

SATURN

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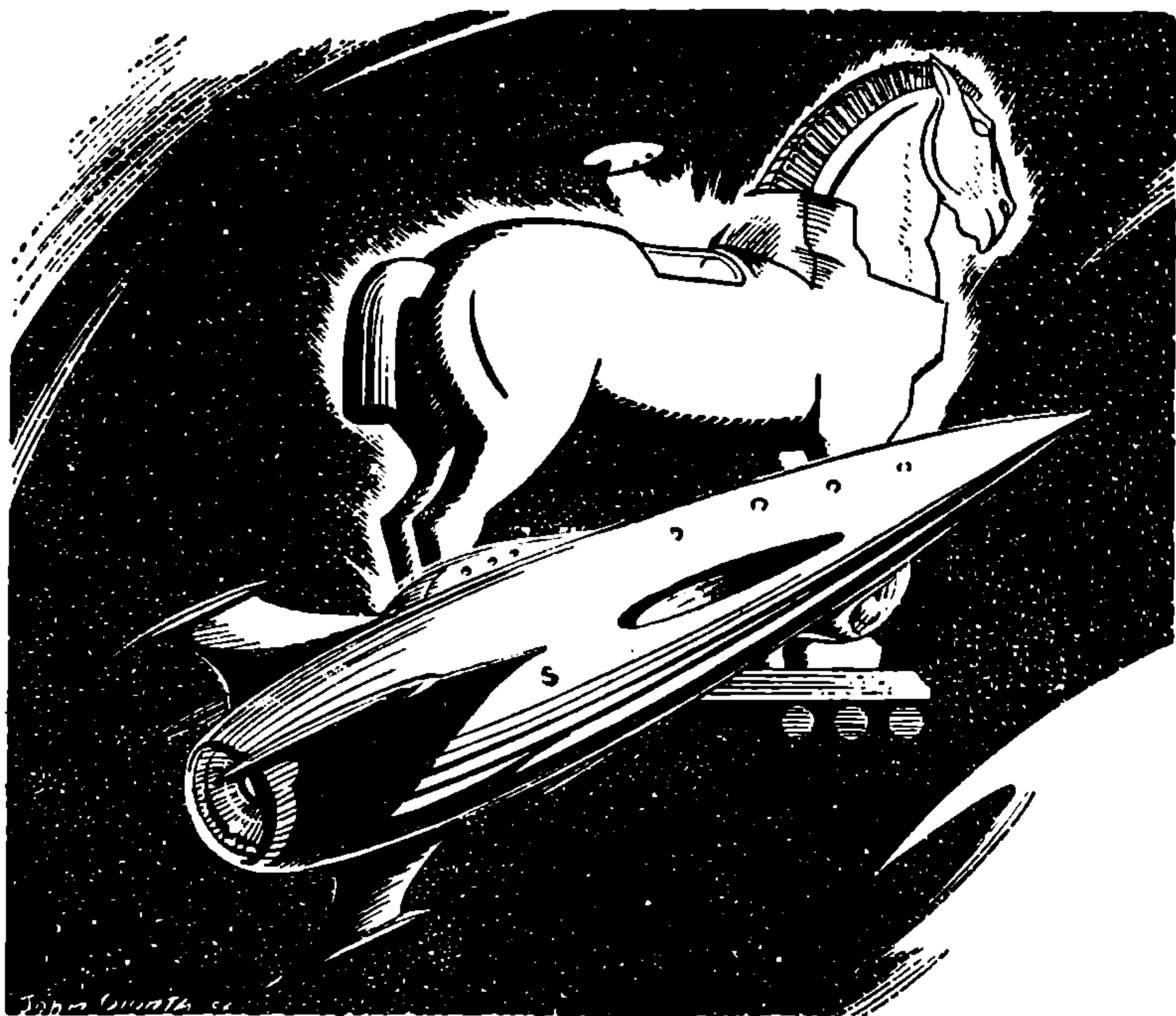
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VISITORS' BOOK



by JOHN BRUNNER

ARNOLD stood on the balcony of the operations room, not really taking in the master plot his eyes were fixed on. Below him, the watch personnel, earphones clasped on their heads, moved with long rods like a croupier's stick the

little symbols that showed the monstrous network of watchers girdling the sun. Every now and again there would be a minuscule error, and Arnold would pick up his mike and code out orders to the swinging ships to correct their course.

