

WELCOME BACK PERRY RHODAN!

PERRY RHODAN has been rescued not from obliteration by some hostile alien race but from oblivion due to the vicissitudes and vagaries of the publishing field right here on Terra!

When Nathan Brindle wrote almost one year ago:

"THE SHADOWS ATTACK once again in No. 126. I wasn't expecting them to show up so soon. Well written episode. Iltu is a good addition to the cast. My only complaint? Perry Rhodan No. 127 is nowhere in sight!"

Friendly allied forces were already hard at work to insure Perry's, Pucky's, Bell's and all the rest of the crew's survival on this and other worlds. Fighting against almost insurmountable odds of contractual difficulties with the series' original German publishers, MASTER PUBLICATIONS is proud to have revived the Peacelord of the Universe and to have given him a new form. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, we must admit that we have always preferred the original German digest size which you are now holding in your hands. The original German covers and interior illustrations seemed also far superior to their American counterparts since they depicted some scene and accurately portrayed humans, aliens and spaceships as described in the actual story. We hope that we will soon be able to do likewise.

MASTER PUBLICATIONS also plans to revive the former Perryscope where the readers have an opportunity to express their opinions. We invite you to send your comments and suggestions for a new name for our readers letter column to:

MASTER PUBLICATIONS
13735 Victory Blvd. Suite 1
Van Nuys, California 91401

If the title suggested by you is selected you will receive free of charge a poster of either PERRY RHODAN, Atlan or Pucky. Please indicate your choice. MASTER PUBLICATIONS also welcomes your ideas for any other department you would like to see included in future issues of PERRY RHODAN, such as shock-short stories; book reports of new science fiction; a film column discussing the latest films in the science fiction or fantasy and horror field.

From a survey taken when you sent in your subscription forms for PERRY RHODAN it was clear that about 95% of the readers would like to see the ATLAN series continued. At the moment this is not yet possible but we are aiming for a production of 2 PERRYS and one ATLAN a month. If we had waited for the contractual finalization of this particular publishing combination you would have had to wait even longer than you did already. We wanted you to be able to continue reading your favourite science fiction series as soon as possible – and we assure you that these endless delays were not caused by your new American publisher!

FORVALA!

MASTER
PUBLICATIONS

FOREWORD

In May of the year 2012 at the University of Terrania the Institute of Cosmobiology opened a series of

lectures. One of these seminar talks was on the subject of contact with extra-galactic intelligences. In the course of his lecture the speaker said:

"Here within our own galaxy we Terrans have perceived that not all intelligent life forms can evolve according to Terran standards. We've, come to understand that an intelligent being does not necessarily have to walk on two legs nor does he have to have two arms, two eyes, two ears, and one mouth and one nose. There are other forms of life and nowadays we can sometimes encounter an alien creature who might offer us a tentacle instead of a hand in greeting, if such a gesture is known to him — yet do it with a certain ease or simplicity which heralds a growing state of cosmic thinking.

"But what still lies ahead of us? How-ever variegated the races of our galaxy may be, there are signs that they all have certain common characteristics. For example we have not found any mode of thinking that is essentially alien to our own. However, what should we expect when we make our first contact with a race from an alien galaxy? Can we hope to find features and characteristics with which we might all have something in common?

"The answer *isno!* Even within our own galaxy we have found grades of differentiation which begin to get pretty far off the norm. So in considering any extra-galactic contacts we would have to expect to encounter some rather wide differences. We can't expect them to regard friendship as something good or hate as something bad. We can't even expect them to have any concept of good or evil. What could be 'beautiful' to us might be 'green' to them, if you know what I'm driving at. We can't depend on being able to even converse with races from an alien galaxy when we first encounter them—not as we are accustomed to doing with other races in our own galaxy. Misunderstandings will be common at first but such misunderstandings could have devastating consequences.

"One might accuse me of talking about rare eventualities such as a 3-headed calf, and in fact at first glance this subject seems a bit far-fetched. However, in this age of trans-light spaceflight that first contact could occur any day and at any hour. This is especially so if we wish to concede that some hypothetical life form in any particular alien galaxy may be far advanced over the state of development of Arkonide-Terran civilizations.

"For that moment—the moment of the first contact — we should be prepared. It is highly possible that it could be vital to the further existence of our culture. we cannot afford to just sit complacently around and wait. We have to foresee and anticipate such an event. Our situation demands it."

Quite contrary to expectations, the words of the speaker were heeded. Men began to prepare for such an extra-galactic contact. That is, preparations were made as far as they could go under the circumstances. Any effective program of this nature required at least some knowledge that could define the objectives, but no such knowledge was available. No one had even the slightest idea of what lay ahead for humanity.

Still, there were the probability calculators, mighty positronic computer installations which were provided with highly detailed programs. These machines worked out hundreds of thousands of possible situations and prescribed an equal number of modes of operation. Of course even these advanced machines could not assume a success probability higher than 53% on the average for any proposed method of procedure.

So basically everything was still up in the air, if one discounted at least the act that men had begun to get used to the idea of an intergalactic contact, which was in contrast to what they had done prior to that May lecture of 2012.

Later it seemed to be a strange quirk of fate that the first contact occurred almost 100 years afterwards to the day. Of course in a more basic sense that eventuality was foreordained when Perry Rhodan first encountered the Arkonides ...

1/ "ARE YOU A TRUE LIFE FORM?"

There was nothing but a deathlike silence and emptiness in this region of the universe.

In a ship suspended in space far removed from the outer rim of the Milky way, the mass detectors had nothing to detect. The only equipment capable of picking up anything was the broad-surfaced collector shields on trans-C velocity ships which now and then probed into this abyss between the island universes. In about every 10 cubic meters there might be a single hydrogen nucleus. To collect just a single gram of matter it would be necessary to comb through a space sector big enough to contain 5000 planet Earths.

That's how empty it was out here. Well, to the devil with it, thought Eric Furchtbar. He only had a few, more days to go before they'd come to pick him up.

No one was assigned to duty for more than three months on board the BOB (Barrier-line Observation Station) 21. In the beginning it had been estimated that the men could endure a half year of service out here but it hadn't worked out. After about 3? months the crews began to get "space happy." They would start seeing ghosts and begin to hear mysterious cries emerging from emptiness.

It wasn't so bad if a man took time to think about it, theorized Eric Furchtbar. All you had to do was sit still somewhere and get it into your head that there were no such things as ghosts and that sounds were impossible out there in the awful void. But who ever had time to go into such meditations? Usually they sat with each other and conversed. What did they talk about? The terrible emptiness. How ghastly it was and how hard it was to imagine such an endless abyss. They thought of how frightful it would be if the BOB 21 suddenly sprang a leak—although it would not be any worse than a leak occurring somewhere in the middle of the galaxy.

And then it would happen suddenly. When they went to bed and started to fall asleep. All of a sudden they would hear voices. And then they would see the grey shadows flitting about. Instead of becoming meditative they would start to yell and rave, or the more impressionable ones would shiver under their sheets.

In short, they would go out of their minds.

Eric had to admit that it wasn't always so simple. He looked around him. The room he was in was rectangular if one overlooked a slight outward curvature of one of the lateral walls. The walls were covered with instruments, meters, viewscreens and control panels. There were a few seats located here and there. In the centre of the room was a large table that was covered with star charts, coordinate tables and stacks of programming sheets which were still in the original order as on the first day. No one had ever used the positronic input forms.

There was no reason to make any new programming inputs. Nothing ever happened. The 25-man crew of the BOB 21 spent their time in merely determining that this sector of the universe was absolutely eventless. Day after day, week after week, month after month.

The instrument needles stood at zero as if they had been turned off. Every 10 minutes Eric would get up and press the switch of the master test board. A green lamp would light up to reveal that all instruments in the room were working and ready to respond. Of course Eric knew this but he only went through the

routine each time to see the lamp come on. Just that at least was an event to break the monotony.

The only equipment that was really shut down was the viewscreens. Matter tracers and reflex sensors were capable of picking up anything coming from the outside much faster than the conventional optics. Besides, the aspect of the empty void between the galaxies wasn't worth turning on the screens. on the contrary: it increased the anxiety factor.

No, it really wasn't pleasant duty here. If you took the psychological problems into consideration, the BOB 21 was actually undermanned. At least two men should be in each room together. Eric would have liked to have somebody to talk to but he was sitting here alone in a room that was almost 50 square meters in extent. 8 other men were sitting somewhere in other rooms, and the remaining 16 were off duty.

Eric got up restlessly and slowly paced the room. With his almost 6'-ft frame he might have had an imposing figure if he had not been so frightfully thin. His uniform, which was the right length but too wide for him, hung in rather dismal folds about him. But that didn't seem to bother him. The only thing he was really aware of was his bald spot, which was shiny enough to catch his eye wherever he saw his reflection. As a man of 31 years he endured it with what little of dignity that remained to him.

As he walked along the curved wall he almost took a masochistic pleasure in the realization that only about half a meter of distance separated him from the lightless vacuum that stretched out from here over millions of light years to the next galaxy. He wondered how he might feel if he thought that the plastic metal hull really was the only thing between him and that awful void. Would it make any difference? About 140 years ago when Terrans were first venturing into space, the hulls of spaceships had been made of ordinary steel and by comparison to these walls were they were as thin as an onion skin. And in those days there was no such thing as the defence screen that protected the BOB 21 from the outer environment more effectively than any material walls.

No, decided Eric, he would still feel safe without the outer screen. Way out here there were no meteors. What could possibly happen to do any harm?

To the devil with all these grey ghosts and phantoms, he thought angrily. He almost wished that something really would happen. He turned and went back to his seat. Sitting down with a sense of boredom he chanced to glance at one of the meters.

The blue-white illuminated needle stood trembling at the upper end of the scale.

*

It was the fastest Eric Furchtbar had ever moved to get onto his feet. In three long strides he reached the main panel and activated the alarm. Sirens started to shriek, signal light blinked, and the viewscreens flashed into operation automatically.

The mighty observation station virtually bristled with a sudden vigilance,
like a man startled from sleep.

Eric returned to his seat. The instrument that had given the first indication was designed to register para-energy radiations. It only reacted to hypertype emanations below a certain threshold of energy and which had no detectable modulations. Such radiations could come from any number of possible sources. If this had been inside the galaxy, that particular indicator wouldn't have been quiescent for a single second.

But way out here . . . ?

Eric scanned meters on other instrument panels along the walls. Other needles were quivering with subtle activity now. One of them registered a light hypergravity shock, and some of the hyperoptic channels were acting up.

All of it was hyper, thought Eric in wondering puzzlement. No direct indications.

He looked at the viewscreen. They revealed the same black void as they al-ways did when they were turned on. There was still nothing to be seen. Whatever may have happened it must have occurred too far away for the light to have reached the station yet. He waited a while longer. Then he got his first call on the intercom. It came from the Analysis Section. On the small screen he recognized the red-haired younger man whose freckled face wore a perplexed and slightly confused expression.

"We've gone over all the input tapes, sir. There's no doubt about the indications. somewhere out there a sun has suddenly come into existence."

Eric Furchtbar almost choked. "A sun..!" he cried out. "You can talk plainer than that, Kirkpatrick!"

Kirkpatrick unconsciously wiped his brow. "Taking all observations together, sir, there is only one straight answer. Somewhere out there is a sun. On a detailed basis—"

Eric interrupted the freckle-faced analyst with a wave of his hand. "Forget the details! How can a sun come out of nothing, just like that!?"

Obviously the question was too much for Kirkpatrick. He stammered: "That's something... I-I can't tell you, sir..."

"OK, skip it! How far away is it?"

"Between 400 and 500 light years, sir."

Eric sighed and looked at the main screens. It would be 400 to 500 years yet before the light reached them. He wouldn't live to see that. "Alright," He said resignedly. "Stay with it, Kirkpatrick, and call me again when you get the full results from the positronics."

He sank back into his chair. Kirkpatrick was one of his most dependable men. If he said that a sun came into being out there a few minutes ago, then there was a sun out there.

*

Art Cavanaugh was sitting in the messhall when the alarms started. He had just picked up one of the colourful Gogo pieces from the bevel-edged playing board and was calculating the move that would beat his partner, Ken Lodge. When the sirens shrieked, Ken Lodge jumped up and knocked the board and the pieces aside. The figures rolled off the table and fell to the floor.

"Alert!" he shouted.

Cavanaugh got up more slowly, wearing a frown. "That came just in time for you, didn't it? one more move and I'd have wiped you out!"

He turned calmly to look at the lighted call panel at the other end of the room. His eyes narrowed. "It's coming from the main control room," he said. "The old Man's on duty . . . !"

Suddenly he began to move so fast toward the door that the powerful figure of Ken Lodge couldn't keep up with him. The passage outside was filled with shouts and the sound of running feet. Art Cavanaugh was only a sergeant like his giant friend, Ken Lodge, who stamped out after him with rumbling complaints. But he had a lively imagination and was trying to imagine what had set off the alarm. He had studied the awesome void beyond the walls of the station and had almost become convinced that nothing would ever happen out there to merit their attention. But now something had occurred.

What could it be?

Ahead in the corridor was the green light outside the Com Room. Art caused the heavy entrance hatch to slide to one side. A man sat there surrounded by hundreds of instruments. He grinned at him when he came in.

"You didn't waste a second, did you?" he commented.

Art dismissed the remark with a wave of his hand. "What's going on? what caused that alarm?"

"No idea," said the com man. "It came from the main control room. I haven't seen anything suspicious here."

"Get up from there," Art ordered.

The Com man had the same rank as Art but Art was older. When he took over the other man's place his fingers flew over the test buttons. Green indicator lamps responded. All equipment was in order. He turned around. "Nothing at all?"

"Not a peep, Art. Everything's quiet as a mouse."

Ken Lodge had come in almost aimlessly with his hands in his pocket. He joined Warren Lee, the younger Com man who was standing behind Cavanaugh. Art had just turned back to inspect the long rows of indicators.

Then all of them heard it at once. With a shrill whistle the hyper receiver came to life.

No one would have been able to move as swiftly as Cavanaugh. His quickness was incredible as he switched on the oscilloscope and adjusted it. The swiftness of his movements was unbelievable as he tuned the receiver frequency so that the signal came in clear and legible.

There was nothing else to do. They watched breathlessly as the green scope began to show a waveform which the hypertransmission was tracing on the fluorescent screen. The basic oscillation took on the shape of a pure sinewave. Nothing in the outer void could generate such an exact configuration unless it had been specifically created for that purpose.

Created...

Somewhere out there was a transmitter.

Somewhere out there were intelligent beings—there in the vast abyss between the galaxies.

*

Eric Furchtbar knew what he had to do. A sun and a hyper signal that so far nobody could decipher—that was enough to set the machinery going, of which the BOB 21 was only a small part.

He had the positronics work out a coded report which clearly and concisely described both observations. The computer delivered the required encoding pattern, which Eric fed into the directional-beam transmitter. A hundredth of a second later the beamed message was on its way to the Earth. The receiver station there decoded it automatically and relayed it on to the responsible officer.

That officer was Nike Quinto, head of Division 3 of Intercosmic Social Welfare and Development. If Quinto hadn't been alone at that moment he would probably have complained loudly about the rise of his blood pressure, which such unexpected events always seemed to aggravate.

Judging by the reaction to Eric Furchtbar's report it seemed as if the Earth had been doing nothing for a hundred years other than wait for the first message from intergalactic space. The ship that Nike Quinto and his men always used to get to the scene of the action was standing ready for takeoff. There was nothing left to do but to go on board and give the order for departure.

The Earth really had waited for this moment. Throughout the years ships had been held on standby, ready to take the members of the Mutant corps or Intelligence or Division 3 to various trouble spots affecting galactic politics. Each time the Terran technology took a step forward, such ships were always modernized. Thus for the more important missions, first-class equipment was always available.

Also, Nike Quinto's men had been fully prepared. What they might expect in intergalactic space, what they had to watch out for, how the situation might be when they were thousands of light years removed from the farthest rim of the Milky Way and encountered an alien intelligence—all this is firmly anchored in their minds. Hypno-training had given them all necessary information, in such a manner that they would never forget it.

It was a specially selected team that Nike Quinto took with him on that same day, May 2nd of the year 2112. His immediate companions were Maj. Ron Landry, Capt. Larry Randall, Sgt. Mitchell Hannigan?nicknamed Meech?and the sworn-in but unenlisted assistant, Lofty Patterson. on previous missions of Division 3, each of them had proved his mettle.

Quinto's ship was exactly half a year old as of that day. In the casual vernacular of Division 3, the *Joann* was a cruising work shop. It was classed as a battle cruiser but in addition to its excellent armaments it was fitted out with a full work shop which enabled the crew to build or repair a number of complicated equipment on board. thus the *Joann* was only dependent upon her home base to a very limited extent, which included any other sources of maintenance and supplies.

