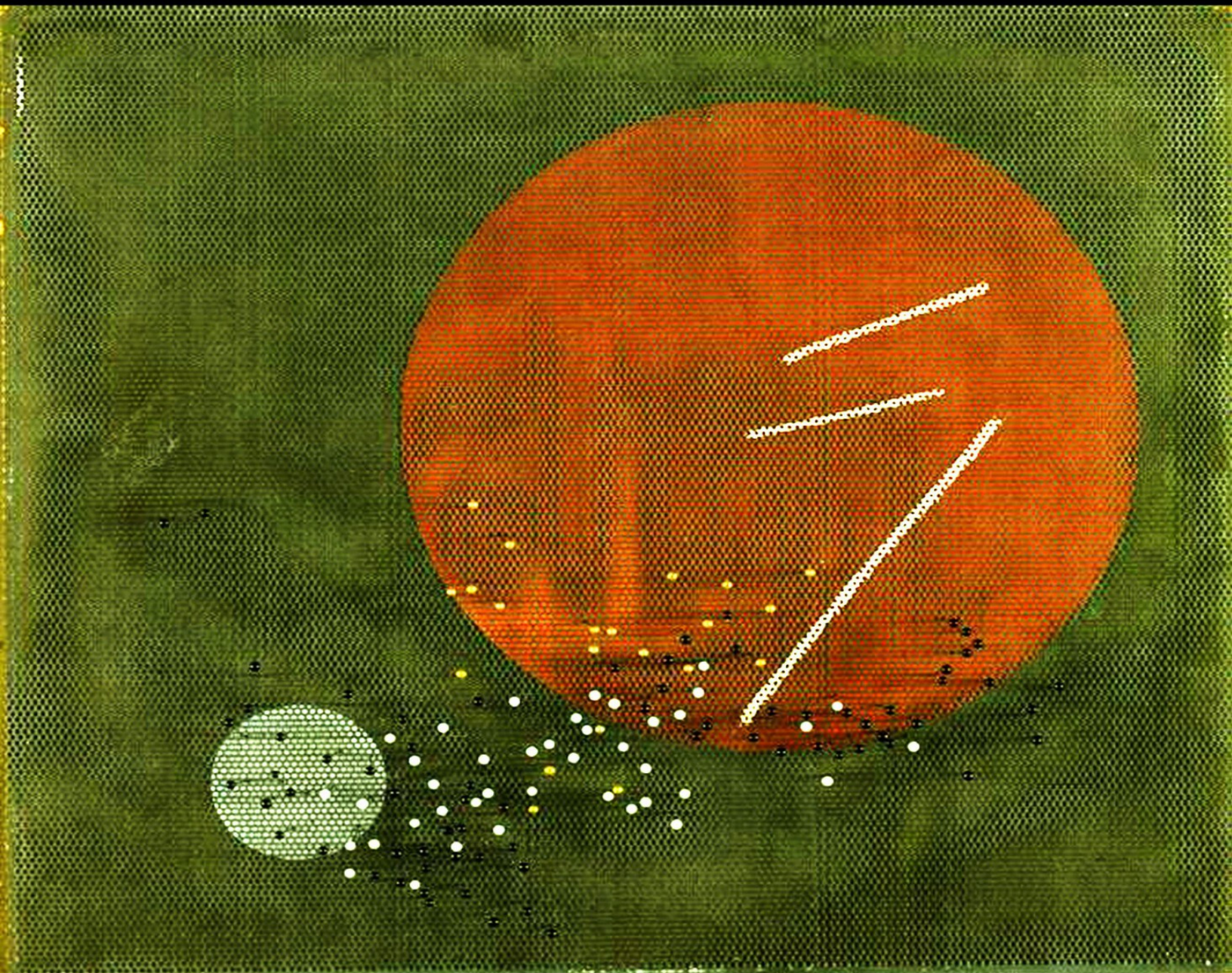


MASTERS OF SPACE



**EDWARD E. SMITH &
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Illustrated by BERRY

*They were the Masters, and they had only
to choose: eternal life, as inhuman monsters—or death!*

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Part One

I

"BUT didn't you feel *anything*, Javo?" Strain was apparent in every line of Tula's taut, bare body. "Nothing at all?"

"Nothing whatever." The one called Javo relaxed from his rigid concentration. "Nothing has changed. Nor will it."

"That conclusion is indefensible!" Tula snapped. "With the promised return of the Masters there must and will be changes. Didn't *any* of you feel anything?"