But nothing really happened.

He sighed, and went back to the desk he had first taken over three short weeks ago. Already, he felt tired of it and the monotony of the task, and he wished achingly that the clock on the wall would hurry towards the end of his watch.

As he settled behind the desk, a light glinted on the report panel, and he tripped the teleprinter switch beside it. Instantly, the busy keys rapped out a message.

XQKD — GBDV. 1167.

That was all. It was all there ever was from one of the robot orbital stations out beyond Pluto. Probably it was no more than a routine statement of mechanical efficiency. He yawned and reached for the black-bound Cypher Manual at his side.

A moment later he stood up and knocked the manual skittering across the floor. One or two of the men on duty below glanced up incuriously as he strode over to the edge of the balcony again and looked for the position of Robot Monitoring Station 1167. As soon as that was fixed in his mind he went out of the operations room at a run.

He was still running when he came to the door bearing the legend A. G. NWAKA; COLO-

NEL COMMANDING, and went in without knocking.

Nwaka raised his eyes from the file on his desk and was on the point of making a comment when he saw that Arnold was agitated. He demanded crisply, "Well?"

"1167 picked up an alien ship, sir," said Arnold breathlessly.

Instantly, Nwaka came from behind his desk. "Right. I want to take a look at this."

He studied the layout of the operations table for a long time before he made his decision. Pointing with a long brown finger, he said, "Who's that?"

Arnold followed his eye and saw the symbol of a manned patrol ship lying on the board within a few hours' flight of 1167. Hesitating only a moment, he said, "Galimov, sir."

"Good. Tell him to make course for the alien ship and report verbally on what he sees. Then notify Earth—use cryptest means. And then go down to the vault and open cabinet five. Inside you'll find a sealed book. Bring it to me in my office. Here's the key."

"Right, sir," said Arnold unhappily, and took the key.

INSIDE the alien ship a conference was in progress.

"Now the question is," said Harachmar, "what have we got?"

Chweit reached across him and opened contacts which notified all stations in the big ship that they were on duty and alert. He said, "That was just about right, where you put us, Harachmar."

"I still don't see why you wanted to break from hyper-drive twelve light hours from the star. I flatter myself we could have put you within ten minutes without any trouble."

"This system happens to be inhabited," said Chweit. "It's a strange custom of livable planets—they produce life. And this lot have space flight."

Harachmar considered the fact, nodding slowly. "What standard? Have they the faster-than-light drive?"

"We haven't found any sign of it yet. But we were picked up by a monitor as soon as we broke, and to judge from the number of detectable ships and stations in transit or orbit, this is a passably crowded traffic area."

"Trouble?"

"Well, one ship can attract plenty. If we'd materialized as close to the inhabited worlds as you wanted, we'd have had hydrogen mines knocking at our

screens and asking to be let in as soon as the local soldiery got over their surprise."

"Hydrogen mines we can handle, surely," said Harachmar.

"Yes, but not too many of them, or too large. And besides, they may have something else as well. We've got a good ship here—but it's on its own."

Harachmar reflected on the populated part of the ship—the quarter that wasn't drive machinery—and the thought of all that armament was comforting. He said, "Well, if they haven't got interstellar flight, they won't bother us."

"You sound as if you want us to go in and take the planet over," Chweit commented. "That's all very well if the race on it is savage, or doesn't exist. But our task in a case like this is to find out what it will take to conquer the locals—not to do it. I agree that if they're only at the sub-light stage of space travel, they shouldn't worry us, but we don't want to be left with an unusable radio-desert for our pains."

He pressed the *report* button. Observation was the first to come in.

"This is Brach, sir," said a soft voice. "Considerable activity on the electronic level. No

gravitic communication has been found. We haven't broken the language yet, since from the shortness of the messages all we are getting is pre-arranged code signals. I'd say they have trouble with their information transfer. But there's a pile reaction headed our way. The inhabitants are coming out to take a look at us.

"Let me know when you get a decent image to show me," said Chweit. "Armaments, what about you?"

"Ready and waiting sir," said a different voice. "State of equipment—serviceable. State of personnel—on watch and ready."

"Fine," said Chweit. "Cloust? What's the situation at Engines?"

"Drive cooling," was the answer. "Serviceability of engines—estimatelly ninety per cent. We're changing a thrust pole on number six, but it shouldn't take more than an hour."