Quinto knew that in this case such a feature was important. When you were 500 light years beyond the rim of the Milky Way you operated on different tactics than you did inside the galaxy where every small hop could bring you to an inhabited world.

The *Joann* used its trans-light linear spacedrive to cover the 34000 light years to Arkon 3. After landing, Mike Quinto advised Eric Furchtbar on the hyper-beam that he was now considerably closer to his position.

For his part, Eric Furchtbar had a few new items on hand to report.

*

The receivers registered a 2nd transmission on another frequency. The first signal had been holding steady for 5 hours. It could be clearly seen on the scope screen that a definite modulation pattern was repeating itself every 14 minutes.

Art Cavanaugh had explained to Furchtbar that it looked like some kind of distress call which was sent out by an automatic transmitter—in a repeated pattern until somebody answered it. Eric had retorted that such an assumption could be made if they were dealing with inhabitants of the Milky Way. But one had to be more careful about anything that came from "out there," at least as far as *seemingly* logical deductions were concerned.

Art didn't understand too much about the art of logic but he had enough confidence in his captain not to insist on sticking to his analysis. Yet in the back of his mind the thought persisted that somebody out there was frantically yelling for help. Or at least their automatic transmitter was still operating when perhaps the people it served had already died. Because that sun that Mike Kirkpatrick had mentioned had meanwhile been defined as a nuclear explosion of tremendous size.

Then this 2nd signal had come in. Whoever was sending it wasn't making an effort to repeat it too often. Art adjusted the receiver frequency but all he could see on the scope was a single decaying wave spike. Then the scope was blank again. Warren Lee wound the recorder tape back to where he could snip off the strip that contained the short transmission. Ken Lodge felt he ought to make himself useful, so he placed the tape strip in a bright red envelope and sent it through a pneumatic tube to the positronic analysis section.

Meanwhile, Cavanaugh had notified the main control room. Eric Furchtbar was still at his post although he had been 12 hours on duty without interruption. Eric asked for the tracking readouts, and considering his agitated condition Art knew he was lucky that the automatic tracker had completed its task in the meantime. The readout consisted of three triangular coordinates and a radius vector. The radius vector indicated the distance between the BOB 21 and the unknown transmitter. It turned out to be 410 light years.

This was the same distance of the first transmitter, which placed it in the same area where the nuclear explosion had occurred.

*

During the next few hours further explosions were detected. A portion of the mighty energies unleashed were 5th-dimensional in nature and 5-D hyperfields were registered by the instruments on board the BOB 21 practically with no lapse of time.

Eric Furchtbar began to feel nervous. The BOB 21 was merely an observation station, not a true spaceship. It had been brought here by a space tender, which had simply decoupled itself and gone back to where it had come from. The BOB 21 had no real propulsion system and its only navigational engines were for limited movements to correct its position. The station was stationary. In case they should come under attack the crew was supplied with weapons, fairly effective ones at that—but if the situation became hopeless there was no way of making a fast exit.

During Eric's 13 hours of duty, 11 explosions were registered—all of them in relatively quick

succession. And there was no change in the hyper signal that Art Cavanaugh thought as a distress call. It looked as if a great space battle were taking place out there somewhere. The radiation fields registered by the instruments indicated that each explosion was caused by a bomb in the range of 1000 gigatons.

Eric had almost forgotten about the 2nd short hyper message when the analysis section announced that the positronic deciphering run had been successful. The man talking over the intercom was Lt. Hynes.

"After everything we've been taught we can't be certain that the decoder is actually giving us the true content of the message," he said. "But everything seems to fit. Every test result comes up with the same coefficient of probability. What this would indicate—"

Eric interrupted him impatiently. "Alright, alright! What does it say?"

In the viewscreen, Lt. Hynes could be seen picking up a piece of paper. He studied it a few seconds dubiously and then read it aloud: "Are you a true life form?"

*

The incomprehensible generates uncertainty and a presentiment of impending danger.

For Eric Furchtbar and the other men on board the BOB 21, this question about a true life form was the most inconceivable thing they had ever heard before in their lives. Nonetheless there was little doubt that the question had really been asked—by somebody who was 410 light years out there engaged in an argument with somebody else, in the process of which they were battling around monster fusion bombs.

Eric Furchtbar had experienced a sense of uncertainty and approaching danger before but this feeling now was coming on like a slow panic.

However, before he could beam out another message, a dispatch came in from the *Joann*, announcing its arrival on Arkon 3. Eric answered practically on a simultaneous beam, and thus in a matter of seconds Nike Quinto was the recipient of information which caused him to take off immediately after just having landed. The *Joann* sped outward, prepared to leave the galaxy.

For the time being, no one had answered the mysterious question: "Are you a true life form?"

2/ STRANGER FROM THE ABYSS

The blackness out here was absolute.

On board the *Joann* Ron Laundry was watching their approach to the disc-shaped observation station. Only a few seconds before it had become visible on the screens.

Ron had an uneasy feeling when he noted the effect created by a total absence of background behind the BOB 21. The station actually did not appear to come nearer. Instead it was as if somebody inside it were inflating it steadily with an air pump. It seemed merely to swell up rather than reveal any motion of itself or the *Joann*. There was no sense of approaching it. The station simply grew larger.

The BOB 21 continued to grow until it almost filled one of the viewscreens. Then the impression of growth ceased. The ship and the station were stationary, relative to each other. Col. Nike Quinto and Maj. Ron Landry shuttled across in a space glider and Capt. Furchtbar met them in the main lock. On his face was an obvious expression of relief.

But that relief was short-lived because Nike Quinto advised him that this was just a brief visit and that he had no intention of just parking the *Joann* next to the station for no good reason. Nor did he indicate how far away he intended to be after he left. But Eric Furchtbar had the feeling that it would be fairly distant. If things got rough all of a sudden, he and his men would be back on their own resources, the same as before—at least in the first crucial moments of alien confrontation.

He didn't complain about it. The Terran space fleet was not a discussion society.

Nike Quinto asked to see all the data that had been picked up by the automatic recorders since the detection of the first bomb explosion. He studied the tapes and graphs carefully while discussing them with Ron Landry in such low tones that no one else could hear him. Finally he requested the use of the station's positronic facilities. He and Landry occupied themselves with the computer equipment for half an hour, and then they called Furchtbar into another meeting.

Quinto's face looked flushed then he spoke. "There can be no doubt that the second message you received was deciphered correctly. It actually does say: "Are you a true life form?" So, somebody is out there whose perception or mode of thinking lies somewhere between a 'true' life form or an 'untrue' form—or maybe they can differentiate between a dozen different grades of being. What they may mean by 'true' in this sense is something we don't know. These unknown aliens are waiting for an answer. In that connection we'll have to rely on our own best instincts. To me, Captain, you're as true a life form as Major Landry, and it's to be hoped that I make the same impression on you. So in my opinion we should answer: Yes, we are a true life form."

Furchtbar was so horrified that he jumped up out of his chair. He was utterly amazed. "You mean—we should actually give them a return message?"

Quinto pretended to be surprised. "And why not?"

"But if we do we'll reveal our position! Out there are unknown intelligences battling each other with weapons of such a destructive power that it's even hard to imagine! If we answer them they'll be able to trace us. That will probably draw the battle to this area and we'll be right in the middle...!"

Nike Quinto was surprisingly calm for a change. "You're overlooking something, Captain. The aliens have asked if 'you' are a true life form. The real question is: *who* is this 'you' they are addressing?"

Still agitated, Furchtbar looked at him helplessly. "That I couldn't say, sir."

Quinto nodded as if he hadn't expected any other response. "Have you checked the energy indicators of your hypercom receiver?"

"Just roughly. We were sure there wouldn't be much to help us there."

Quinto waved a finger at him. "That was a mistake. Otherwise you would have found out that the output power of the alien transmitter wasn't especially high. Even though it's a hypercom signal it's probable that it couldn't be picked up at a distance of 5000 light years. Of course we'll check immediately to see if anyone else has picked it up somewhere but I'm fairly sure of what we'll find out. So what does that mean?"

Eric felt perplexed. He did not like the situation. He wasn't fond of being asked questions when the questioner knew from the beginning that he couldn't answer them. "I haven't any idea, sir," he said curtly.

Quinto continued patiently. "That message had a target destination. Nobody just shoots a question like that into the blue without knowing that someone's at the other end to hear it. But it was transmitted in such a way that it could not be received even at the outer edge of the Milky Way. So who in thunder were they aiming it at?"

It was just you—here in your observation station. Between the edge of the galaxy and that alien transmitter there is nothing—nothing at all, *except* the BOB 21...!"

This almost took Eric's breath away. "But—how could they know...? I mean—" He broke off, unable to finish his question.

Quinto smiled reassuringly. "Better not batter your brains over it just now," he said. "We don't know what technique these aliens are using. Maybe they have sensitive enough equipment to trace the small radiations of this station over hundreds of light years. They could also have looked you over at close range without your knowing it. We can't be sure of anything—except one thing the aliens know the position of the BOB 21. That's why it's too late to worry about that part of it. We've nothing to lose by giving them an answer. In fact, we want to find out what they'll have to say then."

Eric Furchtbar gave up. He arranged to have an answer sent out in the same code pattern in which the original question had been received. It's simple statement was: "Yes, we are a true life form."

Neither Eric nor the men who transmitted the message felt especially relaxed about the situation. They had a feeling that they were reaching out their hand to something monstrous and they didn't know if the monster would shake it or tear it off.

Nike Quinto considered that his task on board the BOB 21 had been taken care of and he said his adieu. He assured Furchtbar that the *Joann* would back him up if he got into any danger. Eric expressed his appreciation but he knew that things could happen faster than a ship could move to come to his aid if it was cruising around somewhere else in the void.

Nike and Ron returned to their "cruising factory." A few minutes later the *Joann* got underway. While picking up speed it grew smaller and finally disappeared from view.

The BOB 21 was alone once more.

*

The next few hours on board the station were passed in a state of nervous tension. Furchtbar had explained to his men what had happened, what the situation was at the moment, and what they might expect. Everyone was strangely convinced that there would be an attack, so he told them unequivocally that they could only expect help from the *Joann* if the hostilities developed slowly enough. But since nobody figured that an alien force bent upon conquest was going to take much time, what it all boiled down to was that there would be no help.

Eric gave orders to put the gun positions through a thorough inspection. He told the men to make sure that the weapons would function at the moment when they were needed. Basically the order was rather superfluous. If anyone wanted to know if the weapons were still in working order, all he had to do was press a couple of buttons on the IFPM panel and green indicator lamps would confirm that there was no cause for worry. But the instruction he had given would occupy about 10 men for at least a couple of hours, and that was Eric's main objective. As a final test, each of the guns would have to be fired, and

that might also help the morale.

Another 10 men were also at their various posts. The com Room had a double crew. Five men were on duty and a sixth was soon going to join them, which was Furchtbar himself. He was just about at the end of his stamina. One hour after the *Joann* departed he turned over his post to the 1st officer, Lt. Hynes. He then went to his cabin and dropped onto his bed. A few seconds later he was fast asleep.

Lt. Hynes took his work very seriously. He meticulously recorded a series of new bomb explosions out in the far abyss. The first hypercom signal the station had received was still being transmitted without interruption. However, they couldn't make anything out of its analysis. It was obvious that, unlike the other message, it was not intended for human eyes and ears. The code was indecipherable. An alien logic had produced it.

There was excitement on board when at 15:23 hours the question concerning a true life form was received a second time. Hynes was sure that he was acting in accordance with Eric Furchtbar's thinking—and above all with Nike Quinto's wishes—when he had the BOB 21 send back the same answer a second time. The fact that the question was repeated indicated that the first answer had not been understood.

Or at least that was a possibility, Ed Hynes corrected himself. He realised he was using Terran logic, and those out there were far from being Terrans. For example they might have the custom of not recognising that something was said until it had been repeated several times.

At 15:57 hours the 68th bomb explosion was registered. Then after that there was a sudden cessation. At 16:02 the continuous signal finally broke off, and 3 minutes later the question was repeated for the 3rd time: "Are you a true life form?" Hynes had the same answer sent out also for the 3rd time, and after that all was quiet in the vast darkness of starless space. It seemed that the battle had ended, the automatic transmitter had been destroyed, and the strange questioner was no longer interested.

Until 19:00 the void was as silent as it had been all the days before but the nervousness on board the BOB 21 only increased. So far the events registered had been happening at a distance of 410 light years but now the sudden cessation of activity could be variously interpreted—such as the possibility that the aliens were approaching the Terran station. The men were so tense at their posts that a momentary surge in cosmic ray reception came within a hair of setting off the alarms again.

The men didn't begin to believe that the danger was over with until 4 hours later. The strangers had not been heard from and was not another indication of their existence on the detection instruments. The tension on board slowly began to subside. Meanwhile Eric Furchtbar had returned to take over his post again and one hour after midnight he sent the men off duty back to bed. The station was back on its normal schedule.

That was about 20 minutes before the catastrophe began.

*

Art Cavanaugh was alone again. Ken Lodge and Warren Lee had greeted the end of the alert condition with a sigh of relief and had disappeared immediately. Ken Lodge would probably go to the messhall to look for a new partner at Gogo, and Warren would no doubt hit the sack and go to sleep.

Art rubbed his eyes. He himself was tired. Yet he still thought that Eric Furchtbar had jumped the gun in cancelling the alert this soon. Since the first bomb explosion had been registered, hardly half a day had

gone by. He smoked a cigarette while he watched his instruments. The receivers were quiet. The alien transmitters remained silent. The radiation gauge showed the usual constant—17 nanowatt per square meter, which was the diffuse radiation from the home galaxy, 5000 light years away, and from other island universes afar off across the starless gulf.

Everything was so quiet that even Cavanaugh's anxiety began to slowly subside. The chronometer read 1:19. Just about 20 minutes since the alert condition had been lifted. Maybe he could risk taking a little nap. He had a built-in sensitivity to his instruments and knew he'd wake up instantly if any of them showed any activity.

He placed his arms across the top of the console and lay his head down. He slowly closed his eyes and began to take in the atmosphere of peace and quiet around him.

It happened then...

The aliens arrived with a roll of drums. There was a crackling and hissing of instruments and luminous meter needles danced wildly across the semi-dark scales. A small transformer box was jolted visibly under the surge of sudden energy. It started to smoke and then shorted out with a loud hissing sound. Within a 10th of a second the peaceful Com Room was transformed into a madhouse of dancing and jumping indicators and deafening sounds.

For just a few seconds, Art Cavanaugh was too stunned to move. Then his reaction brought him up out of his seat. Oblivious to the bedlam and flashing lights around him, he worked the dials of the tracking scope with both hands. As the wide screen lit up, powerful beams of hyper-electromagnetic energy raced outward into space. They were promptly reflected by the foreign object and returned to form an echo image on the sweep screen.

When Art saw it he struck the alarm button.

The thing was obviously a space ship. The energy blast that had made the instruments go mad was the effect of its sudden emergence out of hyperspace into the Einstein continuum. At the moment it was still 3 light hours away. The vessel was not moving especially fast. It could take it at least 12 hours to reach the station—even longer if it went into a braking manoeuvre.

While the alarm sirens filled the corridors and rooms with a raucous clamour, Cavanaugh noticed something else. The stranger was not following a straight course. He weaved to one side and then the other of a direct line of flight and was also slowly revolving. It looked as if the alien ship were in a drunken stupor. Its spinning motion was clearly discernible and it wasn't difficult for Art to figure what that meant.

That ship out there was severely damaged.

*

So far Lofty Patterson hadn't spoken a single word during the discussion. He sat silently in his chair and listened to the others, an older man whose face was touched with a thousand small wrinkles and crinkles of kindly good humour and whose grey hair and beard looked as if they hadn't been touched by a comb in years. It was only when he sensed that the discussion was getting bogged down that he ventured to make a rebuttal.

"Apparently," he began, "everybody takes it for granted that whoever's making all that clatter out there is

some kind of extra-galactic intelligence—isn't that right?"

This seemed to irritate Nike Quinto because his voice went to its highest pitch when he answered. "Of course that's right! Patterson, stop acting as if you've been sleeping all this time! My blood pressure is high enough without any further aggravation."

Lofty Patterson was not easily disconcerted. He knew this chubby-faced man with his perpetually florid complexion. Nike Quinto actually did appear to be perpetually on the verge of a stroke. He was small and portly and usually perspired profusely. Yet among other men of his age there were few who were more healthy than Quinto. Everybody knew this and goodnaturefully endured the colonel's ravings about his blood pressure and threatening heart failure.

In fact Lofty piqued the other's ire even more with his next question. "So who says that these aliens are really extra-galactic in origin? After all, they could be people from our own galaxy who may have gone astray out there, wouldn't you say?"

Nike laughed scornfully. "And you think I haven't racked my brains already over that idea?"

Lofty watched him carefully. "Well, at least you haven't said a word about it, sir."