Her hot, demanding eyes swept the group; a group whose like, except for physical perfection, could be found in any nudist colony.

No one except Tula had felt a thing.

"That fact is not too surprising," Javo said finally. "You have the most sensitive receptors of us all. But are you sure?"

"I am sure. It was the thought-form of a living Master."

"Do you think that the Master perceived your web?"

"It is certain. Those who built us are stronger than we."

"That is true. As they promised, then, so long and long ago, our Masters are returning home to us."

Jarvis Hilton of Terra, the youngest man yet to be assigned to direct any such tremendous deep-space undertaking as Project Theta Orionis, sat in conference with his two seconds-in-command. Assistant Director Sandra Cummings, analyst-synthesist and semantician, was tall, blonde and svelte. Planetographer William Karns—a black-haired, black-browed, black-eyed man of thirty—was third in rank of the scientific group.

"I'm telling you, Jarve, you can't have it both ways," Karns declared. "Captain

Sawtelle is old-school Navy brass. He goes strictly by the book. So you've got to draw a razor-sharp line; exactly where the Advisory Board's directive puts it. And next time he sticks his ugly puss across that line, kick his face in. You've been Caspar Milquetoast Two ever since we left Base."

"That's the way it looks to you?" Hilton's right hand became a fist. "The man has age, experience and ability. I've been trying to meet him on a ground of courtesy and decency."

"Exactly. And he doesn't recognize the existence of either. And, since the Board rammed you down his throat instead of giving him old Jeffers, you needn't expect him to."

"You may be right, Bill. What do you think, Dr. Cummings?"

The girl said: "Bill's right. Also, your constant appeasement isn't doing the morale of the whole scientific group a bit of good."

"Well, I haven't enjoyed it, either. So next time I'll pin his ears back. Anything else?"

"Yes, Dr. Hilton, I have a squawk of my own. I know I was rammed down your throat, but just when are you going to let me do some work?"

"None of us has much of anything to do yet, and won't have until we light somewhere. You're off base a country mile."

"I'm not off base. You *did* want Eggleston, not me."

"Sure I did. I've worked with him and know what he can do. But I'm not holding a grudge about it."

"No? Why, then, are you on first-name terms with everyone in the scientific group except me? Supposedly your first assistant?"

"That's easy!" Hilton snapped. "Because you've been carrying chips on both shoulders ever since you came aboard ... or at least I thought you were." Hilton grinned suddenly and held out his hand. "Sorry, Sandy—I'll start all over again."

"I'm sorry too, Chief." They shook hands warmly. "I *was* pretty stiff, I guess, but I'll be good."

"You'll go to work right now, too. As semantician. Dig out that directive and

tear it down. Draw that line Bill talked about."

"Can do, boss." She swung to her feet and walked out of the room, her every movement one of lithe and easy grace.

Karns followed her with his eyes. "Funny. A trained-dancer Ph.D. And a Miss America type, like all the other women aboard this spacer. I wonder if she'll make out."

"So do I. I still wish they'd given me Eggy. I've never seen an executive-type female Ph.D. yet that was worth the cyanide it would take to poison her."

"That's what Sawtelle thinks of you, too, you know."

"I know; and the Board *does* know its stuff. So I'm really hoping, Bill, that she surprises me as much as I intend to surprise the Navy."

ALARM bells clanged as the mighty *Perseus* blinked out of overdrive. Every crewman sprang to his post.

"Mister Snowden, why did we emerge without orders from me?" Captain Sawtelle bellowed, storming into the control room three jumps behind Hilton.

"The automatics took control, sir," he said, quietly.

"Automatics! I *give* the orders!"

"In this case, Captain Sawtelle, you don't," Hilton said. Eyes locked and held. To Sawtelle, this was a new and strange co-commander. "I would suggest that we discuss this matter in private."

"Very well, sir," Sawtelle said; and in the captain's cabin Hilton opened up.

"For your information, Captain Sawtelle, I set my inter-space coupling detectors for any objective I choose. When any one of them reacts, it trips the kickers and we emerge. During any emergency outside the Solar System I am in command—with the provision that I must relinquish command to you in case of armed attack on us."

"Where do you think you found any such stuff as that in the directive? It isn't there and I know my rights."

"It is, and you don't. Here is a semantic chart of the whole directive. As you will note, it overrides many Navy regulations. Disobedience of my orders

constitutes mutiny and I can—and will—have you put in irons and sent back to Terra for court-martial. Now let's go back."