"Get it fixed fast," said Chweit sharply. "Who ordered you to immobilize the ship like that?"

"I did," said Harachmar.

"Well, anyway," Chweit backed down. "Get it fixed." He avoided Harachmar's annoyed gaze and began to check the inship stations—personnel,

administrative, medical, catering, discipline. All reports being favorable, he shut off the communicator and sat back with a sigh.

ARNOLD found himself nervously shredding a sheet of paper into fragments, and threw it aside in annoyance. Beside him, Colonel Nwaka looked up from the thick, red-bound volume bearing the title *Most Secret—Directive 957/09*, which Arnold had earlier brought from the secret documents vault. His chocolate-colored face broke into a grin.

"You look as if you were due to die at dawn," he said.

"It might be that way, sir," answered Arnold miserably.

At that moment a voice from the open communicator rang out, and they were all attention. The words had been scrambled in transit and there was a faint distortion, but they were comprehensible.

"Galimov here. Do you read me, Titan?"

Arnold passed the mike to Nwaka, who answered urgently, "Titan reading you. Nwaka here—what have you got?"

"It's alien all right. And it's enormous. I estimate it at a mass of not less than five hun-

dred thousand tons, and it's at least a mile long. It must have faster-than-light drive, or it would have shown on my detectors before 1167 caught it. It's covered in what look like long-range rocket launchers, and it's coming in fast. I can't extra-polate it's course back—"

There was the beginning of a rending crash, and then complete silence.

"What—?" began Arnold. Nwaka put the mike down.

"They blasted him," he said. "You'll see it on the table in a moment. You'd better get that through to Earth as fast as you can, but I think I know what their answer will be."

"But what the hell can we do against a race with faster-than-light drive?"

"Do as I say," said Mwaka. "You might be surprised."

"BRACH, sir," said Chweit's speaker. "We're tracking this ship that's coming out to us. I'll put it on your screen."

While they waited for the image to stabilize, Chweit mused, "I wonder if we'd be silly enough to walk into the lion's jaws to count his teeth?"

"Maybe they never met a lion before," said Harachmar.

"To judge from the thoroughness with which they monitor

their perimeter, either they've met people from outside before, or they have over-developed and jumpy imaginations. In either case, our course is definitely one of care—for now, at any rate."

"Here it is, sir," said the speaker again. "It's tiny—a mere six or eight hundred tons. It must have been in orbit when we got here—it couldn't have reached us from a planetary body in this space of time."

"That's certainly not a menace," observed Harachmar as he contemplated the miniature image of a rocket under full power that filled the screen before them.

"You're jumping to conclusions," said Chweit thoughtfully. "There's no reason why that shouldn't be able to come up to this ship, drift through our screens as if they didn't exist, and spread us across a rapidly expanding volume of space."

Harachmar looked at him sharply. "You're joking," he said, but he sounded uncomfortable.

"Of course," agreed Chweit. "I doubt if that ship could go through a planetary atmosphere, let alone our screens. It's a primitive canoe. But you felt bad at the idea, didn't you?"

"Naturally."

"I think in some ways it's a judgment on us that we should be perpetually afraid," Chweit went on. "How many planets have we dispossessed?"

"Over a hundred."

"I thought it was less. Still, that brings out my point. We've done it to so many people that we're forever afraid of it happening to us."

Harachmar turned in his seat and gazed at the other with blank amazement. He said fiercely, "Chweit, do you realize what you're saying?"

"I have nightmares," said Chweit calmly. "Nightmares in which this ship is followed home from one or another of the systems that we visit by a fleet of faster-than-light ships carrying weapons against which we have no defence and armor which we cannot pierce."

"It'll never happen," asserted Harachmar, but there was little conviction in his voice.

"It has never happened," Chweit corrected him. "It may—the odds are all in favor."

"Rubbish," Harachmar all but shouted. "If that's the way you feel, we might as well give up and go straight home."

"Oh, no. Not while there's an inhabited planet here. I want to see that world taken

and made one of ours. Not so much because we need it, but because that would be one less place for the threat to come from. We're walking a tight-rope over a sea of flame, and we shall never feel secure until we've conquered every system in the galaxy. Then, maybe we'll be able to relax."

"But inter-galactic travel—" said Harachmar, in spite of himself.

Chweit laughed, a little sadly. "You see?" he said. "We've chosen our way, and now we are embarked upon it there is no turning back."