Why waste words over the obvious? The objections to your argument are also obvious. All of our Barrier-line Observation stations have been deployed for more than a year now, beyond the rim of the galaxy. Only the Akons and ourselves have the secret of linear space drive. All other known spacefaring races use the hyperjump system of propulsion, and any such transition out of the galaxy would have been detected by at least one of the BOB stations. But nobody's gone out, so who is there to come back in?"

Lofty nodded with satisfaction. "That still leaves two possibilities open, sir. Either these unknown people have been out there more than a year—or we're actually dealing with Akons."

"No, that's not possible. For political reasons the Akon System is under such close surveillance that not even a small freighter could sneak through our control ring, let alone a larger ship capable of making an inter-galactic run. Besides, in the past year none of their trips has been longer than a few thousand light years. So that eliminates the Akons. I don't think that any ship from a local race would be able to stay out there over a year—and above all I can't imagine what race from our own galaxy would send us a message asking us if we're a true life form...!"

"Also aside from the fact," put in Meech Hannigan, "that no known races fool around with fusion bombs in the thousand gigaton range. They may be old-fashioned but their wallop must be colossal."

Lofty finally surrendered. The counter-arguments were convincing. Yet he persisted in another vein: "How can we be sure we've really understood that hypercom message? I mean, if we're really dealing with extra-galactic beings it's theoretically possible that their mode of thinking is so different from ours that there's no way we can understand each other—at least not at the first contact."

Quinto nodded. "That's a fair question. But the code used in the transmission was created by an electronic brain. You know that electrons and positrons are universally the same, and what anybody can do with them is also universally the same. If you take such a machine and give it an independent intelligence and then leave it alone to come up with a message format, in any case there will be certain commonalities to the code pattern, regardless of who may have built the machine."

This also made sense to Lofty. From then on he followed the rest of the discussion in silence.

At this time the *Joann* stood motionlessly in space at a distance of 200 light years from the BOB 21. All hypercom receivers were trained on the observation station. If the BOB 21 should run into trouble, everyone on board the *Joann* would know about it in the next second. The *Joann*'s own tracking equipment didn't have sufficient range to follow events happening out beyond in the far abyss. She may have had other special capabilities but the *Joann* was not an observation station.

Meanwhile, Quinto had made arrangements for the Terran Fleet units along the rim of the Milky Way to be reinforced and made ready for action.

At close to 01:00 hours he reached an agreement with his inner cadre concerning the mode of procedure during the next 10 hours. They had heatedly discussed a suggestion of Larry Randall's in which he proposed that they should go to the site of the bomb explosions and have a look around, but this was finally rejected. Nike Quinto won out with his own idea of waiting right where they were, to see how the situation developed.

The BOB 21 had reported several hours prior to this that everything had quieted down in the distant area of surveillance. The explosions had ceased, the automatic transmitter had become silent, and the question was not repeated concerning their form of life.

For Quinto this was far from being any indication that the case was closed. He decided to wait out the 10 hours quietly and then consider whether to take up the trail of direct investigation or to wait further.

His judgment proved to be valid. At 01:23 hours the BOB 21 announced the emergence of an alien spaceship out of the void between the galaxies. The *Joann* sent an alert signal to the Fleet formations.

*

Eric Furchtbar was observing the alien ship.

Also in the main control room besides himself were Lt. Hynes and corp. Schulmeister. The radar image from Cavanaugh's Com Room had been relayed into the control centre. Furchtbar could see on the screen that the ship was coming closer and that it had gone into a braking manoeuvre.

He told Cavanaugh to turn on the hyper transmitter and beam out a signal with hardly any modulation, which of course could make no sense on the receiving end. But the stranger would no doubt send back some kind of answer and though it would probably make no sense either it would at least indicate that the call had been acknowledged.

This is what Eric expected but he was deceived. There was no answer. The alien ship merely continued its braking manoeuvre. Even an amateur. Could see that every second it was becoming more difficult for the strange vessel to hold its course. It would veer off to the side and struggle back only to buck like a horse and spin on its axis at varying speeds of rotation. It was still too far away to be visible on the optical screens but the hyper-scanner plainly revealed that the ship was spherical in shape.

The energy sensors indicated that the vessel was moving in a synthetic gravity field that took the place of a propulsion system. Strong variations of the field were registered. The generators seemed to be out of control. Eric kept waiting for an answer but none was received. He repeated the signals, he beamed out additional signals, and finally he even sent out a question in positronic code.

But the alien remained silent. Either nobody on board was still alive or they didn't prefer to answer. The

first possibility didn't seem to be too probable. If nobody was alive then at this moment the ship would have to be on automatic pilot. This was wholly conceivable but in Eric's opinion such an automatic system should be responding more quickly to the course deviations. Those corrections he saw appeared to be awfully sluggish and clumsy. It was as if somebody was sitting at the controls who knew nothing about astrogation.

But if somebody was still alive over there, why didn't he give a return signal? It was unthinkable that all receivers on board could be malfunctioning. Receivers and transmitter's were the most important items of equipment on board spaceship. Eric was confident that these aliens, whoever they might be, received radio impulses in the same way and that they had equipped their vessel as earthmen would have. Which meant that there would be such a redundancy of senders and receivers that even in case of complete destruction there would still be an emergency set or two in operation.

Eric was being constantly informed from the Com Room as to the remaining time left before the ship would reach a stopping point. Ken Lodge's deep voice was doing the countdown.

"Still 71 minutes, sir. We have the new tracking readout. The alien ship will come to a stop at a distance of 15000 km."

Eric nodded absently. Either their astrogation instruments are out of kilter over there or they really had a clown at the flight controls. 15000 kilometres! With the lack of light here the vessel still wouldn't be visible on the regular screens.

He decided to fire a warning salvo as soon as the ship came within 50000 km. He had delayed long enough. Of course anyone could see that the vessel was in serious trouble and it was not the custom of the Terran Fleet to hail a crippled ship with a shot across the bow but Eric Furchtbar carried the responsibility for 25 human lives. Out there something unspeakably alien was coming toward him. He didn't know what the intentions of the crew might be on board the damaged spacer—so he had to give them a warning.

He issued orders to gun position 1. Behind the heavy energy cannons the crew sprang into action. The positronics indicated the exact spot where the ship would be when it passed the 50000-km line. The target point was pre-calculated. Five heavy-calibre thermo guns were aimed at a place that was within 100 km of the critical point.

In the main control room the seconds seemed to drag by in slow succession. Every minute, Ken Lodge's deep, monotonous voice came through with the continuing countdown.

"Still 54 minutes, sir. Unknown vessel's present velocity is 1.123 times 10 to the 7th meters per second."

Eric converted the figures in his head while watching the screen. That came to about 11000 km per second. Hm-m... Retropulsion could only be about 350G ...Ridiculous... If they'd only let a peep out of them! Those fools! Why didn't they answer?

"We could send out a lifeboat to them, sir."

Eric was startled to hear Lt. Hynes' voice directly behind him. He whirled around. "My God but you gave me a scare!" he admitted frankly. "Can't you stomp those boots a little louder when you walk? A lifeboat? They're still cutting the ether at over 1000 km per second. Our shuttle craft don't have good enough auto-nav controls—at least not in that range of speed. They're not much better than maintenance workboats, for repair work near the station. If you wavered a minute of arc in the wrong direction that

steamroller out there would flatten you to pieces."

Hynes listened patiently and then added: "I didn't mean now, sir. Later, when they're practically at a stop. Of course the pilot would have to be a volunteer." His voice rose slightly with a note of tension. "We can't just sit here and wait for something to happen, sir!"

Eric looked at him sarcastically. "Would you like to be the volunteer, Lieutenant?"

In the same moment he was sorry he said it but the question was out. Ed Hynes pressed his lips together and squared his shoulders.

"Of course, sir," he answered immediately.

Eric waved a hand wearily. "Forget it, he said in a conciliatory tone. "We still have 50 minutes to mull it over. It isn't a bad idea-maybe we can figure something out."

Lt. Hynes went back to his post, somewhat subdued. The time dragged by with such excruciating slowness that the pauses between Ken Lodge's announcements seemed to be semi-eternities.

"...another 31 minutes sir..."

Always another minute, and another!

"...still 28 minutes, sir..."

The alien ship was still twisting, turning and bucking out there in the darkness. Furchtbar thought that he wouldn't be surprised if the thing exploded and sent the splinters flying around their ears. But the stranger kept on coming.

"Fifteen minutes, sir. The bogie's present velocity is 2780 km per second. Present-distance: 120000 km."

Eric envisioned Ken Lodge standing in the Com Room with the intercom mike in his hand. He wondered if the big fellow was really as cool and collected as he sounded.

At last the time seemed to be passing more swiftly all of a sudden when zero minus 10 minutes was reached. The moment was approaching when gun position 1 would be laying a shot across the alien's bow. That would be at zero minus 140 seconds. Three minutes ahead of time, the chief gunner announced for the last time that his weapons were ready. Eric warned him that under no condition was the stranger to be brought under direct fire.

After that the tensions rose to their highest pitch. Eric remained in contact with the gun position. He finally heard the hoarse voice of the gunnery sergeant.

"Fire!"

The scanners traced the powerful beams of the thermo guns as they shot straight through the darkness and passed beneath the alien vessel. The BOB 21 rumbled and shook from the mighty salvo while the optical screens were filled for some seconds with the blinding glare.

Eric Furchtbar leaned forward tensely in his chair. How would the stranger react to the warning shots?

He must have seen that no direct hit was intended. Gun position 1 had pulled off a minor masterpiece of precision. Their fire accuracy had a variation ratio that was down to 1/1000th of the range.

"That ought to show them we're awake over here," said Ed Hynes from the background.

Eric nodded grimly. It seemed to him that the alien ship had suddenly come under control. At least it wasn't swaying and turning anymore. He couldn't even tell if it was even moving. He was about to put a call through to the Com Room when he was interrupted by an announcement from the energy-sensor operator.

"Sir, the alien's gravity field has collapsed."

The voice was strained, the words were swift, and the face of the man on the vid-screen wore a confused expression. Eric nodded confirmation. The intercom darkened—and then Eric realised fully what he had just heard.

The gravity field was the stranger's propulsion. If the field had collapsed it meant he wouldn't be able to manoeuvre. In that case he would keep the velocity he had when his propulsion failed. Which meant he would also stay on his present course.

Eric whirled around in his seat. Ed Hynes stared at him in wide-eyed surprise. Eric was about to say something but the intercom lighted up without warning and they both heard the bellowing voice of Ken Lodge.

"Crash alert, sir! Alien ship out of control! Approaching on direct course at about 1500 km per second. Contact in 100 seconds!"

3/ AN UNSEEN PRESENCE

"Let's not kid ourselves..." Nike Quinto spoke in such low tones that hardly anybody could understand him.

"That question about a true life form can only mean one thing..." When Ron Landry stared at him questioningly, he finished his statement: "It means that the questioner is a robot!"

Ron thought this over. Lofty, Larry and Meech hadn't heard a word of the half-whispered declaration so they waited.

He could be right thought Ron. According to its programming it could record either its own "life" or the life of an organic being as the "true life form."

So the question could have two meanings. Either: Are you robots like we are? Or: Are you organic life in contrast to ourselves?

It sounded logical, Ron thought, but in the same moment it occurred to him that he had been warned not to think too logically in relation to extra-galactic intelligences.

Anyway, Nike Quinto was probably right.

If that was so and if their previous hypothesis was right, that the explosions out there in the abyss were the signs-of a battle, then it meant that robots were in conflict with other beings, probably organic

intelligences.

Ron found that not to be so strange. Ever since galactic civilisation had brought robots into use there had been robot insurrections. There was always somebody who figured he could use robots for his own purposes. All he had to do was change the program of one machine creature so that it would change others of its kind in the same manner. At first the people who were used to having their robots obey their commands would be surprised when this condition changed. Usually their first thought would be to look for some defect but while they were looking for it the revolt would be spreading. Robot wars were the most dangerous type of conflict which the races of the galaxy had ever experienced.

And out there in the gulf between the galaxies, this is what seemed to be happening. Ron felt sorry for the people who were involved in the terrible battle yet he found it strangely reassuring that they were evidently faced with the same problem that others who were less alien had faced before them.

It had been more than 11 hours now since the BOB 21 had reported the appearance of the alien ship. Nike Quinto as well as Lofty Patterson had managed to sleep a few hours. In the imminence of events, Ron and Larry had not been able to rest. They had kept a vigil in the small conference room next to the small control Central while following the reports from the observation station.

By his nature Meech Hannigan didn't know such a thing as fatigue. He could only know weariness when one of his plastic-metal inner organs ceased functioning, which under normal demands might be in 5000 years. Aside from that he was the most perfect robot that anyone could wish for. That is, if you overlooked his slight speech impediment which made it difficult for him to pronounce his actual first name, which was Mitchell.

At 10:00, Nike Quinto and Lofty Patterson appeared on the scene again. Nike had tried to send Ron and Larry to their bunks but they had explained that all that would do for them was to give them nightmares. Quinto had ordered breakfast for five men and even Meech obediently consumed his portion. He had this special ability because only the smallest possible number of people were supposed to know he was actually a robot. However trustworthy the crew of the *Joann* might be, they were not included in that number.

Shortly before 18:00 in the "afternoon"—an almost meaningless term way out here in this timeless abyss, 5000 light years beyond the rim of the Milky Way—Nike Quinto hit upon the idea that the aliens might be robots. And 15 minutes after he had mentioned it to Ron the BOB 21 reported that shortly after it had fired a warning shot at the alien ship the latter's propulsion system had failed, and now a collision was imminent.

It took Ron Landry 5 seconds to comprehend exactly what had happened. He sprang to his feet with a dozen thoughts in his head all at once. But the primary thought was that they must get to the station immediately. He didn't concern himself about any order from Nike Quinto but Quinto concerned himself about *him* ... As the hatch door slid to one side, Ron heard the other's sharp tone of voice.

"Where are you going, Major?"

Ron turned swiftly to face him. "To the BOB 21!" he retorted tensely. "We can't leave them on their own—they have no manoeuvrability! We have to help them!"

Quinto signalled him to come back. "You will remain here, Major!" he said, and his voice rose in pitch. "That is an order!"

At that moment Ron almost hated the colonel. How could he forbid him to go to the aid of those 25 men out there 200 light years away who were facing death and unable to do anything about it? But he obeyed. His military training was deeply enough ingrained in him so that he knew disobeying a command was sheerly absurd. Quinto wasn't demanding anything immoral of him. He had only told him to stay put. He glanced at the chronometer.

Quinto noticed it and pointed to the time. "They only have about 10 SECONDS, Landry. How were you planning to get there before then?"

10 seconds, thought Ron as he clamped his jaws together. Nine... eight... seven...

*

It is remarkable how swiftly the subconscious mind can take over mental control in a moment of crisis. Almost instantly, Eric Furchtbar decided that he couldn't avert disaster by blasting the alien out of the ether. New trajectory calculations would take at least 20 to 30 seconds and even a direct hit would only convert the menace into a mass of wreckage which would still collide with the station. And at an impact velocity of 1500 km per second nobody would know the difference.

His fingers raced instinctively over the control keys—his only last hope. The station's navigation engines were small and almost negligible in such a situation but they were the only means of locomotion. Eric had no idea of the alien ship's true course. On the tracking screen he saw it coming at him from the right, so he fed in a nav correction that would shift the station to the left. In desperation he depressed buttons, flipped switches and turned adjustment knobs while glancing at the screen every second.

But the threatening bogie blip kept creeping toward the centre of the scanner. He hadn't moved a millimetre out of its way. sweat dripped from his forehead. There was nothing more he could do now. The engines were putting out every ounce of thrust that was in them. The only thing left was hope.

Eric clenched his fists so tightly that his knuckles were white. He stared at the screen as if to avert the danger by an act of will. If wishing could do it there could be nothing more to fear—because never in his life had he wished as hard as he did now in this moment of ultimate crisis.

Remotely the thought had occurred to him he might be able to send his men through hyperspace to the *Joann* by means of the transmitter that could connect the two vessels in an emergency but he rejected the idea as quickly as it came. Both transmitter stations were not operating at the moment and just warming up the power piles would take three times longer than the time they had left.

They were lost if the nav engines couldn't cut it. 10 seconds left!

Ed Hynes' wild shout reverberated in the large control room. "The viewscreen! There it is!"

Startled, Eric turned swiftly toward the receiver screen of the optical system. Out of the darkness emerged a dim point of light. It grew swiftly and more discernible. The alien ship!

For the first time they could see it directly before them. And for the *last* time!

Eric stared, spellbound, as the swift object changed from a little disc to a large ball, until in the final seconds it more than filled the screen. God!—he thought. It's coming head on!

Then came the impact.