In the control room, Hilton said, "The target has a mass of approximately five hundred metric tons. There is also a significant amount of radiation characteristic of uranexite. You will please execute search, Captain Sawtelle."

And Captain Sawtelle ordered the search.

"What did you do to the big jerk, boss?" Sandra whispered.

"What you and Bill suggested," Hilton whispered back. "Thanks to your analysis of the directive—pure gobbledygook if there ever was any—I could. Mighty good job, Sandy."

TEN or fifteen more minutes passed. Then:

"Here's the source of radiation, sir," a searchman reported. "It's a point source, though, not an object at this range."

"And here's the artifact, sir," Pilot Snowden said. "We're coming up on it fast. But ... but what's a *skyscraper* skeleton doing out here in interstellar space?"

As they closed up, everyone could see that the thing did indeed look like the metallic skeleton of a great building. It was a huge cube, measuring well over a hundred yards along each edge. And it was empty.

"*That's* one for the book," Sawtelle said.

"And how!" Hilton agreed. "I'll take a boat ... no, suits would be better. Karns, Yarborough, get Techs Leeds and Miller and suit up."

"You'll need a boat escort," Sawtelle said. "Mr. Ashley, execute escort Landing Craft One, Two, and Three."

The three landing craft approached that enigmatic lattice-work of structural steel and stopped. Five grotesquely armored figures wafted themselves forward on pencils of force. Their leader, whose suit bore the number "14", reached a mammoth girder and worked his way along it up to a peculiar-looking bulge. The whole immense structure vanished, leaving men and boats in empty space.

Sawtelle gasped. "Snowden! Are you holding 'em?"

"No, sir. Faster than light; hyperspace, sir."

"Mr. Ashby, did you have your interspace rigs set?"

"No, sir. I didn't think of it, sir."

"Doctor Cummings, why weren't yours out?"

"I didn't think of such a thing, either—any more than you did," Sandra said.

Ashby, the Communications Officer, had been working the radio. "No reply from anyone, sir," he reported.

"Oh, no!" Sandra exclaimed. Then, "But look! They're firing pistols—especially the one wearing number fourteen—but *pistols*?"

"Recoil pistols—sixty-threes—for emergency use in case of power failure," Ashby explained. "That's it ... but I can't see why *all* their power went out at once. But Fourteen—that's Hilton—is really doing a job with that sixty-three. He'll be here in a couple of minutes."

And he was. "Every power unit out there—suits and boats both—drained," Hilton reported. "*Completely* drained. Get some help out there fast!"

In an enormous structure deep below the surface of a far-distant world a group of technicians clustered together in front of one section of a two-miles long control board. They were staring at a light that had just appeared where no light should have been.

"Someone's brain-pan will be burned out for this," one of the group radiated harshly. "That unit was inactivated long ago and it has not been reactivated."

"Someone committed an error, Your Loftiness?"

"Silence, fool! Stretts do not commit errors!"

AS soon as it was clear that no one had been injured, Sawtelle demanded, "How about it, Hilton?"

"Structurally, it was high-alloy steel. There were many bulges, possibly containing mechanisms. There were drive-units of a non-Terran type. There were many projectors, which—at a rough guess—were a hundred times as powerful as any I have ever seen before. There were no indications that the

thing had ever been enclosed, in whole or in part. It certainly never had living quarters for warm-blooded, oxygen-breathing eaters of organic food."

Sawtelle snorted. "You mean it never had a crew?"

"Not necessarily...."

"Bah! What other kind of intelligent life is there?"

"I don't know. But before we speculate too much, let's look at the tri-di. The camera may have caught something I missed."

It hadn't. The three-dimensional pictures added nothing.

"It probably was operated either by programmed automatics or by remote control," Hilton decided, finally. "But how did they drain all our power? And just as bad, what and how is that other point source of power we're heading for now?"

"What's wrong with it?" Sawtelle asked.

"Its strength. No matter what distance or reactant I assume, nothing we know will fit. Neither fission nor fusion will do it. It has to be practically total conversion!"

II

THE *Perseus* snapped out of overdrive near the point of interest and Hilton stared, motionless and silent.

Space was full of madly warring ships. Half of them were bare, giant skeletons of steel, like the "derelict" that had so unexpectedly blasted away from them. The others were more or less like the *Perseus*, except in being bigger, faster and of vastly greater power.

Beams of starkly incredible power bit at and clung to equally capable defensive screens of pure force. As these inconceivable forces met, the glare of their neutralization filled all nearby space. And ships and skeletons alike were disappearing in chunks, blobs, gouts, streamers and sparkles of rended, fused and vaporized metal.

