. The facts were there, flamboyant and dramatic, but the facts. Tony handed me another. This issue featured authoritative comment: scientists, educated laymen, government officials—quotable and anonymous, armed forces spokesmen—all anonymous. The USSR denied any connection with the mysterious object and demanded a United Nations investigation. The educated opinion seemed to be that no hasty action should be taken. That was all we wanted.

"Just in time, too," Tony said. "Washington sent preliminary permission to set up that three-stager with an atomic warhead. If the final O.K. was received today, course had been set up for T.O.F. 2103. The countermanding order came just an hour ago."

"How bad is Van?"

Tony stared across the field at the administration building. "On everything except this, he's just as good a man as he always was. But he can't believe that the Tiger isn't man-made. For 'man,' of course, he substitutes 'Russian.'"

"What's the other paper?" I asked him.

Tony took it out from under his arm, half reluctantly. "It just came out. Worries me a little."

He had reason to be worried. This issue carried the public reaction—man-in-the-street stuff, opinion polls, letters to the editor. Through it all ran a thread of hysteria; one could almost smell the sick odor of neurotic fear. Almost two to one in favor of destructin, and the one part had a quasi-religious tinge.

"We've got breathing space," I said. "And the government has been known to defy public opinion before."

"Not this government," Tony said.

"What we need is a propagandist," I said. "With a good campaign we could change a lot of minds."

"That costs money."

"Contributions," I suggested. "Professional men, foundations, colleges, students. Intelligent editors can be talked into cooperating. Maybe get the U.N. interested."

"Who's going to do that?" Tony said gloomily.

I nodded toward the guard, who was walking along behind us, quiet but alert. "I'm going to be busy. You can get things started."

Tony looked at me steadily for a moment. "Would it help if I confessed my share in the activities?"

I shook my head. "We need someone free to act."

We were at the door of my room. I turned back toward Tony.

"How come you were waiting for me when I was released?"

"I saw the order when it came in."

"The order?"

"From Washington."

"Oh," I said. "I see." I did see. It explained some things that had been puzzling me.

We said good-by. I opened the door, and the guard took up his position just outside. Inside the room, Rich was just packing up the last of his belongings.

He kept his back to me. When he had everything packed, he picked up the bundles and suitcases and carried them out to a jeep that had driven up. The driver started off with them and Rich turned back. He came to the door, but he still avoided meeting my eye. I couldn't understand it.

"I'm taking the next ship to the moon," he said.

"Oh," I said. "You got out of the jeep-wreck mess?"

"Sure," Rich said. "Easy."

"Jim Martin O.K.?" I asked.

"Sure. Impatient. But still sane."

"When are you leaving?"

"Midnight. On the shuttle."

The conversation went on like that for a few minutes, neither of us saying anything.

"Well," I said finally, "good luck, Rich. They couldn't have picked a better pilot. Give my apology to Jim Martin."

"I will," he said miserably. Half-heartedly he turned to leave.

"When will you be back?" I asked.

His voice seemed muffled. "In a month or so."

"A month!" I exclaimed.

He turned back, looking at me for the first time. "I've volunteered to replace Jim Martin."

"Why?" I gasped.

He took my hand suddenly and squeezed it. "I betrayed you, Les," he said in a swift monotone.

"I gave Allen that paper you wrote for me—"

"But—" I began.

"...And when they hauled me out of the jeep, Allen suspected something right away and he said if I didn't tell him why I had wrecked the jeep he would have me courtmartialed and serving time for malicious destruction of government property and I would never handle a rocket again. He suspected you and he said if I told all I knew everything would be forgotten and he finally got me to admit that I had helped you escape camp. I didn't want to do it, but he forced me. Don't you see? Never to take a rocket up,

ever...."

A dry sob broke from his mouth. I was shocked, stunned. I started toward him. He drew back, looking at me.

"I didn't sign anything," he said. "If I'm on the moon they can't make me testify against you. There's always accidents. Maybe I won't come back."

He turned swiftly and ran blindly across the field. I started after him, but the guard stepped in front of the doorway.

"Rich! Rich!" I called over the guard's head. "Be careful, Rich. It doesn't matter. Rich!"