In a blast of thunder the world seemed to dissolve. The last thing Eric was aware of was that his seat wasn't there anymore. Then something struck his skull like a piledriver and he lost consciousness.

*

Ron Landry pressed his hands to his face just before the second-counter on the chronometer reached the 10th second. He tried to think of the men on the BOB 21 but in spite of himself he envisioned the dimly lighted disc-shape of the observation station, the plunging sphere of the alien ship—had he mentally witnessed the moment when they crashed together and were obliterated in a blinding explosion.

Silence reigned in the small conference room. No one seemed to be breathing. Almost unconsciously, Ron counted the seconds after the catastrophe. One... two... three... four...

Somewhere to his left he heard a sudden scraping noise as a chair was shoved back. Ron knew it as Quinto. At first he heard him gasp aloud; then he heard him shout.

"They survived it! The instruments are still responding!"

That brought Ron back to himself. His widened eyes stared at the visiscreen of the hyper-telecom which had been maintaining contact between the *Joann* and the BOB 21. Although there was no picture just now, the raster showed the repeated sawtooth flash of the interval signal. There would be no such signal if the transmitter at the other end had ceased to exist.

That was it! At least the station's hyper-telecom was working, and since it was a complex and sensitive piece of equipment there must be other things that had also survived the collision with the alien ship.

Nike Quinto took the telecom mike and shouted into it. "BOB 21, come in! BOB 21, please answer! This is the *Joann* calling!"

He didn't take his eyes from the telecom screen. The sawtooth pattern was still there. At the other end there was no one to answer the call. Although the hyperbeam connection existed the BOB 21's receiver wasn't on.

"Probably they have a big mess on their hands just now." Quinto suggested. "The regular posts may not be manned."

Ron doubted it, and he knew that Nike himself didn't believe it. They both knew Eric Furchtbar. On board any vessel commanded by Eric the important stations would be manned—no matter how great the commotion.

Quinto continued his calls but after another 15 minutes without an answer he knew there could only be one other explanation. The hyper-telecom of the BOB 21 was still operatable but there didn't seem to be an able-bodied man left in the crew.

*

It must have been the sense of responsibility anchored in his blood and bones that caused Eric Furchtbar to be the first one to open his eyes.

At first he didn't know where he was. Before his eyes was the blurred image of a room that seemed

terribly strange. He felt sick. He moved cautiously and strained to clear his vision. In some surprise he finally recognised the main control room of the BOB 21, and in that moment he remembered what had happened.

The alien ship! He had seen it rushing directly at the station. Where was it?

He pulled himself together with an effort. Fortunately, when he got to his feet it was next to a high console cabinet, because suddenly he needed a support. He had never felt so awful in his life. Maybe a brain concussion, he thought dully. It didn't matter to him. He'd stay in bed a few days when there was time for it. First he had to find out the status of his station.

He took in his surroundings again. On the other side of the room, two dark forms were stretched out flat on the desk. Lt. Hynes and the duty corporal. Eric dragged his feet over to them. For the moment he couldn't do anything but make sure they were still breathing. That was the most important. Partially reassured, he turned and went back to his chair.

The hyper-tracking system was still working. With benumbed hands he turned several dials to sharpen the focus, and it was more luck than skill that helped him. Within a minute he had the alien ship on the screen again. It was receding from the BOB 21 but at the moment Eric felt too miserable to even be elated. However, he tried to judge the stranger's present course by its movement on the screen. After some time he had an idea of it although it wasn't too accurate. It was quite evident that the unknown ship had picked up a sharply angular course after passing the position of the BOB 21.

In Eric's brain thoughts and pain danced in confusion but he gradually began to comprehend. The nav engines of the station hadn't moved it completely out of the path of the alien but they had prevented a head-on collision. The other ship had sideswiped their defence screen and the alien vessel and the station had both been more or less "bounced" away from each other. The screen had transferred the mechanical shock into the interior of the station, which had caused the shakeup. Eric breathed a sigh of relief. It could all have been much worse. He glanced at the panel clock. It was 14:35 ship time. He had been lying unconscious a good hour. He thought of the *Joann*. Quinto must have been going out of his mind wondering what their status was and even if they were alive.

He turned to the intercom and called through to each station on board, one after the other. Although the equipment was in order there was no reply from anybody. This filled him with new concern. The glancing collision had been violent enough to kill someone if they had been caught off balance somewhere at the precise moment of impact. He would have to find out but above all he had to get Doc Johannesson back on his feet so that he could look after the wounded. Because more or less everyone on board would have been wounded to some degree.

He made his way along the wall to the hatch door. He kept thinking of Johannesson and the need for getting him going. What came after that he didn't care. He didn't even feel responsible just now for advising the *Joann*. The danger was past. He was sure that he himself had actually averted a total disaster. Quinto would have to take that into consideration.

When the bulkhead door slid to one side he stepped out into the corridor. The interior of the station was alarmingly quiet. Nevertheless he sensed that somewhere close by someone was moving.

*

In the Com Room, Art Cavanaugh was just opening his eyes when Eric Furchtbar found him. Here the impact of the glancing collision had been stronger than in the main control room. Shattered glassite was

lying around on the floor and some of the meters had been knocked about. But in a glance Eric could tell that the most important instruments and equipment were still in operating condition.

Ken Lodge and Warren Lee were lying unconscious in front of the space telecom console. An open wound on Ken's forehead had bled profusely.

Warren didn't seem to have any visible injuries. He was breathing and that was the main thing.

Art Cavanaugh was lying just about in the middle of the room. Eric figured he must have been thrown against the wall, knocked unconscious, and then fallen forward due to the impact. When Art came to, he oriented himself quite rapidly. He recognized Eric and raised his head but the sudden movement appeared to unsteady him. For a few seconds he closed his eyes and grimaced in pain.

"Take it easy, lad," Eric admonished. "Give yourself time. We're not under pressure anymore.

Art got to his knees. "Thank you, sir—I'll be able to make it." He finally stood up and although he swayed slightly he could maintain his balance without assistance.

"How do you feel?" asked Eric.

Art managed a weak smile. "Lousy, sir, to be honest with you. What happened?"

Eric explained briefly. He only said that the nav engines had saved the day. He didn't mention who had managed to bring the jets to full power in 2 minutes, in addition to choosing the right direction.

"Right now there are two things we have to take care of," he decided. "First we have to find the doctor so he can look after the men, and secondly we have to advise the *Joann*. You get in touch with the *Joann* and I'll go look for Johannesson."

"Will do, sir," said Art, and he turned to the hyper-telecom.

Eric went toward the hatch door but before he was close enough for it to open automatically for him he heard Art call after him.

"What did you say, sir?"

Eric turned in some surprise. "I said—we have two things to take care of now. First, to go and find Johannesson—second, to get in touch with—"

"Pardon me, sir," Art interrupted him against all regulations. "I didn't mean that. Didn't you just say something else?"

Eric shook his head in puzzlement. "No... not a word."

Art seemed to be at a loss to explain it. "I—I'm sorry, sir." He grinned in embarrassment and motioned toward his head. "Maybe I haven't got all my marbles in order."

Eric smiled back. "That's alright, sergeant. We're all pretty shaken up." He finally went through the hatchway.

When he stepped into the corridor he could have sworn that somebody touched his shoulder. He

stopped and looked around him. There was nobody there. The passage was empty. He shook his head and continued onward, remembering what Cavanaugh had just said. In some wonderment he realized that his own "marbles" might not be in any better order than the sergeant's.

Unfortunately the collision had been especially rough on Dr. Johannesson. Since men on board the BOB stations were trained to do double duty, Johannesson's other assignment was to perform gunnery service. When Eric found him in gun position 1 his face was so scratched and bloody that Eric hardly recognized him except for his service insignia.

He tried to bring him to but before he succeeded half of the other men had recovered on their own. Johannesson took a long while to even regain comprehension of what had actually happened. When he finally collected himself he voluntarily went to work although his own pains must have been worse than those of most of the other men. The impact jolt had thrown him against the ray cannon's breech-lock cap and the radiation meter sticking out of it had left its imprint in his face.

When Johannesson looked at himself in a mirror he calmly remarked: "That'll take plastic surgery later. There'll be some hefty scars from that one!" Then he reached for his instrument case and went to work again.

He was able to report that no one on board had suffered severe injuries, other than a compound leg fracture—but that was the worst case discovered. The crewmen could consider themselves lucky that they had a commander who had acted so quickly and accurately in their highest moment of crisis.

Meanwhile the *Joann* had been contacted. Art Cavanaugh reported that he had even heard Nike Quinto sigh with relief. Eric couldn't believe that Quinto was capable of such a human reaction but Ken Lodge and Warren Lee had since gotten back on their feet and they were witnesses to it.

"That can only mean two things," said Eric, still unmoved. "Either we've been reading him wrong all this time or the strain of suspense made him lose his mind."

Eric himself didn't feel as miserable now as he had felt during the first few minutes. When he returned to the main control room he came across Johannesson again, who was putting Lt. Hynes' arm in splints. Ed Hynes was sitting up in a chair and when he saw Eric he smiled in greeting.

"I guess at that last moment I lost control of my nerves," he said apologetically. "I hope you'll overlook it, sir."

Eric nodded goodnaturedly. "It's forgotten already, Ed. We were all a little off our balance. You feel any pain?"

Hynes laughed cheerfully. "Nary a trace. Doc stuck hall a dozen hypos into me and one of them must have been 'spiked' because just now I feel like I'm on my 5th snifter."

Eric chuckled and went to his chair. As he did so, Hynes watched him, thinking of his German name, "Furchtbar," which meant terrible or formidable. He felt that the old boy wasn't all that formidable, after all.

Eric adjusted the hyper-scanner focus again. At the moment he was left to himself. On doctor's orders most of the men were in the process of resting up and tending to their wounds. The main observation posts were only covered by limited emergency crews. Eric had hesitated to give his permission for this but since at present there didn't seem to be the slightest hint of danger he had finally agreed. He fooled

with the adjustment knobs long enough to finally pick up the waning blip of the alien ship again.

At first he was startled when he saw the green light point wavering and jerking about on the screen but in a sense it came to him as a relief to realise now that the alien ship out there was definitely no longer a menace. It had evidently gotten completely out of control only the end velocity it had had when he gave it a warning shot was still giving it a favourable vector of motion—namely, away from the BOB 21. But the semi-collision had obviously slowed it down some or it would have been much farther away by now.

Eric experienced something akin to guilt for a few moments. He recalled that the stranger's propulsion system had failed when gun position 1 had fired its warning salvo. The powerful thermo cannons generated wide-ranging interference fields which may have been too much for the alien's weakened control navionics. The vessel lost its retropulsion capability then. And if anybody had been alive on board before the collision, they certainly weren't alive now. Not even an alien life form would be able to survive the terrible inertial punishment from all that jumping around out of control—what with its antigrav system having apparently gone wild.

But he soon recovered from this direction of self-recrimination. If the same thing happened all over again he probably would react in the same manner. Anybody coming straight at him like that without answering any calls deserved a warning shot. Eric would have been irresponsible if he had not fired under the circumstances. It was vital to let the stranger know that the station was ready to defend itself.

Eric watched the erratic blip of the ship reflectively. Just for a fraction of a second before the crash he had seen the actual vessel on the optical screen. Like most interstellar ships used in the galaxy, it was spherical in shape—but there were certain features about it that were alien to any of the known configurations. Where he was concerned, that said a lot. Eric Furchtbar was an expert in extra-terrestrial ship types. If he couldn't recognise a vessel and classify it, it was fairly certain that it was not a known type. So this had to be an alien—out of an unknown part of the galaxy, or from even another island universe.

What must the beings have looked like on board that ship? Where had they come from? And *why* had they come? Moreover, *whom* had they been slugging it out with out there?

Eric sat there lost in thought. The knobs and levers on the control panel before him were a momentary other reality as he seemed to stare through them. But he tensed suddenly when he became aware that something had just moved there. Alarmed, he focussed his attention on the controls. He made a visual check of them, one after another, and found them to be at their proper settings. He calmed down quickly again. He had to remember that he had probably suffered a concussion. Heaven only knew what tricks of impression might be the result of such a jolt to the brain.

He was about to lean back and have his first cigarette since the emergency but then he was aware of the movement again. This time he happened to be looking in the right spot. It was the main dial for power to the hyper-telecom!

Eric jumped up. He reached out wildly with his hand and grasped the knob, preparing to turn it back to zero. But he felt resistance. Angrily, he used both hands on the dial but even though his knuckles whitened under the strain the

thing didn't move.

He climbed halfway onto the control panel to get into a better position. He made a third attempt and succeeded in bringing the dial a few degrees back toward its zero setting. But before he could be

completely successful something very strange happened.

Suddenly a bloody welt appeared on the backs of his hands as if someone had sliced him with a sharp knife. It all happened so fast that he failed to note whether the scratch had come from right or left. But he felt the throbbing, burning pain and released the knob with an angry cry.

*

Eric Furchtbar was not one to burden himself with premature judgments. Yet he suddenly recalled that when he went out of the Com Room an hour before he had felt something touch his shoulder. And also how Art Cavanaugh had thought that he had said something to him.

Something was there.

It was a something that made others believe they were hearing voices—something that touched strangers, shoulders and sliced people's hands with sharp knives and turned power dials on telecom transmitter consoles.

Eric turned around. Doc Johannesson was still busy with Ed Hynes. The duty corporal was off to one side, pale and weak, lying in a more comfortable form chair. No help to be expected from any of these. However—

A wild idea came to him. If somebody was trying to get power to the space telecom it could only mean that they wanted to operate the transmitter. The major part of the telecom circuitry was located below in the Com Room.

With a few deft movements over the panel, Eric made an intercom connection. He didn't have much hope that anyone would answer because the receivers had switched automatically to the main control room and the three communications men were attending to their injuries. Nevertheless the small visiscreen lit up to reveal the drawn face of Art Cavanaugh.

Eric sighed with relief. "Check over your telecom, Sergeant! on the double!"

Art's eyes narrowed slightly with sudden purpose as he jumped up at once. For half a minute, all Eric saw on the screen was the chair where Cavanaugh had been sitting. Then he was back.

"Everything ship-shape, sir," he reported. "Power off—all instruments intact."

"Poweroff...?"

Incredulously, Eric glanced at the power dial on his own panel. He had seen it turned on—and he had two painful gashes on the backs of his hands to prove that he had sought to turn it off against an unseen resistance. But now Cavanaugh was saying—

Then it came to him that his own power dial was back at zero. He drew a deep breath and held it. Had he really lost his mind? But when he looked at the backs of his hands he let out the air from his lungs again. The welts were still there and blood still oozed from them—not to mention the fact that they were still paining him.

No, he was not crazy. Somebody had sliced him. The same one who had first turned on the power and then while he was talking to Cavanaugh, had turned the dial back to zero again:

He barked another order: "check out the activity of the transmitter during the last 10 minutes, sergeant!"

Art Cavanaugh had served too long in the spacefleet to contradict any order from a superior officer. He confirmed the instruction and disappeared from in from the pickup's range of vision. Eric knew he'd need at least 10 minutes to study the transmitter's automatic recordings and find out what had happened. In the meantime, Eric had another idea. He switched the open line to Cavanaugh into the automatic call circuit and then contacted the instrument section.

In his excitement he momentarily forgot that the emergency schedule did not provide for any coverage of this section. This he finally remembered when there was no answer. He was about to shut off the connection impatiently when the screen lit up at the last moment and the pain-wracked face of one of the duty techs stared at him.

Eric was the "old Man" again. Faced with the possible presence of danger in the BOB 21 again, he had no time for considering the other man's pained condition. His voice was as hard as everyone one was accustomed to hearing it before the collision episode. "Check out the oxygen consumption on board during the past two hours!"

"Yes, sir," answered the technician. He turned his head to read some indicators. "At the moment the atmospheric composition on board—" He broke off in the middle of the sentence.

"Well, what is it?" asked Eric impatiently. "You were going to say normal, weren't you?"

"I was *going* to, yes, sir..." The man stared at him helplessly.

"But...?"

"we've lost some oxygen, sir—maybe a leak!"

"Don't jump to conclusions!" interrupted Eric. "Check the nitrogen content."

"Normal, sir," the tech man answered unhesitatingly.

Eric's next question was slightly sarcastic. "So what kind of a leak would that be—that leaks only oxygen out and not the nitrogen?"

The man was nonplussed. Eric knew it and gave him a new order.

"Make a carbon-dioxide analysis—and hurry!"

The screen was empty again. The analysis wouldn't take long. All the tech man had to do was press a key and read a certain indicator. The CO₂ content of the station's atmosphere was not constantly indicated. Unlike oxygen and nitrogen, the constant was minimal and not an ordinarily important.

But now... ?

When the technician came back his face was flushed with excitement. Sweat had appeared on his forehead. "Above normal, sir," he cried out. "The build-up rate..."