Hilton watched two ships combine against one skeleton. Dozens of beams, incredibly tight and hard, were held inexorably upon dozens of the bulges of the skeleton. Overloaded, the bulges' screens flared through the spectrum and failed. And bare metal, however refractory, endures only for instants under the appalling intensity of such beams as those.

The skeletons tried to duplicate the ships' method of attack, but failed. They were too slow. Not slow, exactly, either, but hesitant; as though it required whole seconds for the commander—or operator? Or remote controller?—of each skeleton to make it act. The ships were winning.

"Hey!" Hilton yelled. "Oh—that's the one we saw back there. But what in all space does it think it's doing?"

It was plunging at tremendous speed straight through the immense fleet of embattled skeletons. It did not fire a beam nor energize a screen; it merely plunged along as though on a plotted course until it collided with one of the skeletons of the fleet and both structures plunged, a tangled mass of wreckage, to the ground of the planet below.

Then hundreds of the ships shot forward, each to plunge into and explode inside one of the skeletons. When visibility was restored another wave of ships came forward to repeat the performance, but there was nothing left to fight. Every surviving skeleton had blinked out of normal space.

The remaining ships made no effort to pursue the skeletons, nor did they reform as a fleet. Each ship went off by itself.

And on that distant planet of the Stretts the group of mechs watched with amazed disbelief as light after light after light winked out on their two-mile-long control board. Frantically they relayed orders to the skeletons; orders which did not affect the losses.

"Brain-pans will blacken for this ..." a mental snarl began, to be interrupted by a coldly imperious thought.

"That long-dead unit, so inexplicably reactivated, is approaching the fuel world. It is ignoring the battle. It is heading through our fleet toward the Oman half ... *handle* it, ten-eighteen!"

"It does not respond, Your Loftiness."

"Then blast it, fool! Ah, it is inactivated. As encyclopedist, Nine, explain the freakish behavior of that unit."

"Yes, Your Loftiness. Many cycles ago we sent a ship against the Omans with a new device of destruction. The Omans must have intercepted it, drained it of power and allowed it to drift on. After all these cycles of time it must have come upon a small source of power and of course continued its mission."

"That can be the truth. The Lords of the Universe must be informed."

"The mining units, the carriers and the refiners have not been affected, Your Loftiness," a mech radiated.

"So I see, fool." Then, activating another instrument, His Loftiness thought at it, in an entirely different vein, "Lord Ynos, Madam? I have to make a very grave report...."

IN the *Perseus*, four scientists and three Navy officers were arguing heatedly; employing deep-space verbiage not to be found in any dictionary. "Jarve!"

Karns called out, and Hilton joined the group. "Does anything about this planet make any sense to you?"

"No. But you're the planetographer. 'Smatter with it?"

"It's a good three hundred degrees Kelvin too hot."

"Well, you know it's loaded with uranexite."

"That much? The whole crust practically jewelry ore?"

"If that's what the figures say, I'll buy it."

"Buy *this*, then. Continuous daylight everywhere. Noon June Sol-quality light *except* that it's all in the visible. Frank says it's from bombardment of a layer of something, and Frank admits that the whole thing's impossible."

"When Frank makes up his mind what 'something' is, I'll take it as a datum."

"Third thing: there's only one city on this continent, and it's protected by a screen that nobody ever heard of."

Hilton pondered, then turned to the captain. "Will you please run a search-pattern, sir? Fine-toothing only the hot spots?"

The planet was approximately the same size as Terra; its atmosphere, except for its intense radiation, was similar to Terra's. There were two continents; one immense girdling ocean. The temperature of the land surface was everywhere about 100°F, that of the water about 90°F. Each continent had one city, and both were small. One was inhabited by what looked like human beings; the other by usuform robots. The human city was the only cool spot on the entire planet; under its protective dome the temperature was 71°F.

Hilton decided to study the robots first; and asked the captain to take the ship down to observation range. Sawtelle objected; and continued to object until Hilton started to order his arrest. Then he said, "I'll do it, under protest, but I want it on record that I am doing it against my best judgment."

"It's on record," Hilton said, coldly. "Everything said and done is being, and will continue to be, recorded."

The *Perseus* floated downward. "*There's* what I want most to see," Hilton said, finally. "That big strip-mining operation ... that's it ... hold it!" Then, via throat-mike, "Attention, all scientists! You all know what to do. Start doing

it."