He looked again at the tiny image on the view screen. "What's it got, Brind?" he went on, keying open the line to Armaments.

"Radioactive weapons, sir," was the reply. "That's all. No energy source big enough to load a beam. It's not a match for us—we could go through its meteor screens as if they were paper."

"Blast it," ordered Chweit.

There was a hiss of indrawn breath from the speaker. "Would you repeat that, sir?" Brind asked hesitantly.

"I said blast it. Knock it out of space. Use the smallest and least efficient weapon we have

capable of doing the job. If I want to study the behavior of ants, I stir the heap with a stick. This will tell us what they have to fight with and if it offers any obstacles to us."

"Right, sir," said Brind, but it was plain that he was unhappy about it.

"You see?" Chweit commented a little grimly. "Brind is as afraid of some impersonal vengeance as you or I."

Harachmar said nothing, but kept his eyes on the screen.

It was minutes only before the ship in it abruptly turned into a cloud of boiling gases and dissipated its mass among the interstellar dust.

"Brach here, sir," the speaker muttered after a while. "The ship Armaments just blasted—it was broadcasting, presumably to a home base somewhere not far from here. Also there is considerable noise from the robot station that reported our arrival. It seems to be some kind of alarm."

"Brind! Blast the robot station as well. Make them really unhappy while we're about it. There's a chance that if they don't like the way we get rid of their best stuff, they may be too frightened to offer resistance."

A pause. Then, "Robot destroyed, sir," Brind said. He sounded very nearly frightened.

"Assessment from Armaments," a new voice cut in, much more assured than Brind's. "No resistance was offered to the light weapon employed. No screens were detected except a minimum of meteor protection. Analysis of the resultant explosion shows no energy source except a space drive pile operating on a simple reaction principle and the suspected detonation of an atomic missile. Enemy weapons assessed as primitive."

Chweit noted the defense mechanism implicit in the use of the word *enemy*, and smiled faintly.

"Right," he said. "Now we await results."

FOR PERHAPS the twentieth time Arnold stood up and went across the balcony to look down at the operations table. In his hand was the last thing to come from the 'printer on the desk behind him. It was the final message from 1167, the monitor which had first found the alien, and consisted of two simple code groups as always. These, though, meant:

"Alien known to be hostile. Station under attack."

But now there was a piece missing from the jigsaw on the table below, and an uncomfortable gap in the ring of watchers. There was a new symbol in the gap, too—one he had never expected to see. There was a brilliant red question mark which signified *ALIEN*.

He could almost smell the sense of uneasiness which arose from the busy men below him. There were no words, but the glances they kept passing meaningfully every time their eyes fell on that red query made their anxiety plain enough.

The door opened, and he turned to see that this had infected even the normally imperturbable Nwaka. His dark, strong face was lined and haggard.

"Anything from Earth?" he demanded abruptly.

"Nothing yet, sir," said Arnold worriedly. "Unless—" He stepped back to the desk, and as if the transmitter far away had anticipated his arrival, the light on the panel began to blink. He tripped the switch, and read the message eagerly as it emerged from the 'printer.

From: Minister for War.

To: All units holding Directive 957/08, as amended.

Most secret—e n c o d e by cryptest means.

Priority—instantaneous immediate.

I. Proceed in accordance with directive above-named.

*FOR THE PRESIDENT OF EARTH,
Li Liang-Huen.*

Nwaka had come up behind him and was reading it over his shoulder. He said without glancing up, "High time." He seemed satisfied.

"What does that mean?" Arnold demanded. "I never heard of—oh! That book I fetched out of the operations table," he said. "I think I could do with some sleep. Isn't it about time Rattray came on?"

Startled, Arnold looked at the wall-clock. It was more than an hour past the termination of his watch. He said, "Of course, sir. I'll go and wake him—I promised to call him two hours ago. What shall I tell him?"

"Tell him not to be surprised at the number of symbols he has to use this watch," answered Nwaka cryptically, and went out.

THE RESULTS were a long time coming. And when they

did arrive, they were not what had been expected.

Chweit was almost out of patience, and ready to order another show of force, when Brach's voice from Observation heralded the long-awaited answer. He said, "Sir, there's a ship coming. A big one."

"Put it on the screen," said Chweit.

Shortly, the image of a ship so big that at the standard magnification for its distance it filled the screen from edge to edge, appeared before them.