While the man went on with his technical jargon, Eric's mind raced. His first reaction was one of sudden

calm. His suspicions had confirmed. For one or two seconds it was a feeling of satisfaction but then he realised that it was much more reasonable for him to be concerned with this new danger than to triumph over a mere confirmation of his theory.

"I told you—didn't jump to any hasty conclusions," he warned the technician calmly. "Does the CO₂ increase compare with our extra loss of oxygen?"

The tech operator only needed a moment to think this over. "Yes, sir—almost to 1/10th of a percent."

"Thank you. That is all for the moment."

He cut off but in the next breath it occurred to him that perhaps a precise analysis of all data might be strategic, after all. Exactly how much oxygen had been consumed? If he assumed an approximate time period of 2 hours and considered the air consumption per man, then he could figure out how many...

He rejected the idea. Two hours was guesswork, and the oxygen-consumption rate per average man would be still more arbitrary. There wasn't a reliable point of reference.

He wondered if the life-support system had been damaged. He was thoroughly familiar with the recycling setup. It was based on the fact that oxygen was consumed in human lungs and carbon dioxide was exhaled. Over a period of time, the oxygen was consumed in non-regenerating atmosphere; without replacement there could be nothing but carbon dioxide. The BOB 21's recycling system—through a number of processing phases—separated the carbon dioxide and broke it into pure oxygen and graphite. The resulting oxygen was returned to the station's atmosphere and the graphite was stored so that every 3 months it could be transferred to the supply ships. It was only unnecessary ballast for a space vessel but on Earth there was a high demand for pure-grade graphite.

Anyway, the recycling system was one of the least sensitive installations on board. If the sensitive circuits of the hyper-telecom had withstood the shock of the sideswipe then it was a guaranteed certainty that nothing had happened to the recycler setup. In which case, of course, there was only one explanation for the remarkable present state of the local atmosphere.

The auto-call again opened a channel on the intercom with the Com Room. Art Cavanaugh was ordinarily a person who had good self-control but just now his expression revealed that something very unusual had happened.

"Sir...!" he said excitedly. "I found that a message has been beamed out!"

He seemed surprised when Eric only nodded calmly. "The code?" asked the commander curtly.

"Not recognisable, sir." He opened his mouth as if to add something but then remained silent.

Eric noted it. "Go ahead and say what's on your mind," he urged.

"It's only a suspicion," Art blurted out, "and it would have to be really checked out first. But the modulation seems to be the same as we registered for that other illegible signal that we were getting for hours before."

Eric also nodded calmly to that. "How long is the whole message?"

"12 to 13 seconds, sir."

"Did you see any repeat patterns in it?"

"No, sir."

"Did you notice anything else unusual?"

Art hesitated a moment. "No, sir..." This time he was hesitant again. "I—I've been getting the feeling, more and more often now, that somebody is close to me. Each time it happens I look around but everything looks normal. You remember about an hour ago I thought you had spoken to me when you didn't. Must be some kind of lingering hallucination."

Eric shook his head. "You need have no fear on that score, Art. It's no hallucination."

Then he cut off the intercom mike. He had a strange urge to swing around in his chair and scan the long control room behind him. This he did suddenly, taking in the walls and the central area critically. He saw Doc Johannesson putting the final bandage on Ed Hynes. There was nothing else going on.

Nonetheless, Eric knew very well that they were there!

He turned back to the console again and made an input to the positronics, programming the computer to encode an emergency dispatch to the *Joann*. Since the message only contained a few words, it only took a hundredth of a second for the equipment to handle the assignment. However, the input and output phases took longer. Eric had to wait 3 seconds for the punched strip to come out. Then he shoved it into the transmitter.

Moments later a very unusual message left the hyperantenna of the observation station. Not without a grim touch of amusement, Eric tried to imagine Nike Quinto's expression when he read the dispatch:

"Invisible aliens on board the BOB 21!"

4/ THE PHANTOMS STRIKE

As it turned out, Nike Quinto had been counting on a few more surprises than most of the other men. When he received Eric Furchtbar's short message he remained completely calm. Ron Landry stood next to him and tried to see over his shoulder. Nike turned and gave it to him reproachfully.

"No need to kibitz, Major, when you can read it for yourself."

Ron took the plastic strip and read it. He swallowed once, read it again, and then found his voice. "They've really been shaken up over there," he said. "Looks to me like they're having hallucinations."

Quinto glared at him angrily. "Any, more amateur remarks like that and my blood pressure will hit the top!" he upbraided him. But his voice didn't have its usual force.

Ron was amazed to see that Quinto was taking the message seriously.

"Haven't you ever seen an invisible person before?" continued Nike—then corrected himself. "I mean, one who can make himself invisible? All he'd need for that would be an Arkonide transport suit."

"I wasn't referring to that, sir," argued Ron. "The fact that the intruders are invisible doesn't bother me at

all. It's how they got on board that bugs me—when the BOB 21 has a strong defence screen."

Quinto dismissed the objection with a wave of his hand. "At the time when the two vessels grazed each other there must have been a second or so when the screen was weakened—its energies taken up by having to absorb the impact. We only have to imagine that the aliens foresaw that moment. They made themselves ready for the transfer, and at the right instant they simply jumped."

Ron had an impression that Quinto was overrating the strangers' intelligence but he kept his thoughts to himself. As silently as the others he sat there and waited for further news from the BOB 21.

About an hour went by without untoward event. At brief intervals Furchtbar reported his various efforts to make contact with the unseen intruders. Either they weren't able to understand his attempts to approach them or they were avoiding any contact. Eric was apparently getting desperate. To all appearances the aliens were keeping quiet but they were getting an unbearable psychological pressure on board the station. Nike Quinto soon found himself in the role of "chaplain" where he had to reassure and console the other commanders. Surprisingly, he was fairly good at it.

At any rate, he didn't have to exert himself for very long.

Between 17:00 and 18:00 hours the aliens began to stir. Then suddenly things began to happen so fast that the men on board the *Joann* had trouble making rhyme or reason out of the rapid succession of incoming reports.

*

Art Cavanaugh had a lively imagination yet kept an open mind. He took a great interest in the new situation on board the BOB 21 but without the feeling of panic that seemed to be gripping the majority of the crew members as the hours passed.

Before he was promoted to sergeant, Art had taken many courses and attended many special seminars, all of which was required of any sergeant in the Terran spacefleet. Nobody could rise to one of the highest non-com levels without having a broad education in the various branches of modern science and technology. So Art Cavanaugh was not in danger of being led into wild conjectures concerning the strange invisible visitors. He knew how to differentiate between fantasy and plausibility. He did not believe for one moment that here at last was a manifestation of all the old ghosts of myth and legend which had been reported on Earth for thousands of years—an attitude which had since taken hold of the crew.

With Art it was different. He decided there were just two possibilities. The aliens might have a method of adjusting the index of refraction of their bodily substance to the surrounding air in the ship. This was the more classic method. Or they were producing around them one of those R-9 fields which were capable of bending light rays. R-9 designated the distance from the skin (if they had any skin) in which the field would remain effective. It surrounded the object to be made invisible in a thickness of only about 100000th cm. this was necessary because the light rays going around an obstacle had to travel farther than a straight-line ray. If the field were too "fat" around the invisible person, then even the most unbiased observer would notice certain curious distortions of the background behind the interloper.

Of course even a good R-9 field produced some distortions but one had to realise that the invisible ones would be careful to take this into consideration. Art kept a sharp lookout but no matter how much he strained his eyes he couldn't detect the slightest distortion effect anywhere.

He admitted that the aliens could also have an entirely new system of some kind. In which case he was sitting here racking his brains for nothing. Maybe it would be better to think out a way of making contact with them. He wondered what would happen, for example, if he were to reproduce on a piece of paper the scope patterns of one of their transmissions—showing the modulations that none of the Terran techs had been able to decipher. For them the pattern would be familiar and they would be alerted to the fact that somebody was trying to get through to them.

Art was fascinated by this idea. He got busy with the auto-recorder machine and wound back one of the used tapes to where a portion of the hours long transmission was available which they had started to pick up after the first of the bombs had exploded. He coupled this part to the oscilloscope and let it play. Then he procured some writing foil and a ball stencil. When the image formed on the green-glowing screen of the scope, he at first studied it for several minutes. When he had finally memorised the modulation pattern, he began to draw. With slow, careful strokes he sketched in the sinusoidal outlines of the carrier wave and added the dips and peaks of the envelope that carried the information. But he began to have his doubts in the middle of his work. He tried to place himself in the aliens' situation. If someone presented him with a Terran radio message, especially if in code, would he know what it was supposed to communicate? Not for certain, he had to admit.

He stopped his work and pondered over it. There was a dead silence in the Com Room. At least to Art's ears it was silent because the soft humming of the equipment was something he had long ceased to be conscious of. While lost in thought his gaze wandered along the rows of switching panels, indicators and decoder equipment to his right. During this he noted that one of the main control dials was moving.

Startled, he looked at it closely, suddenly keenly alert. The dial was still turning slowly but methodically. It was the power control for the main transmitter and somebody was turning it to maximum.

Art jumped up, realising that the present equipment setup wouldn't take, the full-power load. Just now the main transmitter wasn't connected. They had been using a smaller auxiliary line for communications with the *Joann*. If the invisible idiot really needed so much transmission power to beam out his message, why didn't he put in the main transmitter first?

He made an angry leap and attempted to stop the motion. If one of the phantoms were close by he must have drawn to one side because he didn't feel any contact with anyone. He gripped the dial firmly and tried to turn it back. He was prepared to desist at the first sensation of pain because he knew what Eric had experienced. But the expected resistance wasn't there. He turned the dial back to its previous setting so as not to overload the other equipment. Releasing it he heaved a sigh of relief but continued to observe.

Apparently the unseen presences had given up their try. The dial remained in its place. No one attempted to turn on more power. Art wondered what they had probably had in mind. Also he wondered what had caused them to give up so quickly. He finally relaxed and was about to take his seat again when everything changed. That was the moment when he learned that the phantom invaders were not about to change their plans because of a little resistance.

Before he reached his chair, something struck him on the head. he fell forward but simultaneously fought against unconsciousness with more strength than anyone would have attributed to him. A dark mist formed in front of his eyes. When he heard the hum of the equipment again the sound seemed to come to him through a long, narrow corridor. He was trying to support himself on his arms but they felt like clay. He could do nothing to prevent them from collapsing under him. He finally lay there on his stomach and it didn't seem likely that he would ever stand on his feet again.

Breathing deeply, he subdued his vexation and anger as he lay there on the deck and forced himself to relax. Whatever had hit him had paralysed part of his nervous system, and as long as it wasn't functioning there was nothing he could do. He needed a few moments of rest.

He tried to look around but from his angle of vision he could only see a section of floor. There was really nothing to be seen but the floor since there was no visible trace of the invisible aliens. After some time had passed, Art tried again to support himself on his arms. He knew the strangers would see him move if they were still present but he didn't care. He had to get on his feet. They were about to destroy the transmitter equipment. He had to inform Eric Furchtbar. After that, they could do what they wanted with him.

His efforts succeeded. He tested out his muscles for a few seconds and knew that he was functional again. Then he suddenly lunged upwards and felt a surge of triumph when he stood solidly on his feet. They hadn't hit him hard enough—he was still in one piece! He sensed a trace of weakness but knew that would go away if they left him alone for a few minutes.

He could still hear the hum of the equipment but it didn't sound the way he was used to hearing it. When he turned around he suddenly knew what was wrong. All the equipment was straining under an overload of power. Sharp, blinding lines danced in confusion on the oscilloscope screen. The illuminated indicators on the meters were trembling at their maximum positions and the distribution box Art was standing in front of was radiating dangerous amounts of heat.

He glanced at the power dial and saw that somebody had turned it to its full position while he'd been lying on the deck. All of the output of the generators for the Com Room was being fed into the equipment. It was actually enough power to operate the entire 25 transceiver stations on board the BOB 21 but just now only three of them were turned on. Art could mentally visualise the deck plates bending and melting. He could imagine the meters exploding and the circuits blasting to pieces. He realised that in a few seconds the BOB 21 would cut be off from all contact with the outside if he didn't take action.

He ventured a second time to reach his seat. He only had to turn on the intercom and inform Eric Furchtbar. Eric would see to it that the invaders were held in check. On his second step, Art halted on his own volition. The intercom mike on the console was showing a wisp of blue smoke. The power overload had burned it out.

The only way left was through the door. Art plunged toward the door, hoping to yell out to the first man he saw what was going on in the Com Room. Whoever might hear him would have to get to Eric and tell him. He himself would have to stay at his post to keep an eye on the invisibles.

He didn't quite reach the bulkhead hatch. Within 2 meters of it he suddenly had the feeling that somebody was coming at him. He weaved to one side and the blow grazed his shoulders this time driven by much more force than the first one. He only staggered, managing to keep on his feet this time. But he knew that he had to face this menace alone now. They were blocking his way out and the intercom wasn't working. The fate of the station lay in his own hands.

He took a few seconds to think. Why were they doing this? Why were they overloading all the equipment with full power? Did they simply want to destroy all the instruments? They could do it easier by just smashing the main control panel. If cut off from the outside, the BOB 21 would need half a year to get repaired. So that couldn't be it. What the devil were they trying to do?

He didn't find out. He only knew they were in the process of demolishing his equipment—all his shining equipment on which he had lavished more care than his own person during all these months. They just

came on board uninvited and without asking. They kept themselves from being seen or identified and acted as if the station were theirs. And now they were starting to destroy Art's most precious possession—his com equipment.

Art's anger got the better of him. He threw himself forward toward the power control. He knew this try was going to cost him trouble but he gripped the dial and with a hefty twist brought it around to zero. The loud humming died down swiftly. The lighted indicator needles fell back, and even the intercom mike stopped giving out smoke.

Art looked around him in triumph. "Alright!" he shouted. "Where are you now?"

Something was coming toward him. He could sense it. He couldn't see it but he had a clear impression of approaching menace. He jumped to one side and something struck full force against the top of the distribution box which he had been standing in front of. Art laughed scornfully. Apparently the invisibles were slow to react. He took a step back and again had the feeling that he had only missed a hefty blow by a few millimetres.

He wondered about that. Didn't they have any weapons other than knives and fists? If that were so then his chances weren't quite so bad. He had his instinct which seemed to sharpen every time he was attacked. How many invisibles were in this room? Art was certain one of them was standing by the door to prevent him from leaving. Another one must have been occupied with the power control. That made two. Were there any more of them?

For a second time he approached the door. He moved slower than before so that his, instinct would have time to warn him. When he was 2 meters away from the exit he sensed that somebody was standing close in front of him threateningly. He moved to one side and just then heard the loud humming of the equipment again.

That was all he had wanted to find out. One of them stood at the door while the other one worked the power dial when his way was clear to do so.

Art drew back but thought he could sense that the alien by the door didn't follow him. Now he felt more sure of himself. Not too hurriedly, so that he would arouse no suspicion, he moved toward the small metal cabinet next to his control console. No one stopped him from opening its door. His hand darted swiftly inside and his fingers closed around a cool piece of plastic metal. He suddenly jerked the heavy thermo beamer out and turned, ready to fire.

The cold metal against him and the weight of the raygun gave him a feeling of having the upper hand. He didn't know if these phantoms would be sensitive to the concentrated energy of a thermo shot. The field around them might protect them from any kind of radiation but the beam of this kind of weapon also packed a wallop in terms of the transmitted mechanical energy. It was like a lightning bolt in a storm. If it didn't burn the thing it hit it would at least knock a hole in it.

Art knew they would observe him but perhaps they didn't know what he was holding in the crook of his arm. He approached the power control for the third time, walking carefully one step at a time while watching for the right moment. He had to know exactly where the alien was standing. With his finger on the trigger he sort of listened with an instinctive ear in order not to miss the slightest warning. Step by step he came closer to the distributor box. It almost seemed as if they were not going to hinder him this time. Clutching the weapon tightly in his right hand, he reached out with his left hand toward the control dial.

Then he sensed it!

The alien came at him from the left and behind him at an angle. Art swung the heavy barrel of the beamer around and pressed the trigger automatically.

A brilliant sharp beam of energy darted from the muzzle of the weapon. He saw it split close in front of him and bend in two streams to the right and left as though it were going around an obstacle. So he hadn't been wrong. The field around the aliens also made them insensible to the effects of a thermo gun—except for the physical impact. He could see that the point where the beam parted was receding from him. His instinctive sense of having someone close to him faded as the invisible alien was pushed back farther by the impact of the beam.

Art released his finger from the trigger when the stranger was about 5 meters back from him and then he turned swiftly and with his left hand he reset the power dial. While so doing, he held the weapon ready in his right arm.

Now his way was free because he knew what his weapon was able to do. He didn't take any more time to search for instinctive signals of warning because the approximate location of his second opponent was known to him. He pressed the trigger and fanned the brilliant beam widely next to the exit hatch.