He was out of hearing. I turned back into the room and shut the door and slumped down in a chair. Everything I touched seemed to decay from within. Rich, burdened with guilt, was going to try to expiate it with thirty days of frozen solitude, the loneliest job possible to man. And, in his frame of mind, the most dangerous....

When I looked up, a long time later, Jeff was there, standing by the door, swaying slightly, like a lily trembling on its stalk. Night had dropped with a suddenness typical of New Mexico, and her pale face was framed in darkness.

"Les," she said. It was scarcely more than a whisper. "They wouldn't let me see you. I was on duty when I heard that you were brought here. I couldn't come any sooner."

My arms had started to open toward her of their own volition, but before she could move I dropped them at my sides.

"Hello, Jeff," I said.

"You're safe."

"Yes."

"Nothing else matters."

"Jeff—"

"Nothing at all." It was almost a sob.

Too swiftly to stop, she had crossed the room and was kneeling beside my chair, her forehead pressed against my knee. I put my hand on her head; her hair was dark and silken and tangled by the wind. Her shoulders were quivering. She was crying.

"Jeff!" I said incoherently. "Don't! There's no reason. Please stop!"

She raised her head. Tears glistened in her eyes. As I watched, one gathered and trickled down her cheek. She brushed it away with a finger.

"I thought I wouldn't see you again. I thought you would be killed or you wouldn't come back. You had no way to get back into the base. Oh, Les, I was so afraid. I knew you would come back if you could, but I was still afraid."

"Would you miss me?"

"Miss you!" she said. "Don't you understand yet? I love you."

"Jeff! You don't have to—"

"But I do! That's what love is—your head can tell you the sensible thing to do but you don't do it. You do what you have to do."

"But are you sure, Jeff? You aren't just telling me out of pity or to make me feel better—?"

"That wouldn't be kindness."

"I'm ugly and I'm getting bald and I'm middle-aged—so much older than you—"

"You're handsome. Your mind is strong and your heart and the strength shines through. As for hair, I have enough for both of us. And you're not middle-aged. You're only thirty-two."

"How did you find out?"

"A girl in Personnel did me a favor. I told her I was in love with you." Her eyes were beginning to twinkle through the tears.

I looked away from her eager girl's face and tried to make myself think practically. It was the most difficult thing I have ever done.

"I'm still ten years older," I said. "Ten years can make a man old."

She reached up and turned my head back toward her. It was easy; a baby's strength could have done it.

"Old is when your mind stops growing outward and starts growing inward. Look at me, Les! Look at me and know that nothing else is of the slightest importance if we love each other."

I looked at her. I knew, and yet I struggled. "I've been divorced," I muttered.

"I know that, too," Jeff said quietly. "I've seen her. Oh, Les," she said with sudden doubt, "do you still love her? I thought you didn't, but if you do—"

I raised her up. I gathered her into my arms. I kissed her lips. I kissed her tear-dampened eyes and the streaks her tears had left on her cheeks. And she kissed me, and someone was murmuring, "I love you, I love you, I love you," and I discovered that it was me.

She was curled up on my lap, and finally she drew back and looked at me in mock disapproval.

"You!" she said scornfully. "You've wasted so much time and now you think you can make up for it in a few minutes. I've loved you for six months, and you wouldn't even be alone with me. I almost went mad. It was always, 'you and Rich, when are you going to get married?' and that fatherly, 'bless you, my children,' when I didn't care at all about Rich—"

I groaned as if someone had hit me in a kidney with a sledge hammer. "Rich! He needs you, Jeff! More than I do. He may kill himself."

"Bosh," Jeff said very calmly. "Rich isn't in love with me. At his age he is in love with any young, attractive girl."

"You don't understand," I said, frowning. "He's

going on the next moon rocket. He's volunteered as Jim Martin's replacement—"

"I know."

"But he feels guilty about—about—"

"I know," Jeff said casually. "He told me.

Rich loves to talk about the state of his soul. The trouble is that the state of his soul is never the same two hours in succession. Rich's guilt will vanish the moment he leaves the atmosphere. He's too young to be through with life.