Sandra's blonde head was very close to Hilton's brown one as they both stared into Hilton's plate. "Why, they look like giant armadillos!" she exclaimed.

"More like tanks," he disagreed, "except that they've got legs, wheels *and* treads—and arms, cutters, diggers, probes and conveyors—and *look* at the way those buckets dip solid rock!"

The fantastic machine was moving very slowly along a bench or shelf that it was making for itself as it went along. Below it, to its left, dropped other benches being made by other mining machines. The machines were not using explosives. Hard though the ore was, the tools were so much harder and were driven with such tremendous power that the stuff might just have well have been slightly-clayed sand.

Every bit of loosened ore, down to the finest dust, was forced into a conveyor and thence into the armored body of the machine. There it went into a mechanism whose basic principles Hilton could not understand. From this monstrosity emerged two streams of product.

One of these, comprising ninety-nine point nine plus percent of the input, went out through another conveyor into the vast hold of a vehicle which, when full and replaced by a duplicate of itself, went careening madly cross-country to a dump.

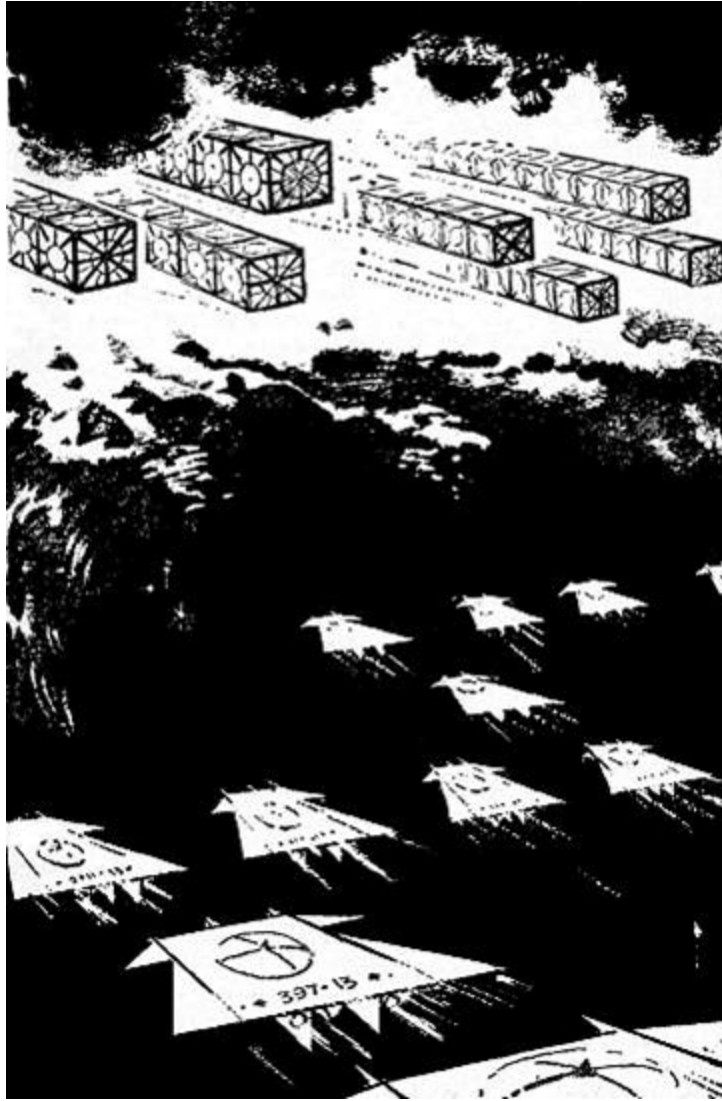
The other product, a slow, very small stream of tiny, glistening black pellets, fell into a one-gallon container being held watchfully by a small machine, more or less like a three-wheeled motor scooter, which was moving carefully along beside the giant miner. When this can was almost full another scooter rolled up and, without losing a single pellet, took over place and function. The first scooter then covered its bucket, clamped it solidly into a recess designed for the purpose and dashed away toward the city.

Hilton stared slack-jawed at Sandra. She stared back.

"Do you make anything of that, Jarve?"

"Nothing. They're taking *pure* uranexite and *concentrating*—or converting—it a thousand to one. I *hope* we'll be able to do something about it."

"I hope so, too, Chief; and I'm *sure* we will."



"Well, that's enough for now. You may take us up now, Captain Sawtelle. And Sandy, will you please call all department heads and their assistants into the conference room?"