In the blinding flood of energy there was suddenly a blank spot like a hole. The beam was parted again and was going around the obstruction created by the protective field that enclosed the alien. Art tightened the beam and kept the weapon aimed at the hole. Immediately the powerful thrust repelled the unseen enemy. The apparent "hole" moved to the bulkhead wall beyond the hatch door and then swerved to the right into the middle of the Com Room.

Art had to turn to keep his opponent under fire while he backed toward the exit. The beam's impact kept pushing the alien farther from him. The latter could no longer keep him from going out into the passage to yell for help. He heard the hatch behind him start to open. The blinding flood of energy still spewed forth from the barrel of his weapon. It was set on short range so that it would not damage the instrument consoles along the opposite wall. The air began to get heated. Successive waves of heat beat against him and he knew it was time to get out of the place.

The blue-white illumination from the corridor fell into the room as the hatch slid completely open. Art stepped back. He released the trigger of his weapon and prepared to run. He had to get to the main control room and let Eric Furchtbar know what was happening down here.

But suddenly *they* were all around him. Not just two as before but this time at least a dozen of them. They came striking in at him from all sides. He tried to raise his weapon again but hard blows struck against the barrel and Art had to drop it. He figured that if that was gone at least he could use his fists. So he began to swing out. It wasn't any task to guess where his enemies were. They were everywhere around him. Where the devil had they all come from and how had so many of them managed to get on board the BOB 21?

Nevertheless, here they were, and Art soon perceived that he was becoming exhausted. They were pummeling him from every direction. Mean while, he kept on shouting everything he knew about them. Somebody had to be somewhere nearby, one of the crewmen who would hear him and understand. All through it he kept striking blows to his right and left ahead and behind, and above and below. He even kicked out with his legs to defend himself more effectively.

But he was expending his strength. After a while that seemed like hours he was too weak to even clench his fists anymore. He flailed about him with open palms, and finally he couldn't even raise up his arms.

He stood there defenceless and they must have seen their opportunity. A blow landed simultaneously on his chin and his neck. Art fell to the deck, at last depleted of all his frenzied violence and rage.

*

Eric Furchtbar wasn't alerted until somebody reported that he had heard some wild shouting in the main M-Deck corridor. He sent down an orderly to see about it and minutes later he learned that Art Cavanaugh had been found unconscious. His face was swollen as though he'd been heavily beaten and he was bleeding from various wounds.

Eric knew that Art had been on duty alone in the Com Room. He had transferred Ken Lodge and Warren Lee to other posts. As long as the Com Room was manned, the operator there had direct control over the equipment. Eric had no idea of what could have happened to Cavanaugh in the meantime. He threw in a switch that channelled the IFPM portion of the Com Room equipment into the main performance monitor. It was a routine move. He hadn't been hoping merely with that to find out anything about Art.

But he quickly saw what had happened. The only thing left in the Com Room that showed any functional activity was the power distribution box. But it really wasn't distributing anymore. It was just a channel now for one tremendous current, which was going somewhere that his instruments weren't indicating.

Eric sent a detail of 4 men down to the Com Room and also ordered Doc Johannesson to look after Cavanaugh. The 4 men later reported that all equipment was knocked out in the Com Room and that somebody had turned up the main power to maximum. Eric told them to cut off the power, which was done immediately.

He kept watching his own indicators, expecting the straining needles on his meters to drop back to the normal range" but this they failed to do. They remained trembling against their top pins, still registering a tremendous flow of current. For only a few seconds, Eric was at a loss to explain it but then he began to see what was going on. He knew his station well enough to know what one would have to do to put a master circuit out of commission.

They had been able to turn on a full power source from the Com Room, and while they held the dial open they had made sure also that the generators in the power room didn't stop working. The circuits controlled by the dial in the Com Room were no longer intact. It didn't matter now how you set the dial there—somewhere the invisibles were now able to tap off the maximum power they needed.

Needed? For what?

He asked himself the same question that Art Cavanaugh had brought up a while before but he didn't lose any time over it. He ordered the 4-man team to remain in the Com Room and then sent 10 more men to the generator section. He ordered them to arm themselves and to shoot at anything that moved down there. The generator room wasn't manned at present so there was no risk in giving such a command. If there were anyone down there it would be the aliens. And Eric did not intend to have any more patience or consideration for the enemy.

Like the Com Room detail the 10-man group was equipped with wrist telecoms which were constantly in contact with the main control room. In spite of his broken arm, Lt. Hynes had insisted on leading the latter group. And Eric had let him go because he wasn't sure where he was going to get all the men he needed at the moment.

On the way to the power room everything was quiet. If there were any aliens in the station's corridors and companionways, they did nothing to hinder Ed's force of men. Unmolested, the 11-man detail reached the lower deck and the big room where the powerful generators of the BOB 21 were located. This was the main power source of the station.

Ed Hynes' wrist device transmitted a clear picture of the large room. Eric was able to observe it on his smaller telecom screen. He could see that the indicator lamps on the control panels were all green, signifying that everything was in order. Hynes let his pickup device scan the whole installation and everywhere was the same scene of order and calm.

"Alright, Ed," cut in Eric in a gruff tone. "shut down the Com Room's generator."

After Hynes confirmed the order, Eric saw him go with one of his men between the towering machines until he finally stopped in front of one of them. He looked around him cautiously. The man next to him held his weapon ready to fire. Hynes lifted his good arm and reached out his hand to the switch lever.

That's when things went wrong.

Eric couldn't see clearly what happened. He was only aware that Ed Hynes suddenly flew to one side. His companion swung around and fired, even though he couldn't see anything more than Eric, who was now leaning close to his screen. But Eric's eyes widened incredulously as he watched the flaming bright beam of the thermo weapon and saw it make what looked like a hole in nothingness, as if the flow of electromagnetic energy were flowing around an obstruction. He could see that the hole started to recede from the muzzle of the weapon, at first slowly and then faster. He caught on to what was happening as quickly as Cavanaugh had, a half hour before.

The invisibles were there! The thermo gun's energy beam couldn't do anything to them, or at least not in the normal way. But the beam also exerted mechanical force. Meanwhile, Ed Hynes had gotten onto his feet again. He shoved his companion aside and again reached for the power switch. This time he was able to grasp it but he didn't get to pull it down to a shut off position. A number of things happened simultaneously. Hynes was flung to one side and his companion, who was still firing his weapon, suddenly let out a cry and dropped to his knees. The scene was still being transmitted by wrist telecoms among the other men in the background. Now Eric saw them charging forward to help the other two. He caught a glimpse of some of their faces which were grim with anger. They all held their weapons out in front of them and several were already firing. A hissing flood of hot energy shot out ahead of them. They all looked as if they could handle a superior enemy force in a matter of moments.

But after only a few steps they crashed into a wall. Or at least it looked as if there were a wall there. The brilliant ray beams were now being deflected upward and downward, causing part of the awful heat to reflect back against the attackers. They did not realize soon enough that an obstacle had been thrown in front of them and most of them crashed into it, some falling down and others jumping back.

Eric knew that his men needed him down there. He had already unmanned half the station to halt the activities of the aliens.

Without a word, the duty corporal who had been resuscitated by Johannesson took over his position at the main console. Eric opened a small safe near his chair and extracted a lightweight disintegrator.

Leaving the control room, he ran along the main corridor of the central deck to the antigrav shaft. When he leapt into it he gave himself a shove from the shaft wall to accelerate his descent. He hit the bottom

fairly hard but took up the shock by bending his knees. Now in the lower passage he could hear the sounds of the conflict. The power room was to his right. He set his weapon ready for firing and ran to the open hatchway. He wasn't prepared for the heatwave when he entered and for several moments it took his breath away. When he saw his men sprawled on the deck, however, anger drove him forward. The men turned to see their commander charging through the bulkhead opening into the room.

Eric came in firing. He didn't see anything to shoot at but he instinctively pressed the trigger, blindly rushing pell-mell into the fray. The pale green ray of the disintegrator pistol was sweeping back and forth, close over the heads of the men on the floor. He had no idea whether or not he would hit something but he was making every effort to do so.

A series of shrill, deafening cries filled the room, horribly strange and alien. For only a second or so, Eric was confused, aiming his concentrated beam at a specific point. Then he set the beam to fan out wider and let it sweep across everything ahead of him. He was aware of his disadvantage in the face of the enemy, who could see him when he couldn't see them. They would try to prevent him from firing. Apparently the disintegrator was more capable of harming them than the thermo guns.

He was about to turn to the men and yell out an order to arm themselves with disintegrators when the first blow struck him. One of the invisibles had crept up behind him and he was hit on the head. He staggered to one side but immediately caught himself from falling. He swung about swiftly and directed the green energy beam at the spot where the blow had come from.

A wild cry almost deafened him. There was a flash before him of some thing formless and incomprehensible and a wave of suffocating heat swept back upon him. But he felt a surge of triumph. He had managed to knock one of them out of action! The disintegrator had destroyed the alien's protective screen.

He was suddenly sobered by a second attempt on the part of one of the intruders. The blow only grazed him and he swung about and fired where he thought the enemy might be. But the invisible appeared to have been warned because no outcry followed. He had dodged out of the way. A second later Eric was struck from another direction and this time he was really knocked to his knees.

It cleared his mind, however, to one reality. He realized there was no hope of winning against these odds.

He retreated slowly, fanning the width of the room with his beam. Hynes and his helper had joined the others by now as evidently the unseen wall of force was gone. Eric had the gun set for minimum but in spite of this the cabinet panels protecting the generators began to show a rising mist of molecular gas. In a few moments the cover casings would shatter and collapse. There was no purpose to this, Eric decided. He and his men were simply Fleet personnel. Nobody had ever prepared them for a battle with invisible aliens from another galaxy. All they were supposed to do was run a picket post out here and advise the Earth of any unusual occurrences. It wasn't intended that they should be an advance fighting force against aliens.

There were other men for that. The men of Division 3—Nike Quinto's specialists!

Eric turned around. "Get the transmitters ready!" he yelled to the man nearest him.

The man was startled but he turned and ran to the exit hatch.

Eric tried to hold his position. He was sure the man had understood his order. They would fire up the

transmitters. In every room of the station the blue signal lights would announce that the transmitters were on, and everybody would know what the situation had come to. Each man would go as quickly as possible to the transmitter station and get himself to safety, each in his turn.

It was necessary to hold out here to keep the invisibles from being aware of the retreat plan. Eric's right arm had become numb. He transferred the disintegrator to his left hand and continued firing. Automatically, his hand weaved back and forth to keep the beam fanning as wide a cross-section of the room as possible. Behind him the men were slowly backing out. They understood that the station was being abandoned. Under Eric's covering fire they carried the unconscious men with them.

Eric was streaming sweat. The heat in the room was almost unbearable. The air seemed to shimmer before him. The way behind him was clear now as he backed away. There was no sense in trying to hold out here any longer. He tried to see if the aliens would pursue him outside into the corridor. He still had to fight off their blows at the hatch door but as soon as he got into the outer passage they left him alone. He fired a last salvo through the opening and then ran as fast as his legs could carry him.

In the transmitter station everything was in full operation. There were two cage-like compartments which were transporting one man after another from the BOB 21 to the *Joann*. The badly wounded had been the first to be sent through. Meanwhile, Art Cavanaugh had recovered and was there as tirelessly busy as ever, standing in front of the sender cages and checking off each man as he made the jump.

He saluted when he saw Eric. "Just these last two men here, sir" he said briskly. "then there'll be just you and me."

Almost at the same moment the two transmitter cages emitted a loud buzzing sound. Green indicators flashed. The cages were ready for the next transmission. The two men Art had indicated yanked open the doors and sat down on the uncomfortable waiting benches. Art deftly closed the outer wire doors. Then he adjusted the power controls and pressed two release buttons. The buzzing stopped, to be replaced by a new sound that was like the rumbling of an old-fashioned freight truck. Absently, Eric saw a faint mist fill the two cages. When the mist vanished after a second or so, the two men were no longer there.

Art Cavanaugh politely opened the doors again when the green lights flashed on. "If you please, sir!"

Eric refused. "You first, Sergeant!" he said wearily, and he managed a slight smile. "The captain leaves his ship last."

Art obeyed silently. He stepped into one of the compartments and closed the grid door behind him. Eric handled the controls and in a few seconds the next to last man on board the BOB 21 disappeared.

Eric had remained last for a reason. An idea had suddenly occurred to him. He didn't intend to give up the BOB 21 permanently. The return here was only a matter of time, so the transmitters would still be needed. But what if the enemy had gotten in here in the meantime and managed to observe how they worked? Would he use them to his own purposes, which would obviously be opposed to Terran interests, or would he simply destroy the equipment if he didn't know how to use it?

Eric wanted to be sure. He took up a position with his back to the cage that Art Cavanaugh had just vanished from. For the last time he raised his weapon, set the beam for a wide fanout, and pressed the trigger. The pale green rays spewed forth from the stubby barrel. Eric made a slow sweep with his hand - and hit.

There was a brilliant flash next to the closed bulkhead door, followed by a strange cry that reverberated

in the room. Eric charged forward immediately. Somehow it seemed impossible to him that more than one of the aliens had gotten into the transmitter room. The hatch had not opened since he had arrived.

Without using any particular tactic, he threw himself at the spot where the flash had occurred, although the cry had ceased. He collided with something soft and yielding. He couldn't see anything but something was there between him and the wall by the door.

He tried to grasp it and although he touched the unseen creature his fingers slipped off of it. As the phantom thing sought to elude him he aimed his fist at a place which would have been the solar plexus of an ordinary man. There was no resulting sound nor did it seem to have any effect on the alien. He slipped out of Eric's hands and he had to resort to his weapon again.

This time he knew exactly where to aim. With a light pressure of his finger he changed the focus of the beam and fired. This time a fine, brilliant green needle of energy shot from the muzzle.

Eric had expected the effect of the disintegrator to be greater than before but he wasn't prepared for what happened then.

Something exploded in front of him with a thunderous roar. He was struck by a wave of highly compressed air and he was thrown to one side. A brilliant flash blinded him in the midst of an echoing loud cry. He landed against the wall and slid to the floor. The impact knocked the wind out of him so that he lay there with coloured lights dancing in front of his eyes while he tried to regain his strength.

It was then that he saw the alien. The devastating shot had caused his screen to break down, or at least it had weakened it considerably. What Eric could see was anything but clear and definite. Either the stranger's screen was still partially working or Eric's vision hadn't quite recovered yet.

It was hardly more than a shadow. As it moved swiftly across the room, Eric could not make out any definite shape to it. It was just a constant flowing and gliding apparition. In a second or so it reached the wall by the door where Eric had nailed it before. For just an instant he saw the thing silhouetted in a blue-white shimmering light - and then it vanished.

There could be no doubt that it had exited the room in a way that was normal for its kind - through the solid wall.

Breathing heavily, Eric got to his feet. It was clear to him that he had missed his mark. The alien had gotten away. But if he were capable of understanding Terran technology, then he would know what the two grid cabinets were used for. And of course he'd report this to his companions. They would come here and want to use the transmitters for their own purposes.

Eric decided that he could not allow it to happen. He and his men needed the equipment for themselves. So he resolved to remain on board the BOB 21.

5/ THE NIGHTMARE SHIP

Two by two the crewmen of the BOB 21 arrived on board the waiting "factory" cruiser. 24 men were received through the transmitter but for the time being the 25th man was missing.

This caused Nike Quinto to convert his plans into action as soon as possible.

As he figured it, if the question concerning a "true life form" indicated that the signaller was a robot, then

there was only one practical way of confronting such entities: you sent a robot to face them. He felt that the alien questioner had wanted to know if they were also robots or some kind of organic life form.

He had to admit, however, that there were probably 3 dozen other explanations which could be as valid as this one. Yet this was the only direction he could take effectively and in a hurry. So he grasped the one opportunity out of 3 dozen rather than stand idle and allow them all to be lost.

On board the *Joann* there was only one action-ready robot: Meech Hannigan. It was a strange irony of fate, however, that Meech happened to be provided with a human like covering of synthetic flesh and skin tissues which were in a sense alive and therefore made him actually unsuitable for the mission, in spite of his real body of plastic metal and positronic circuits. No one, not even another robot, would have taken Meech for a robot. He was simply too human in his appearance.

Of course this wasn't too much of an obstacle for Nike Quinto, and anyway he didn't intend to send Meech alone on his journey. His companion would be a human, but one who would be disguised for the mission. In fact Quinto also had a disguise prepared for Meech himself. This consisted of a sort of metallic armour which was not unlike a suit of mail such as had been used on Earth in medieval times. The main difference was that various outer details had been designed so that its wearer would look less like a knight but more like a genuine robot.