Harachmar sat forward on his chair as if jolted by an electric shock.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"That," said Chweit, choosing his words with care, "is the biggest ship either of us has ever seen in space."

"Sir—" there was a note of alarm in Brach's voice, "—our radar doesn't register this thing properly. It won't hold the image. We can't get a distance-fix on it, and the mass-register won't stop still!"

Slowly whitening, Harachmar sat back again. Chweit rapped out, "Find out why! Armaments, get every gun and beam we have focused on that ship. Stand by to blast!"

"What if we can't hurt it?"

said Harachmar. His forehead was beaded with sweat.

"That's exactly the point," said Chweit. "We aren't up against a primitive rocket this time. We daren't fire, for fear of not achieving anything."

They sat in silence for a while, as the ship loomed larger and larger. They had to step down the magnification twice to keep it in sight.

"This is it," Harachmar kept whispering. "This is it." He wished he was a peasant with a god to whom to pray.

But nothing happened. No bolts of intolerable lightning flashed out to exact a revenge for the loss of the other ship and the orbital station, and at length Brach voiced what they were slowly coming to suspect.

"Sir, that's a dead ship! She isn't under drive—she's drifting!"

And indeed it was true. The mighty stern tubes, that looked capable of lowering the ship's vast bulk to the surface of a sun with less force than would crack an eggshell, were cold and quiet. The ship was on a derelict's course.

"Where's she from?" Chweit demanded.

"She must have been lying inert in orbit somewhere. We

didn't notice her before a few minutes ago. It looks as if she blasted off and something went wrong." A note of cautious jubilation crept into his voice. "Maybe their big bang was a misfire."

"No!" said Chweit decisively. "There must be a reason for this. A people who could build a ship like that wouldn't design it so that it went wrong the very first time it was used."

"The first time?" said Harachmar involuntarily.

"You don't fight interplanetary wars with battlewagons like that," said Chweit. "You'd lose half your planets. No, that must be their major defensive weapon. A ship packed as full as possible with everything technology can devise for the inevitable attack from outside their system."

"Why do you say it is their major defensive weapon?" Harachmar wondered. "Would they send out their only one—like this? Dead? I don't think so. It would come out fighting. They must have more than one."

"Sir," said Cloust from engines, "do you want the drive warmed?"

"Warm it," said Harachmar. "We'll probably need to get out

of here in a hurry."

"No!" said Chweit decisively. "We won't be going. We stay here—until something happens."

"Are you out of your mind?" said Harachmar incredulously. "You mean we're going to stay here right under the nose of that thing? Don't be more stupid than you can help."

"Remember what I said about an alien following us home?" Chweit answered quietly. "The drive stays cold."

Harachmar remained silent, but his face went grey.

IT WAS like a game of chess, thought Arnold. Unfortunately, there was no time limit on the moves. It was more than three days since the new piece—this time, the symbol was a black cross—had moved out of nowhere and begun its leisurely drift towards the red query. In that time, he had found himself almost incapable of sleep, and had taken to spending his time in the operations room "in case he was needed."

Nwaka too was spending much of his spare hours here, and the contrast between them grew minutely more pronounced. With the enigmatic message from Earth, his worry

seemed to have sloughed at least partly off him. It isn't fair, Arnold thought dispiritedly. He knows what's going on.

Below, the man in charge of that sector moved the black cross one step further on its journey.

FOR THE ten-thousandth time Chweit raised red-rimmed eyes from the view-screen, which still held that same awe-inspiring image, and repeated, "There's got to be a reason for this!"

Harachmer leapt out of his seat and began to pace the length of the cabin. After a couple of circuits, he wheeled suddenly and asked, "Must there be a reason? Why can't you accept that it's within the bounds of possibility the enemy ship should have gone wrong—is simply lying there, drifting? Why not let's settle that once and for all? If it's booby-trapped, there's no need to go close to it to find out. Just send a life-boat, manned by a crew of volunteers, to draw its teeth. Or at least to find out if it has any."

Chweit nodded reluctantly. "That's right," he admitted. "We don't have to endanger the ship—we might even get

something out of it we can use ourselves. Attention!"

He snapped open the general address circuits.

"Attention! Since the enemy ship has lain dormant for so long, it has been decided that it cannot intend to attack. There is a high probability that it has failed and is incapable of so doing. Volunteers are called for, one from each of the following sections: Armaments, Observation, Navigation, Engines. These men will have the task of investigating the alien ship.