AT the head of the long conference table, Hilton studied his fourteen department heads, all husky young men, and their assistants, all surprisingly attractive and well-built young women. Bud Carroll and Sylvia Bannister of Sociology sat together. He was almost as big as Karns; she was a green-eyed redhead whose five-ten and one-fifty would have looked big except for the arrangement thereof. There were Bernadine and Hermione van der Moen, the leggy, breasty, platinum-blond twins—both of whom were Cowper medalists in physics. There was Etienne de Vaux, the mathematical wizard; and Rebecca Eisenstein, the black-haired, flashing-eyed ex-infant-prodigy theoretical astronomer. There was Beverly Bell, who made mathematically impossible chemical syntheses—who swam channels for days on end and computed planetary orbits in her sleekly-coiffured head.

"First, we'll have a get-together," Hilton said. "Nothing recorded; just to get acquainted. You all know that our fourteen departments cover science, from astronomy to zoology."

He paused, again his eyes swept the group. Stella Wing, who would have been a grand-opera star except for her drive to know everything about language. Theodora (Teddy) Blake, who would prove gleefully that she was the world's best model—but was in fact the most brilliantly promising theoretician who had ever lived.

"No other force like this has ever been assembled," Hilton went on. "In more ways than one. Sawtelle wanted Jeffers to head this group, instead of me. Everybody thought he *would* head it."

"And Hilton wanted Eggleston and got *me*," Sandra said.

"That's right. And quite a few of you didn't want to come at all, but were told by the Board to come or else."

The group stirred. Eyes met eyes, and there were smiles.

"I MYSELF think Jeffers *should* have had the job. I've never handled anything half this big and I'll need a lot of help. But I'm stuck with it and you're all stuck with me, so we'll all take it and like it. You've noticed, of course, the accent on youth. The Navy crew is normal, except for the commanders being unusually young. But we aren't. None of us is thirty yet, and none of us has ever been married. You fellows look like a team of professional athletes, and you girls—well, if I didn't know better I'd say the Board had screened you for the front row of the chorus instead of for a top-bracket brain-gang. How they found so many of you I'll never know."

"Virile men and nubile women!" Etienne de Vaux leered enthusiastically. "*Vive le Board!*"

"Nubile! Bravo, Tiny! *Quelle delicatesse de nuance!*"

"Three rousing cheers for the Board!"

"Keep still, you nitwits! Let me ask a question!" This came from one of the twins. "Before you give us the deduction, Jarvis—or will it be an intuition or an induction or a ..."

"Or an inducement," the other twin suggested, helpfully. "Not that *you* would need very much of that."

"You keep still, too, Miney. I'm asking, Sir Moderator, if I can give my deduction first?"

"Sure, Bernadine; go ahead."

"They figured we're going to get completely lost. Then we'll jettison the Navy, hunt up a planet of our own and start a race to end all human races. Or would you call this a *see*-duction instead of a *dee*-duction?"

This produced a storm of whistles, cheers and jeers that it took several seconds to quell.

"But seriously, Jarvis," Bernadine went on. "We've all been wondering and it doesn't make sense. Have you any idea at all of what the Board actually did have in mind?"

"I believe that the Board selected for mental, not physical, qualities; for the ability to handle anything unexpected or unusual that comes up, no matter what it is."

"You think it wasn't double-barreled?" asked Kincaid, the psychologist. He smiled quizzically. "That all this virility and nubility and glamor is pure coincidence?"

"No," Hilton said, with an almost imperceptible flick of an eyelid. "Coincidence is as meaningless as paradox. I think they found out that—barring freaks—the best minds are in the best bodies."

"Could be. The idea has been propounded before."

"Now let's get to work." Hilton flipped the switch of the recorder. "Starting with you, Sandy, each of you give a two-minute boil-down. What you found and what you think."

SOMETHING over an hour later the meeting adjourned and Hilton and Sandra strolled toward the control room.

"I don't know whether you convinced Alexander Q. Kincaid or not, but you didn't quite convince me," Sandra said.

"Nor him, either."

"Oh?" Sandra's eyebrows

"No. He grabbed the out I offered him. I didn't fool Teddy Blake or Temple Bells, either. You four are all, though, I think."

"Temple? You think *she's* so smart?"

"I don't *think* so, no. Don't fool yourself, chick. Temple Bells looks and acts sweet and innocent and virginal. Maybe—probably—she is. But she isn't showing a fraction of the stuff she's really got. She's heavy artillery, Sandy. And I mean *heavy*."