Meech's companion in arms was to be Ron Landry, and he was provided with the same kind of camouflage. After donning the metal suit he could only be distinguished from Meech by the number on the headplate of his helmet. This was also for realism because naturally robots were numbered. But the history of Meech Hannigan was to be recorded henceforth in the annals of the Terran spacefleet as "the case of the robot disguised as a robot"—even though at the moment, considering the uncertainty of the situation, nobody felt overly disposed to laughter.

Without further delay, Ron and Meech prepared to leave, both of them armed to the teeth. The transmitter receivers on board the BOB 21 were remotely activated. The *Joann*'s instruments indicated that the station's equipment was still in order. So Ron and Meech took the leap. So far, there was still no trace of Eric Furchtbar.

*

The two adventurers arrived without hindrance in the BOB 21's transmitter room, which they found to be empty. However, there was an odour in the air that hinted of a short-circuit somewhere. It was a stench of burned or melted insulation.

Before leaving the *Joann*, Ron had gotten a short report of what happened in the generator room. He knew about Eric Furchtbar's strange success with his hand disintegrator after the much heavier thermo beamers had proven themselves completely ineffective. Thus he followed the same plan of action which Eric had used but minutes before. He placed his back to both transmitter cages so that they wouldn't be damaged, and then swept the room with a fanned out disintegrator beam.

The general effect was zero. Judging by what information he had so far, this meant that no one was in the room except the two of them. Ron was disappointed. He had hoped to either find Eric Furchtbar here, or one of the invisibles. When he had learned that Eric hadn't arrived on board the *Joann* he had assumed that he had remained behind in order to guard the transmitters.

It had seemed to be a logical conclusion. Even if the phantoms had located Eric here and done away with him, then at least one of their kind should have been here.

But now Ron realized that his reasoning had been false. He ordered Meech to open the hatch door. Meech complied and stepped outside halfway into the corridor. Nothing happened. He looked to the right and the left of him and also checked his surroundings with all of his superhuman sensor equipment. In the end he reported to Ron that the "coast" was clear.

After finding the transmitter room empty, the place Ron was most interested in was the main control room of the station. He and Meech were well acquainted with the layout of the BOB 21, so they had no difficulty in finding their way. The only question was whether or not the invisible aliens would let them get that far.

They went along the passage to one of the antigrav shafts. Meech had taken the lead in accordance with the traditional rules of the spacefleet. Whenever robots took part on a mission" they formed the advance guard and fought in the most dangerous positions. Meech was no exception but he wasn't sensitive about it. His positronic program didn't provide for such a reaction.

They drifted cautiously up the shaft to the central deck. Everywhere in the station was the same echoing emptiness, the same deadly and uncanny silence. Like in a tomb, Ron thought uneasily. A tomb that was 5000 light years out from the rim of the Milky Way. The phantoms had to be somewhere!

Perhaps they were below in the power room, he thought fleetingly. They had been trying to do something with the generators. He recalled Art Cavanaugh's hasty report. The Com Room had been supplied with more power than the equipment then in operation had been able to stand. Maybe all the aliens had really wanted to do was provide themselves with more power, without knowing how the equipment functioned. If the attack in the Com Room were correctly analysed, what it amounted to that they had already sent out one quick radio message, possibly a distress call. It could be that they were trying to do it again only this time with maximum transmitting power.

But it could also be that this guess missed the mark by a long shot. Maybe they needed the tremendous output for an entirely different reason. Art Cavanaugh had said that most of the equipment had been intact when he left the Com Room. Otherwise, under the mighty full power load they would have long since gone up in smoke. This indicated that the additional current was being tapped off and conducted to some unknown place.

But where? - and to what purpose?

When Meech reached the central deck level he swung out of the shaft cautiously after concealing himself a few seconds at the opening. Then he stepped out into the corridor, followed by Ron.

A new thought came to Ron. The energy employed by the hyper transmitter had the same structure as...

He was interrupted. Meech flew at him as if shot from a cannon. The two suits of armour collided with a loud crash and Ron was flung to the deck, knocking his chin against a helmet hinge in the process. Meech was lying on top of him, and a second later it seemed that this had saved his life.

He would never have been able to react as quickly as the robot. Peering from under Meech's armour he could see a glaring flood of red light coming from the end of the passage. In frozen surprise he noted that the brilliant light advanced slowly and sluggishly, almost looking like oil, toward the spot where the two Terrans were lying on the floor. The light emanated a glowing heat wave in front of it. Ron could feel it through his metal covering and he noted that the plating on the walls was blistering and starting to bubble.

Without hesitation, Meech retaliated. With a breath-taking swiftness that was not in the least impeded by his heavy mail, he jerked out his disintegrator. It was no hand gun such as Eric had used but rather a heavy automatic weapon that was like a miniature cannon. With a loud hissing and humming the green ray stormed through the passage toward the red fire.

When the two fires met there was an ear-splitting explosion. Ron felt Meech's ponderous weight lifted from him as the robot was blasted halfway into the antigrav shaft. Once relieved of his protective load, Ron was also gripped by the mighty rush of air and was shoved along the passage.

Up ahead there was a wild shriek but nobody could be seen. Ron had also heard that the invisibles let out such yells when they were hit by disintegrator fire. He then perceived the advantage that Meech's lightning reaction had given them.

"Forward, Meech!" he shouted.

With an almost inimitable grace, the heavy robot swung out of the shaft and landed on his feet. This time Ron was not concerned about using him for cover. They charged forward, shoulder to shoulder, and before long they arrived at the small continuation of the corridor that led to the control room door.

No one blocked their way. The red fire had vanished. Only the walls still retained their ugly blisters and the air was still scalding hot. Meech held watch while Ron opened the hatch door. It seemed to have been affected by the heat because it took a few moments before it sluggishly slid to one side with a complaining, screeching sound.

Ron had his weapon in firing position as he started to enter. In fact he had the trigger half depressed, ready to sweep the room with a fanned-out beam, but suddenly he saw the burnished barrel of a weapon sticking out of the hatchway and it was pointed directly at his mid-section.

With a warning shout he ducked to one side. Meech whirled around, raising his heavy automatic.

If it hadn't been for Meech's wonderful ability to react with lightning swiftness, a tragedy might have occurred at that moment. Unimpeded by the weight of the automatic, his steel sheathed hand shot forward. Ron heard a clattering blow and a cry of pain. He couldn't see what was happening beyond the angle of the door. Something metallic rattled to the floor. Then all was still.

Until Meech was heard to say: "Excuse me, sir, but you might have fired before we had a chance to explain the situation." Ron heard somebody sigh. Then Eric Furchtbar's voice answered in slightly hoarse tones: "You're probably right - and I thank you!"

*

Ron straightened up with a sense of relief. Eric came through the hatchway as Ron explained their identities. He saluted the major weakly.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed fervently. "I thought I was going to have to handle everything by myself." They all entered the control room together. The door closed behind them. Eric picked up the disintegrator that Meech had knocked from his hand. With a pained expression he shook his arm and then massaged his wrist.

"What's happening here?" asked Ron. "Any new developments?" Eric made a wry grimace. "I wish I knew, Major. The only thing I know for sure is that the station is swarming with these invisible aliens. It's

a shame the way they're fooling around with our generators. And that I'm sure of, too. I don't know what they're trying to do with them but I think I know why they came on board."

Ron raised a querulous brow. "Oh? Why?"

"Their ship out there—about 3 minutes ago it blew up. They must have had a nuclear fire going on board, or something of the sort. I don't know if that's what caused them to collide with us or if it had something to do with the war they were fighting out in the abyss somewhere—but at any rate they probably saw that their chances were gone where their own ship was concerned. That's why they transferred over to us. And now they're getting ready for something but I haven't any idea of what it could be."

This last remark made Ron wary. "They're preparing for something, you say?"

"Yes, of course," Eric assured him. "Just look at the instruments. The generators are acting up like crazy. They'd never do that by themselves, so somebody has to be fooling around with them continuously - and I'd say in a frenzied hurry. If that doesn't mean they're expecting something to happen pretty quickly, and that they're trying to get ready for it..." He left the rest of the thought unexpressed.

Ron recalled that some idea had come to him suddenly just before the aliens had unleashed their red fire as he was coming out of the antigrav shaft but he couldn't remember now what it was. In its place came another thought.

"They've never shot at you, is that right?" he asked Eric.

"No, and I thought that was very strange. They always used their fists as if they were unarmed. Just once they used something sharp that left a trace like a knife slice. Here, look!" He showed Ron the backs of his hands so that he could see the faint cuts but was almost insulted when the latter failed to be impressed.

Instead, Ron turned abruptly to the robot. "Then why did they shoot at us...?" The question came out like a shot from a gun.

"Because they took us for robots," was Meech's answer, which was returned with equal swiftness.

Eric Furchtbar's eyes widened with sudden comprehension. "So that's it!" he exclaimed. "I've been wondering all this time why you were hauling that strange-looking armour around."

The other two ignored him for the moment. He wanted to ask them what they were thinking of on board the *Joann* in sending men to the station disguised as robots. He didn't know that Meech Hannigan was actually a robot. However, when he saw that Ron was busy with his own thoughts he decided to remain silent.

After pondering over Meech's answer a few seconds, Ron nodded. "Sounds logical," he agreed. "The invisibles don't intend to destroy organic life as long as they can avoid it—but they don't have the same consideration for robots. They shoot at them wherever they encounter them. Meech confirmed this line of reasoning but added: "That's a valid assumption as long as we can presume that the aliens' way of thinking is related to ours."

Ron thought this over. Somehow he had not considered these aliens as having a different form of reasoning than what would be the norm in his own galaxy, but now he remembered the warning.

"They shot at you?" asked Eric in surprise.

"Yes—with a weapon that generated a sort of Greek fire. It creeps slowly along the corridor and is devilishly hot. It is a gleaming red colour. If Meech hadn't reacted quickly it might have been curtains for us."

"That's strange," muttered Eric. "In our case they never—" Ron interrupted him. "It makes it all the more evident, doesn't it, that they were having their big battle out there with robots...?"

"That's one of a 100 different possibilities. Don't forget, sir, that we have practically nothing to go on."

"Yes, and I guess we don't even know if they think at all as we do."

It was frustrating. Normally whenever one took up a thread of reasoning and followed it, in a very short time it fell into place somehow with the basic standards of logic. You could do this with Arkonides and even with the Ferronians and the Swoons and maybe even with the serpents of Passa - but not with entities who came from an alien galaxy.

Ron turned to look at the indicators Eric had mentioned. The meters were in an uproar, most of them showing readings in the upper limits of their scales. In fact some had passed the red line. The aliens were overloading the generators.

"Now you can see why I came back up here," said Eric. "In the transmitter station I could only watch the two cages but up here I can monitor everything."

"Have they been fooling around with the transmitters?" asked Ron.

Eric shook his head negatively. "No—everything is calm in that area."

"Were you attacked on your way back here?"

"There wasn't a trace of them. Except for the Com Room and the power room, the BOB 21 is empty."

This brought Ron back to the thought that had escaped him before. They had turned on all the generators and had channelled the total output into the Com Room. Why? What were they trying to do? Ron recalled that his vague idea had something to do with related forms of energy—and then it suddenly came to him again.

The alternating field of a hyper transmission was related to the stationary field of a defence screen in the same way as an electromagnetic field was to one that consisted of an intersecting electrostatic and magnetic field. And one could rectify hyperfrequencies, of course, just as easily as those in the electromagnetic range.

Was that it? Were the phantoms merely attempting to beef up the defence screen? For a brief moment it seemed to Ron Landry that he had a clearer picture of the situation than he had ever had before.

Then Eric Furchtbar gave a shout. "We're getting another message!"

It startled Ron from his train of thought. Ever since the BOB 21 had received the first alien hypercom signals, the small scope in the main control room had been coupled to the Com Room equipment. Until

now the small circular screen had not shown anything but a confused tracing of interference that was caused by the feverish activity with the generators but now it revealed a clearly amplified wave pattern. About one and a half cycles of the carrier wave were encompassed by the screen but it was spiked with numerous modulation patterns.

"That's the old one again – about a true life form!" announced Eric excitedly. "The pattern is unmistakable!" The image remained on the screen a few seconds and then vanished. Ron would have preferred going down to the Com Room and running the recorder strip through the positronics for verification but the aliens were down there and besides, nobody was on duty in the computer room. Even if he could have obtained the tape he would have had to run the positronics himself, and at the moment he didn't have time for it. So he took Eric's word - that it was the same message as before. Why were they asking this again? They had already received their answer several times.

Another thought came to him. "Have you any way of telling whether or not the wave pattern is clearer and more amplified this time than when it was last received... or is it weaker...?"

"This was much stronger than the last time." Eric's answer came without hesitation, which meant he was sure of the difference.

Ron's tension increased. Hyper transmission was one of the wonders of modern technology but no matter how wonderful it was it couldn't violate natural laws. You had to receive signals from a near source more strongly than you would from a distant source. The first message received by the BOB 21 had come from a distance of about 400 light years but this latest reception was much clearer. Therefore, the distance had changed.

Somebody else was approaching the BOB 21!

Ron told Eric to answer the call the same as he had before. Eric went to the small control panel that enabled him to operate the Com Room equipment. He pressed a few buttons and smiled faintly.

"I hope it's still working," he commented. "Who knows what those characters may have done in the meantime?"

Seconds later the oscilloscope registered the wave pattern of the outgoing signal. It was coded the same way as the aliens' message. No one could tell from the scope what the content of the answering message was but Eric claimed that there was only one prepared program strip in this transmitter. It had to be the right one.

Ron Landry forced himself to be calm because he had to think clearly. He wondered if he should try making contact with the invisibles but he rejected this idea before long. Eric and his men had spent a lot of time on that without the slightest success. He was sure that the second alien ship whose message they had just received would show up very soon. He was almost equally certain that this second ship would be bringing the enemies of their present unseen visitors, because the wave pattern of the received signal was basically different from the message the invisibles had sent out previously. Therefore there were just two types of aliens out here in intergalactic space—the invisibles, and their enemies, whoever they might be.

Ron went over this chain of logic repeatedly, attempting to find an error in reasoning. He searched for places where either one of the alien actions might be attributed to a mode of thinking different than his but he found no loopholes. The chain of reasoning was like a puzzle whose pieces fit into each other. It had to be the way he had figured it—or they had overlooked something.

But then again this present situation would explain why the invisibles were trying to strengthen the station's defence screen. In some way they had learned about the imminent arrival of their enemies. Probably they didn't believe the screen had enough protective power in its normal state, and that's why they were beefing it up. This might also explain why they had not responded to Eric's previous attempts to contact them. They needed every spare second to prepare for an attack by the enemy.

Ron turned and looked questioningly at Meech Hannigan, and Meech understood.

"My analysis, sir..." he began, and then he proceeded to give the same arguments and logical conclusions that Ron had already thought out by himself.

Eric Furchtbar stared at them in wide-eyed amazement as he listened.

For him the past few hours had been too hectic for him to get into the deeper whys and wherefores of the situation. He was still trying to recover from the shock of the first ship's sudden appearance.

"Do you really believe," he said excitedly, "that still another vessel has set a course for the station?" Ron nodded. He was about to answer him but Meech made a surprising breach of regulations by cutting in on him quickly.

"There's nothing much more to argue about, sir. There are the other aliens already!" The alien ship fairly leapt into the viewscreen. A half a second before it had not been there but now it filled more than 70% of the main screen. It had arrived without the slightest hyper shockwave disturbance.

Ron instantly realized that this was a new type of transition. He was about to marvel at it but all his wonderment concerning the strange ship's propulsion was swept aside by the shock of its outward appearance. He was only vaguely aware of a groan of dismay from Eric's tall figure beside him, and it could have been that he also let out a groan. It was impossible that anyone could be insane enough to design such a ship.

It looked as if it had once been cubical but its structure had been bent out of shape. What remained was a completely erratic geometrical creation with a basically octagonal pattern. Since the BOB 21 provided them with artificial gravity, the observing Terrans had a sense of up and down, so what they thought they saw was a looming vertical wall directly in front of them. It ended in a sloping edge, beyond which they could make out one of the deck surfaces, a trapezoidal plane that slanted steeply up to the farther edge or nether wall of the hull. The left sidewall stood out at a grotesque angle. On the viewscreen, nothing could be seen of the righthand wall. It was probably indented.

Although such was the general shape of the vessel its sides and deck areas were anything but even. There were bays and turrets, domes and other projections as well as a confusing maze of niches and channels. Out of the domes towered rod-shaped protrusions covered with stiff fanlike shapes. In the indented areas gleamed varicoloured lights. From the bays, heavy three-pronged and fourpronged forks emerged into space, and a lively movement of some kind was to be seen on the mound-like elevations. Not even Meech could make out what the movement was or what it was supposed to accomplish.

This gave Ron an idea. It was fairly illogical and that was why Meech hadn't thought of it. Ron knew that objects moving on the outside of an intergalactic spaceship had to have some limitation of size but those things over there were neither bugs nor humans. They must have been as big as lifeboats or observation modules. At least he thought so. There was no comparison, however, that he could judge by.