"The alien ship is to be considered a derelict."

It took some time, but after a while the names of volunteers began to trickle in, and Chweit picked those whom he knew to be most stable and competent. Nonetheless, it was with misgivings so great as to approach terror that he watched the image of the little life-boat leave their ship and cautiously move on to a collision course with the alien. They all waited, in the ship, for the life-boat to vanish—or flare into nothing—or turn into a manned bomb and attack its own ship.

Nothing of the sort happened.

Instead, the small and the

big spacecraft converged, and the first hesitant report to come in was full of jubilation. The voice was that of Brind, from Armaments, the senior member of the four-man crew.

"The locks are open to space," he reported baldly.

Harachmar turned to Chweit, starting to say, "What did I tell you?" but Chweit motioned him to silence. His teeth had closed so firmly on his lower lip that the blood had begun to flow.

The boat touched. One man in a spacesuit entered the vast lock of the alien, and disappeared. Brind's voice announced that radio contact had been lost, owing to the intervention of the hull and a peculiar sourceless static which the listeners could hear crackling in their own speakers. An hour elapsed. Another, and a second man followed the first. It must have been Brind, for a different voice made the third report—a non-committal statement of absence of progress.

In all, more than six hours had elapsed before the two men returned from searching that colossal hulk. Even before the official announcement, there was something in their

very movements which indicated success, and indeed the word came shortly after.

"Captain Chweit! The ship is empty!"

Slowly, Chweit and Harachmar relaxed. Chweit felt for a handkerchief, becoming conscious of his bitten lip for the first time, and said thickly, "Congratulations: Right, leave it. I want all the members of the search party to report to me right away. In person."

Harachmar, this time, could not be stopped from saying, "I told you so."

Even so, it was a worried captain who acknowledged the salutes of the reconnoitring party when they entered the cabin on their return. He said immediately, "Well? What's it got?"

The four men looked hesitantly at one another. It was Brind who finally had the courage to break the silence. He said, "Everything, sir."

"What do you mean? Explain."

"Just that, sir. There's hardly anything there which we could understand. I managed to get a look at the armament while I was on board, and though that's my job I never saw anything like it. As far as

I can see, they pipe some kind of energy—fusion, at a guess—into a beam. At least, there are some blackened cradles which lead off to output antennae. That's the only thing I could even remotely guess at. The controls are fantastic. It looks as if five or six hundred men would be needed to run the ship—and there's absolutely nobody on board."

"As far as the engines go, sir," one of the other three chipped in, "they work on no principle I ever heard of. It looks as if they use raw energy. And I mean raw. It could even be neutrino stuff. They draw it off into some kind of metal frame running around the hull. It's probably faster-than-light drive of a kind we don't know about."

"I see," said Chweit. "And you're sure there's nobody on board?"

"Certain, sir. There just isn't anywhere for them to *be*."

"Then we are going to find out what makes that ship tick. And when we've done that, we'll know exactly what we're up against. Harachmar, would you organize the necessary teams? This is the best break we've ever had."

THE RED question mark and the black cross had finally come so close that the scale on the board was too small to show the gap between them. Arnold gazed at them with tired eyes, wondering what was supposed to happen now.

A manned patrol ship, watching from the absolute limit of detector range with positively the best radar ever taken into space from Earth, reported that something had left the alien and touched with the mystery ship represented by the black cross. Arnold notified Nwaka when the latter came in.

For some reason, it seemed to make him overjoyed. He took from his pocket a signal form on which a message was already written, and said, "Send that to Earth. Right away."

In astonishment, Arnold took it and read it. He was no better off when he had done so, for it ran, simply:

Dog has seen rabbit.

IT WASN'T quite the break he had thought it was.

They put in a complete team of technicians, all very highly skilled tradesmen, for their fighting service had access to all the latest technical and scientific knowledge. And

conversations ensued...

"What are you so worried about, Grad?"

"It's this thing here."

"What about it? It's a guided missile, isn't it? In fact, it's about the only recognizable thing we've dug out of this department."

"Yes, it's a guided missile, all right, with an ordinary fusion warhead. But it's got nothing to guide it! This circuit is set up as if the informations loss was nil. Chief, that's impossible!"