"I think you're slightly nuts there. But do you really believe that the Board was playing Cupid?"

"Not trying, but doing. Cold-bloodedly and efficiently. Yes."

"But it wouldn't *work*! We aren't going to get lost!"

"We won't need to. Propinquity will do the work."

"Phooie. You and me, for instance?" She stopped, put both hands on her hips, and glared. "Why, I wouldn't marry *you* if you ..."

"I'll tell the cockeyed world you won't!" Hilton broke in. "Me marry a damned female Ph.D.? Uh-uh. Mine will be a cuddly little brunette that thinks a slipstick is some kind of lipstick and that an isotope's something good to eat."

"One like that copy of Murchison's Dark Lady that you keep under the glass on your desk?" she sneered.

"Exactly...." He started to continue the battle, then shut himself off. "But listen, Sandy, why should we get into a fight because we don't want to marry each other? You're doing a swell job. I admire you tremendously for it and I like to work with you."

"You've got a point there, Jarve, at that, and I'm one of the few who know what kind of a job *you're* doing, so I'll relax." She flashed him a gamin grin and they went on into the control room.

It was too late in the day then to do any more exploring; but the next morning, early, the *Perseus* lined out for the city of the humanoids.

Tula turned toward her fellows. Her eyes filled with a happily triumphant light and her thought a lilting song. "I have been telling you from the first touch that it was the Masters. It *is* the Masters! The Masters are returning to us Omans and their own home world!"

"CAPTAIN Sawtelle," Hilton said, "Please land in the cradle below."

"*Land!*" Sawtelle stormed. "On a planet like *that*? Not by ..." He broke off and stared; for now, on that cradle, there flamed out in screaming red the *Perseus'* own Navy-coded landing symbols!

"Your protest is recorded," Hilton said. "Now, sir, land."

Fuming, Sawtelle landed. Sandra looked pointedly at Hilton. "First contact is my dish, you know."

"Not that I like it, but it is." He turned to a burly youth with sun-bleached, crew-cut hair, "Still safe, Frank?"

"Still abnormally low. Surprising no end, since all the rest of the planet is hotter than the middle tail-race of hell."

"Okay, Sandy. Who will you want besides the top linguists?"

"Psych—both Alex and Temple. And Teddy Blake. They're over there. Tell them, will you, while I buzz Teddy?"

"Will do," and Hilton stepped over to the two psychologists and told them. Then, "I hope I'm not leading with my chin, Temple, but is that your real first name or a professional?"

"It's real; it really is. My parents were romantics: dad says they considered both 'Golden' and 'Silver!'"

Not at all obviously, he studied her: the almost translucent, unblemished perfection of her lightly-tanned, old-ivory skin; the clear, calm, deep blueness of her eyes; the long, thick mane of hair exactly the color of a field of dead-ripe wheat.

"You know, I like it," he said then. "It fits you."

"I'm glad you said that, Doctor...."

"Not that, Temple. I'm not going to 'Doctor' you."

"I'll call you 'boss', then, like Stella does. Anyway, that lets me tell you that I like it myself. I really think that it did something for me."

"*Something* did something for you, that's for sure. I'm mighty glad you're aboard, and I hope ... here they come. Hi, Hark! Hi, Stella!"

"Hi, Jarve," said Chief Linguist Harkins, and:

"Hi, boss—what's holding us up?" asked his assistant, Stella Wing. She was about five feet four. Her eyes were a tawny brown; her hair a flamboyant auburn mop. Perhaps it owed a little of its spectacular refulgence to chemistry, Hilton thought, but not too much. "Let us away! Let the lions roar and let the welkin ring!"

"Who's been feeding *you* so much red meat, little squirt?" Hilton laughed and turned away, meeting Sandra in the corridor. "Okay, chick, take 'em away. We'll cover you. Luck, girl."

And in the control room, to Sawtelle, "Needle-beam cover, please; set for minimum aperture and lethal blast. But no firing, Captain Sawtelle, until I give the order."



THE *Perseus* was surrounded by hundreds of natives. They were all adult, all naked and about equally divided as to sex. They were friendly; most enthusiastically so.

"Jarve!" Sandra squealed. "They're *telepathic*. Very strongly so! I never imagined—I never felt anything like it!"

"Any rough stuff?" Hilton demanded.

"Oh, no. Just the opposite. They love us ... in a way that's simply indescribable. I don't like this telepathy business ... not clear ... foggy, diffuse ... this woman is *sure* I'm her long-lost great-great-a-hundred-times grandmother or something—*You!* Slow down. Take it *easy!* They want us all to come out here and live with ... no, not *with* them, but each of us alone in a whole house with them to wait on us! But first, they all want to come aboard...."