But if he was right, the alien ship was a giant. Until now he had thought the vessel was only a few km away from the station but after all it had just emerged from hyper space—and not even an intergalactic commander would terminate a transition so close to his target. So the monster was farther distant, and judging by that it would have to be much larger than he had thought.

Those angular sides had to be at least 2 km across. It was only a rough estimate but Ron was startled nevertheless. The alien monstrosity was even larger than the mightiest super battleship of the Terran spacefleet.

It left Ron severely shaken. For a few tense moments he stood there waiting for some gun ports to open up out there and for a mighty blast of deadly energy to come flashing at them. But the seconds passed without event. The weird, fragmented crate thing merely hung there motionlessly in the void.

Then Ron began to wonder what these new aliens were waiting for. It seemed as if they had actually been waiting for him to have the thought because in the next moment the oscilloscope came to life again. He glanced at it only briefly before he turned to Eric.

"Is that the same as before?" he asked.

Eric studied the scope with wide, wondering eyes. "Yes!" he exclaimed. "That's the same old question!"

Ron almost barked an order. "Then give them the same old answer again!"

This time it took Eric a while longer because he was somewhat perplexed and confused. His hands seemed to grope aimlessly over the keyboard of the control panel. He preset a few buttons, then cancelled with a correction switch, but finally he found what he wanted. The frequency pattern of the answer appeared on the oscilloscope screen, which was connected with the Com Room.

Ron watched the fragmented space monster tensely, knowing that the aliens there would have to receive this answer. Since the message was structured in their own code they wouldn't take long in deciphering it. So what would they do now?

Ron was often to recall later how startled and surprised he was to get the first reaction from an entirely unexpected source.

While he was still staring at the viewscreen the hatch door opened behind him. Meech was the only one who noticed it and he shouted a warning. Ron whirled around, noting out of a corner of his eye that Eric Furchtbar threw himself to one side.

Of course he didn't think that would help him much. Through the bulkhead opening surged a tidal wave of blood-red brilliance that filled the room almost at once with a suffocating heat.

*

It was strange how silently the ambush happened. After Meech's warning cry the first thing Ron heard was the breaking of glassite meter and indicator faceplates under the blistering heat. Synthetic glass splinters were falling to the floor like hail. Meech raised his heavy disintegrator and in an almost instantaneous movement he brought the destroying green energy beam into play. It sang out with an irresistible force against the red wall of fire.

The effect was seen immediately. The scarlet flame drew back, forming an indentation before the impact

of Meech's ray. To the right and left of that cleft, the outer arms of the flame came to a momentary halt but then they crept forward again. Ron also started firing. The considerably finer beam of his hand weapon struck the left wing of the flame front and at first it seemed that he wasn't stopping it in the least. But then the progress of the heat flood became slower, and after a while it came to a stop completely.

Now Eric Furchtbar came into the battle, aiming the beam of his disintegrator at the righthand front of the flame. However small his weapon, it made the difference. The red fire receded, at first slowly; then it flowed back with increasing speed, finally disappearing through the hatchway. The door could no longer close because it had ceased to exist. The fire had consumed it.

Ron got to his feet, now feeling the full impact of the terrible heat, to which he had been exposed for several minutes. His skin was burning and he could only move very slowly. Wherever his metal armour touched his clothing it burned a hole and brought blisters to his hide..

Eric had more freedom of movement because he wasn't wearing a coat of mail. He was able to jump up without pain and get to the control panel. The most unscathed of course was Meech. Heat did not affect him unless it exceeded 1000? Centigrade. His first glance was at the viewscreen. Since he saw Ron was slow to turn about he reported.

"The alien ship has not moved from its position, sir!"

Ron's metallic armour was rapidly losing its heat. He finally managed to face the screen again, which was apparently the only equipment in the control room that was still functioning. Its covering glassite plate was thicker than the others. Also, it had been the farthest removed from the reddish heat glow.

Meech was right. The strange ship was still in the same place. Ron suddenly comprehended. It wasn't the strangers out there who had attacked them but the invisible phantoms here on board the station. The red fire weapon was proof enough of that. It all came clear to him. The invisibles had the com Room under their control. They must have noted that the station had sent out two messages in short succession, which contained the same set of signals. Perhaps they knew the enemy code. Then they would know, of course, that their enemy regarded himself as a "true life form" and would only be a friend of those who were living entities like themselves.

The situation was not without its humorous irony. Ron himself had approved a confirmation of the alien question. But while he had sought to satisfy one enemy he alienated the other. Because apparently the invisibles hated anything that was "true life" like their enemy, with whom they had been waging war out between the stellar islands.

They had observed the arrival of the alien ship the same as the Terrans had, up in the control room. When the question was transmitted again and confirmed once more in the same format, they had sought to retaliate. When a mighty enemy ship was outside they couldn't afford also to have enemies right under their noses on board the station.

What would they do now? Their at tack had been repulsed. It looked as if they knew of no weapon that could stand up against a Terran disintegrator. Would they try it again? Perhaps at a point in time when they figured the Terrans would have their attention focussed elsewhere. Ron decided to keep his eyes open. But first of all that angular ship out there was the most important consideration. It appeared to be much deadlier than the red fire weapon of the phantoms.

Ron observed that in the meantime his armour had cooled off enough for him to move about without being agonized.

He sent Meech outside the room to stand guard because he didn't want to be surprised again. Meech obeyed willingly. Ron and Eric concentrated their attention on the viewscreen.

After a few minutes the nightmarish ship began to move. It was a breathtaking experience to watch the vast, angular edges and corners of the monster as they ran off the limits of the big screen and finally left them facing a metal wall with its hundreds of outcroppings and corners and niches and turrets.

"They're coming over" said Eric.

The thought sent a chill through Ron but his voice was steady when he answered. "That's just what we're waiting for."

There was nothing more he could say. There was no other purpose to their vigilance here. Yet he had hardly spoken before he realized there was a possibility he hadn't thought of until now. It was the possibility, in fact, that the phantoms might know how to operate the BOB 21's gun positions.

*

There was no doubt anymore that they knew how.

A pale blue shimmer of battle rays swept across the viewscreen. The broad, canted surface of the ship wall out there flared suddenly with an unreal, flickering light.

Defence screens, thought Ron. Naturally they would have powerful defence screens.

Forgetting his own situation, Ron watched the battle in fascination. The crossing ray beams were coming from at least two of the station's gun turrets. The phantoms were handling the weapons with maximum expertise. With apparent ease they brought 5 pale green disintegrator beams together over the surface of the angular ship. The enemy defence screen glowed white hot. A jerking pattern of yellow and rose-coloured lightwaves travelled over the steep wall. It seemed as if the screen hadn't been ready for such a tremendous load all at once.

At the same time Ron could see that the brilliant beams of the thermo cannons were no match for the ungainly looking monster. The defence screen glowed faintly where the thermo rays struck it. There was no jerking wave pattern of lights as a consequence. Yet the average power of the thermo cannons was much greater than that of the disintegrators.

Ron was so gripped by the unusual spectacle that he only thought of his own position when the misshapen vessel opened its counter-offensive. It was hard to tell exactly what was happening. Something seemed to come between the canted wall of the ship and the viewscreen—like a thin curtain of heated air, dancing and shimmering.

In the next instant such a terrific jolt ran through the station that Ron and Eric were knocked off their feet. The deck of the control room slanted suddenly and the two men slid helplessly toward the open hatchway. The full realization of their danger came to Ron now. The BOB 21's screen weren't the strongest available by any means, even though the invisibles may have reinforced them. Who could know what reserves of power the odd-angled alien Behemoth possessed?

The shock of the impact ebbed away in receding waves of force. When Ron got to his feet again he saw the deadpan "helmet" face of Meech looking in through the hatchway.

"To the transmitters!" Ron shouted.

"Check the route for any resistance!" Meech complied immediately and went ahead. Ron helped Eric to his feet and by the time they got out into the corridor their robot companion was nowhere to be seen.

"Come on!" Ron urged. "We have to get out of here. Those idiots in the gun bays—they're not going to accomplish anything except get this station blown up by that flying fortress!"

As they staggered through the passage a second great jolt struck the defence screen and caused the deck under them to sway. The walls and bulkheads groaned under the strain. The fragmented ship's giant salvos were too powerful for the screen to even absorb the mechanical impact.

The dark opening of the antigrav shaft loomed closer and finally Ron simply shoved Eric in ahead of him. Before following him he took one last look around. No sign of the phantoms. There was no red fire now. The invisibles had their hands full to just stay alive.

They sank downward on the grav field into the lower depths. Once Ron caught a glimpse of Meech peeking up from an exit below. Apparently he saw the two of them because when they came out on the transmitter deck he had already gone ahead to clear the way and give them coverage.

Unchallenged, they reached the station where the transmitter cages were showing green lights already. So far everything was in order. But at that moment the BOB 21 received another hit, and this time the effects were much worse.

Ron had a strange sensation which made it seem as if the room was spinning around him. His helmet, shoulders, arms and legs crashed against the walls. He was bounced back and forth but finally came to rest in a fairly benumbed state.

Nearby, somebody groaned. Eric!

Ron got up and saw Eric lying by a wall with his eyes closed. He had evidently been knocked out. He grasped him under the arms and dragged him to the nearest sender cage. With one hand he tried to open the wire-mesh door of the cubicle. He shoved down the lock handle and pulled on it but the door didn't budge.

He stared in puzzlement at the control lamp and saw that it had gone out. The power had been interrupted. The transmitters weren't operating now. For a moment he was seized by a rising panic until he noticed that the other cage was apparently unimpaired. The green indicator lamp was still on. Laboriously, he dragged Eric across a space of 4 meters, and this time the cage door opened for him at once. Ron shoved Eric's long, limp body inside and arranged it so that he could close the door.

Then he ran to the switchboard, pulled down the start lever and depressed the release button. A gentle mist appeared in the cage and then was gone. So was Eric—to safety.

Ron remained by the switch panel. "Meech!" he called. "Come here!" Out in the corridor was a clattering, rumbling sound of metallic footsteps. Before Meech came into view, Ron heard him answering.

"Get into the transmitter, sir! The next hit can—"

Just then it came. The aliens in the giant ship seemed to be building a learning curve with their shooting.

Each hit was more dangerous to the station than the previous one. All around Ron a pit of Hell seemed to open up with blinding flashes, biting odours and a raging hissing and deafening thunder. He was knocked back and forth helplessly, feeling numb and weary. He tried to resist the spasmodic jolting and jerking movement of his surroundings but not a muscle of his body seemed to respond.

When the tumult subsided, he lay still. He was hardly aware of being lifted up. Vaguely he heard a few blurred clinking sounds and the buzzing and slamming of a door that seemed to be made of wire mesh. For the moment he didn't know what it was. For a few seconds more he was lying on a deck, unmoving. Then a sharp pain shot through him and momentarily there was nothing but darkness around him.

Finally, it was bright again. Ron's curiosity brought back his ability to move and he raised up swiftly. A cage door opened before him. Beyond it was the transmitter room on board the cruiser *Joann*.

Meech! Where was Meech?

*

Meech hadn't considered his chances to be too slim. Not so slim that he couldn't stay with the station a few more minutes to see what happened.

He knew no emotion of fear. If he were to have been provided with a special program for showing fear in expression and movement, this would have been no great difficulty, but he still wouldn't have understood the meaning of it.

He went out of the transmitter station but made sure that the hatch door stayed open. He didn't dare leave the remaining sender cage out of his sight. In fact the only reason he came this far away from it was to escape the interference caused by the radiations from the transmitter generator. He wanted to be able to follow the activity of the gun positions and perhaps pick up a few other signals as well. He didn't believe that the phantoms were exclusively engaged in shooting at the crooked giant outside. They had a powerful sending station at their disposal. At least it had been powerful before the angular monster ship had started firing.

Meech could tell that three of the gun positions were highly active. The energy fields radiating from the various heavy weapons were so strong that they almost gave him a headache. The station received a fourth and a fifth hit. Meech held on to the bulkhead opening and thanks to his tremendous strength he didn't lose his footing - even though the BOB 21 did a double somersault.

He looked concernedly at the one remaining transmitter inside the room. The control lamp was still on but it was flickering. He told himself it was time. If they didn't start signalling in the next few seconds....

That's when they started.

Meech could detect it plainly. Above the raging influx from the guns he sensed the even cadence of frequencies from the big hyper-telecom transmitter. He stood there quietly and took in the wave pattern of it, storing it in his memory. The carrier wave and the modulations combined. He kept listening until he was sure that it was only a repetition of the starting information.

Then he left his listening post. With a mighty grip he opened the door of the remaining transmitter cage, threw himself on the uncomfortable bench inside—which complained under his ponderous weight—and closed the grid door behind him. It was at that moment when the indicator overhead went out. Meech got up calmly, realizing that he only had a few seconds left. If in that brief space of time he failed to get the

transmitter going he would be just as lost as the invisible aliens on board.

Inside of each transmitter cage was an auxiliary control panel so that the equipment wasn't solely dependent upon outside operation. Meech ripped off the panel plate, an effort which would have broken the arms or hands of a normal man. But Meech only had to give one firm tug and his task was accomplished. He then divested himself of his outer armour with a few deft movements. With powerful fingers he tore open his uniform and also his own synthetic skin. Underneath was revealed white-gleaming plastic metal. There was a small opening he could reach into, from which he pulled two insulated cables. These he fastened to the control panel's contacts.

Emotionlessly, he looped up. Two seconds passed, then three... Then the green indicator lamp came on again not especially bright and mostly just flickering. But at any rate, the signal light was on. Meech broke the contact, not bothering to stick the two cables back inside his body. He pressed two knobs on the panel plate... and noted at the same moment that in the ultimate second something had gone wrong.

This transmitter jump was never going to bring him to the *Joann* in all of eternity. He realized this automatically when the greyness of semispace welled up around him.

At least he had escaped the doom in store for the BOB 21.

*

The incident far beyond the edge of the Milky Way by far outweighed all normal political questions on Terra. A few minutes after Maj. Landry had arrived back on board the *Joann*, the BOB 21 had exploded under the bombardment of the angular battleship. The *Joann* had gotten under way at once and flown to the site of the catastrophe. When it arrived there was no trace of the big assailant. And since its propulsion system seemed capable of making silent transitions there was no remaining clue as to where it might have gone.

Nike Quinto virtually stood there with empty hands, which didn't do his so-called blood pressure any good. Besides, a valued member of his commando team had vanished with the BOB 21. Meech Hannigan the robot had not returned from his last mission.

Quinto beamed a brief report to Earth. Minutes later he received instructions to return to Terra as quickly as possible and to make a personal report to the Administrator.

Meanwhile, Earth issued a warning to the other intergalactic observation stations. The Fleet units that Quinto had mobilized along the edge of the galaxy, 5000 light years from the position of the BOB 21, were reinforced and sent on patrol. The entire Terran Fleet was on top alert.

Perry Rhodan received Nike Quinto and his men at once. The debriefing session lasted almost 6 hours and immediately thereafter Rhodan requested the Terran TV networks to give him a halfhour timeslot between 20:00 and 20:30, local Terra time.

His half-hour address was more upsetting yet more objective than the lecture once given by the cosmobiologist 100 years ago. Perry Rhodan established a firm course for extra-terrestrial policy with regard to aliens from intergalactic space.

He concluded with the words: "We have calculated that ours is not the only island universe that could have produced intelligent life. Anyone with common sense could have foreseen that sooner or later such an encounter would take place. Well, we have that first encounter behind us. And we are appalled by its

frightening nature and the utterly alien mode of thinking it has revealed to us."

"But we will not give rein to our fears in this regard. We've seen that the aliens, to say the least, have a warlike streak in them - if indeed their entire nature and method of thinking isn't committed to war and conquest. So we must arm ourselves, for however pleased we may be to make contact with alien intelligences we shall always protect our position within our own galaxy.

"You may rest assured that the coming months and years will demand sacrifices from us. These we will make, even to the point of war. We are Terrans, and aside from our position we have a reputation to uphold. The galaxy has its eyes on us!"

*

During a routine investigation of instruments on board the *Joann*, it developed a few days later that the BOB 21's last transmitter had become active at the last moment but that it had not developed sufficient power to complete the hypertransmission. As a result, no reception had occurred at the cruiser's end of the circuit.

Nike Quinto immediately ordered a checkout of the automatic recordings in his transmitter room. The technicians soon found out the exact time of the incident, and the result was surprising. It had occurred between the time of Ron Landry's return from the BOB 21 and the moment when the *Joann* observed the explosion of the observation station.

What this meant was immediately obvious to everyone. Meech Hannigan had made a last attempt to get away from the station. The attempt had failed.

Which was very disturbing because where Meech could be now after such a mishap - no one could say...

THE END