And again:

"Well, it's plain that you pipe the heavy¹ hydrogen in here and initiate a fusion reaction in it with the pocket-size atom bombs they store in these lockers over here. The power is somehow drained off into this tube here and fed into a square frame aerial about six feet long somewhere the other side of that hull. That much is clear. But how the hell can you have a dozen hydrogen bombs going off in little metal cups right in the middle of your ship?"

"It must have something to do with this doolally here."

"Yes, that's what I think. It's focused right slap in the middle of the cup. But we've

tried putting power into it, and all it does is create a magnetic field. And nobody is going to tell me we dare try this thing out before we find how a magnetic field can control a fusion reaction."

And again:

"Well, we know exactly what this is. It's the Nurald effect. We discovered it fifty or sixty years ago, and we never found a practical use for it. But these people seem to be able to make it do tricks—though what kind of tricks is strictly beyond me."

"It doesn't make sense."

THAT WAS exactly it. It didn't make sense.

They solved the problem of why they had so much trouble with the radar. In addition to—warping space, they decided to call it—the silver and copper frame around the hull shifted all radiation falling on it half an octave down the spectrum. That was aside from the fact that the whole skin was space-black and absorbed light in the visible range as if it hadn't been there. Chweit sat and marveled for an hour at that, asking why his own people had never thought of it.

They solved the problem of

the mass-register. It had something to do with a meaningless alloy of rare minerals in a steel ball machined to an incredible tolerance which hung judiciously balanced between giant alnico magnets at the exact center of gravity of the ship. But they couldn't see the point of it.

It was on the twentieth day that Observation reported, "Sir, we're being watched."

"Who by?"

"There are about four hundred enemy ships of all sizes ringed in a semi-circle at the limit of detector range. Two or three of them are ships as big as the one they sent before."

"Are they doing anything?"

"No, sir. They're just—waiting for us to go away."

Chweit sat bolt upright. For a moment he was speechless. Harachmar demanded, "Are you all right?"

"Yes," said Chweit with difficulty. "Yes, I'm all right. And so, by the grace of a very kind and wise people, are all of us."

Harachmar looked as if he suspected insanity, but Chweit went on, the words tumbling from his mouth. "Don't you see? Here, we've run up against what we've always feared—a science which we

can't understand, which is so superior to ours that we couldn't last against it for a moment. We came here, and the first thing we did was to destroy one of their ships—probably a sort of one-man go-cart. But instead of retaliating, as we expected them to do, they must have looked us over and discovered how primitive we are. So, rather than attack us and wipe us out, they simply sent us a sample of what was waiting for us. We've looked at it and we know we're beaten. Now they're waiting for us to admit it."

"But surely they wouldn't have sent us their best weapons? Supposing we'd turned them back on them?"

"They won't have sent us anything they haven't got a defense for. But the fact remains, we can't understand them. Why, those crazy atomic fusion beams of theirs could go through our screens and we'd never know any more. No, Harachmar, let's go. Let's get out before they run out of patience, and we suffer that long-ago vengeance we're all so afraid of."

THERE was a sudden ripple of excitement in the opera-

tions room, and, unbelievably, the man in charge of the sector where the visitor was located reached out his croupier's stick and moved the red question mark—away from the sun.

Arnold caught the motion and whirled on Nwaka. "Look at that!" he exploded. "What in God's name did we *do*, sir?"

He picked up the thick volume labelled *Directive 957/08* and weighed it meditatively in his hand. He said, "Well, I can tell you now, I suppose. It'll be released to the public soon enough.

"We just pulled the biggest bluff in the history of man. This book started out as a minute from the Minister for War back in '08. Came up at a cabinet meeting. They'd decided that we couldn't expect to dodge interstellar contact much longer, once we were in space ourselves, so the psychologists set up a kind of defense.

"So they built about a dozen ships—bigger than anything else we'd ever dreamed of. Ten, even fifteen miles long. Then they turned loose the backroom boys to dream up the wildest inventions they could, things that looked as if they did the impossible. Those ships *look* as if they go faster than light, and they're stuffed chock-full of every inexplicable scientific effect that has ever been discovered.

He put the volume down on the desk and gazed at it. "You'll get to read this some time," he said. "Now that it's been proved to work, they may even declassify it. It's fascinating, really."

He glanced up at Arnold with a faint smile, the first in many days.

"We call it the Visitors' Book," he said.

THE END