"*What?*" Hilton yelled. "But are you *sure* they're friendly?"

"Positive, chief."

"How about you, Alex?"

"We're all sure, Jarve. No question about it."

"Bring two of them aboard. A man and a woman."

"You won't bring *any!*" Sawtelle thundered. "Hilton, I had enough of your stupid, starry-eyed, ivory-domed blundering long ago, but this utterly idiotic brainstorm of letting enemy aliens aboard us ends all civilian command. Call your people back aboard or I will bring them in by force!"

"Very well, sir. Sandy, tell the natives that a slight delay has become necessary and bring your party aboard."

The Navy officers smiled—or grinned—gloatingly; while the scientists stared at their director with expressions ranging from surprise to disappointment and disgust. Hilton's face remained set, expressionless, until Sandra and her party had arrived.

"Captain Sawtelle," he said then, "I thought that you and I had settled in private the question of who is in command of Project Theta Orionis at destination. We will now settle it in public. Your opinion of me is now on record, witnessed by your officers and by my staff. My opinion of you, which

is now being similarly recorded and witnessed, is that you are a hidebound, mentally ossified Navy mule; mentally and psychologically unfit to have any voice in any such mission as this. You will now agree on this recording and before these witnesses, to obey my orders unquestioningly or I will now unload all Bureau of Science personnel and equipment onto this planet and send you and the *Perseus* back to Terra with the doubly-sealed record of this episode posted to the Advisory Board. Take your choice."

Eyes locked, and under Hilton's uncompromising stare Sawtelle weakened. He fidgeted; tried three times—unsuccessfully—to blare defiance. Then, "Very well sir," he said, and saluted.

"THANK you, sir," Hilton said, then turned to his staff. "Okay, Sandy, go ahead."

Outside the control room door, "Thank God you don't play poker, Jarve!" Karns gasped. "We'd all owe you all the pay we'll ever get!"

"You think it was the bluff, yes?" de Vaux asked. "Me, I think no. Name of a name of a name! I was wondering with unease what life would be like on this so-alien planet!"

"You didn't need to wonder, Tiny," Hilton assured him. "It was in the bag. He's incapable of abandonment."

Beverly Bell, the van der Moen twins and Temple Bells all stared at Hilton in awe; and Sandra felt much the same way.

"But suppose he *had* called you?" Sandra demanded.

"Speculating on the impossible is unprofitable," he said.

"Oh, you're the most *exasperating* thing!" Sandra stamped a foot. "Don't you—*ever*—answer a question intelligibly?"

"When the question is meaningless, chick, I can't."

At the lock Temple Bells, who had been hanging back, cocked an eyebrow at Hilton and he made his way to her side.

"What was it you started to say back there, boss?"

"Oh, yes. That we should see each other oftener."

"That's what I was hoping you were going to say." She put her hand under his elbow and pressed his arm lightly, fleetingly, against her side. "That would be indubitably the fondest thing I could be of."

He laughed and gave her arm a friendly squeeze. Then he studied her again, the most baffling member of his staff. About five feet six. Lithe, hard, trained down fine—as a tennis champion, she would be. Stacked—*how* she was stacked! Not as beautiful as Sandra or Teddy ... but with an ungodly lot of something that neither of them had ... nor any other woman he had ever known.

"Yes, I am a little difficult to classify," she said quietly, almost reading his mind.

"That's the understatement of the year! But I'm making some progress."

"Such as?" This was an open challenge.

"Except possibly Teddy, the best brain aboard."

"That isn't true, but go ahead."

"You're a powerhouse. A tightly organized, thoroughly integrated, smoothly functioning, beautifully camouflaged Juggernaut. A reasonable facsimile of an irresistible force."

"My God, Jarvis!" That had gone deep.

"Let me finish my analysis. You aren't head of your department because you don't want to be. You fooled the top psychs of the Board. You've been running ninety per cent submerged because you can work better that way and there's no glory-hound blood in you."

She stared at him, licking her lips. "I knew your mind was a razor, but I didn't know it was a diamond drill, too. That seals your doom, boss, unless ... no, you can't *possibly* know why I'm here."

"Why, of course I do."

"You just think you do. You see, I've been in love with you ever since, as a gangling, bony, knobby-kneed kid, I listened to your first doctorate disputation. Ever since then, my purpose in life has been to land you."