"Now see here, darling," she said, leaning toward me and taking my face between her hands, "you can be just as unselfish as you want to—and I love you for it—but I'm going to be selfish. Someone has to look after us."

And she pressed her lips to mine, and the world was forgotten.

Until it broke apart in a throaty, mounting roar and a wash of blinding light that spilled in the window. We rushed to look out upon the field, in time to see a three-stage rocket dwindling in the sky. People surged and milled around the area. Someone was shouting and pointing to something that had been directly beneath the rocket's exhaust. We couldn't see what it was.

THE TIGER VANISHES

I got out of bed carefully so as not to awaken Jeff. I lit a cigarette and walked to the window and stared at the east where a low bank of clouds was beginning to blush.

That was the way it had ended.

Six months have passed and we're still waiting. We're waiting together now, Jeff and I, and that helps. I'm still theoretically liable to indictment, but no action has been taken and I doubt now that it ever will.

Rich Dodge has been back five months from his moon exile and in his visits to our home seems unchanged and unchangeable. He swears that he will never testify against me and can't because of self-incrimination. We have had thorough analyses from him of the process of falling in and out of love with three different girls. It can't be love as Jeff and I know it.

Colonel Allen is now Brigadier General Allen. Rich reports that he is doing an adequate job of commanding the White Sands Rocket Base. With the fulfillment of his ambition, he seems to have lost interest in me. I am satisfied to leave it like that.

Perhaps what happened was for the best. It is hard to weigh the various factors. The world situation, at least, seems to have improved. Russia has shown signs of wanting to compromise. Rocket research and space travel are being pushed hard, with larger budgets and surprising international cooperation.

The public itself seems to be looking outward toward the stars. Expeditions to Mars and Venus are being readied. Rich hopes to pilot one of them.

Why has this happened? I suppose it isn't hard to understand. When Van Devlin eluded his guards and tripped the emergency switch on the three-stage rocket at exactly 2103, he performed for himself a vitally necessary act. Perhaps it was necessary for the world, as well, to see the explosion created when the atomic warhead intercepted the ten-foot sphere. It lit up a hemisphere as bright as day. There, written inescapably in the sky in fiery letters, was a message to all mankind.

"You are not alone," it began. And continued, "These secrets you have lost by your madness. You will search far before you discover another chance." We have not yet read to the end.

Jeff thinks it is merciful that Van Devlin died in the exhaust blast, and she is probably right. Sometimes I think, "One cannot kill the tiger without dying oneself."

I was not quite as quiet as I thought. Jeff's hand just slipped into mine. We stand, silent, looking over the field. It is not much. It doesn't compare with White Sands. But it is a step toward something we discovered we needed badly. Tony Fazio and I and a few others interested private capital in an organization which has as one of its functions the building of a foundation for commercial space travel. One reason for mankind's failure in this most recent test was that military minds were in control, and military minds have limited objectives. The goal of the military is to provide immediate security. We have in mind a more distant and more important destination.

The other function of our organization is analysis of the data gathered on the alien survey missile. We had more than we thought, and more is still pouring in. A substance can be tested by its absence.

The survey missile is gone. The aurora polaris is gone. Cosmic rays are a fraction of their former value. There is other phenomena we did not suspect. And there is still that cosmic ray fraction. We nurse the hope that somewhere there are other survey missiles circling other worlds. Perhaps we'll find one in an orbit around Mars or Venus. Perhaps we will have to go to the stars. But if we find another, we want to be ready.

Interested? We need money, of course. But more than that we need young men and women trained as research scientists, engineers, technicians, mechanics, metal workers, public opinion specialists.... You can look us up. We're listed under the Tiger Research Corporation.

Tiger! Strangely enough, it seems lonely not to be watched any more. And the questions we asked, will they ever be answered? Is the race that set

you here as a watcher or a guard still receiving your reports and understanding them? Have they received the last one?

Tiger! Will your master come?
We're waiting.

* * *

JAMES GUNN is one of those rarities—a scholar of science fiction who can also write the stuff. Here is a short novel by him that has managed to elude publication until now—32 years after it was written.