

SPACE PRISON

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(ORIGINAL TITLE: *The Survivors*)

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PHOENIX PICK

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To

JOE AND BLANCHE KOLARIK,

*whose friendship and encouragement in the years gone by
will never be forgotten.*

AFTER TWO CENTURIES....

The sound came swiftly nearer, rising in pitch and swelling in volume. Then it broke through the clouds, tall and black and beautifully deadly—the Gern battle cruiser, come to seek them out and destroy them.

Humbolt dropped inside the stockade, exulting. For two hundred years his people had been waiting for the chance to fight the mighty Gern Empire ...

... with bows and arrows against blasters and bombs!

PART 1



For seven weeks the Constellation had been plunging through hyperspace with her eight thousand colonists; fleeing like a hunted thing with her communicators silenced and her drives moaning and thundering. Up in the control room, Irene had been told, the needles of the dials danced against the red danger lines day and night.

She lay in bed and listened to the muffled, ceaseless roar of the drives and felt the singing vibration of the hull. *We should be almost safe by now*, she thought. *Athena is only forty days away.*

Thinking of the new life awaiting them all made her too restless to lie still any longer. She got up, to sit on the edge of the bed and switch on the light. Dale was gone—he had been summoned to adjust one of the machines in the ship's X-ray room—and Billy was asleep, nothing showing of him above the covers but a crop of brown hair and the furry nose of his ragged teddy bear.

She reached out to straighten the covers, gently, so as not to awaken him. It happened then, the thing they had all feared.

From the stern of the ship came a jarring, deafening explosion. The ship lurched violently, girders screamed, and the light flicked out.

In the darkness she heard a rapid-fire *thunk-thunk-thunk* as the automatic guard system slid inter-compartment doors shut against sections of the ship suddenly airless. The doors were still thudding shut when another explosion came, from toward the bow. Then there was silence; a feeling of utter quiet and motionlessness.

The fingers of fear enclosed her and her mind said to her, like the cold, unpassionate voice of a stranger: *The Gerns have found us.*

The light came on again, a feeble glow, and there was the soft, muffled sound of questioning voices in the other compartments. She dressed, her fingers shaking and clumsy, wishing that Dale would come to reassure her; to tell her that nothing really serious had happened, that it had not been the Gerns.

It was very still in the little compartment—strangely so. She had finished dressing when she realized the reason: the air circulation system had stopped working.

That meant the power failure was so great that the air regenerators, themselves, were dead. And there were eight thousand people on the *Constellation* who would have to have air to live....

The *Attention* buzzer sounded shrilly from the public address system speakers that were scattered down the ship's corridors. A voice she recognized as that of Lieutenant Commander Lake spoke:

“War was declared upon Earth by the Gern Empire ten days ago. Two Gern cruisers have attacked us and their blasters have destroyed the stern and bow of the ship. We are without a drive and without power but for a few emergency batteries. I am the *Constellation's* only surviving officer and the Gern commander is boarding us to give me the surrender terms.

“None of you will leave your compartments until ordered to do so. Wherever you may be, remain there. This is necessary to avoid confusion and to have as many as possible in known locations for future instructions. I repeat: you will not leave your compartments.”

The speaker cut off. She stood without moving and heard again the words: *I am the Constellation's only surviving officer...*

The Gerns had killed her father.

He had been second-in-command of the Dunbar expedition that had discovered the world of Athena and his knowledge of Athena was valuable to the colonization plans. He had been quartered among the ship's officers—and the Gern blast had destroyed that section of the ship.

She sat down on the edge of the bed again and tried to reorient herself; to accept the fact that her life and the lives of all the others had abruptly, irrevocably, been changed.

The Athena Colonization Plan was ended. They had known such a thing might happen—that was why the *Constellation* had been made ready for the voyage in secret and had waited for months for the chance to slip through the ring of Gern spy ships; that was

why she had raced at full speed, with her communicators silenced so there would be no radiations for the Gerns to find her by. Only forty days more would have brought them to the green and virgin world of Athena, four hundred light-years beyond the outermost boundary of the Gern Empire. There they should have been safe from Gern detection for many years to come; for long enough to build planetary defenses against attack. And there they would have used Athena's rich resources to make ships and weapons to defend mineral-depleted Earth against the inexorably increasing inclosure of the mighty, coldly calculating colossus that was the Gern Empire.

Success or failure of the Athena Plan had meant ultimate life or death for Earth. They had taken every precaution possible but the Gern spy system had somehow learned of Athena and the *Constellation*. Now, the cold war was no longer cold and the Plan was dust...



Billy sighed and stirred in the little-boy sleep that had not been broken by the blasts that had altered the lives of eight thousand people and the fate of a world.

She shook his shoulder and said, "Billy."

He raised up, so small and young to her eyes that the question in her mind was like an anguished prayer: *Dear God—what do Gerns do to five-year-old boys?*

He saw her face, and the dim light, and the sleepiness was suddenly gone from him. "What's wrong, Mama? And why are you scared?"

There was no reason to lie to him.

"The Gerns found us and stopped us."

"Oh," he said. In his manner was the grave thoughtfulness of a boy twice his age, as there always was. "Will they—will they kill us?"

"Get dressed, honey," she said. "Hurry, so we'll be ready when they let Daddy come back to tell us what to do."



They were both ready when the *Attention* buzzer sounded again in the corridors. Lake spoke, his tone grim and bitter:

"There is no power for the air regenerators and within twenty hours we will start smothering to death. Under these circumstances I could not do other than accept the survival terms the Gern commander offered us.

“He will speak to you now and you will obey his orders without protest. Death is the only alternative.”

Then the voice of the Gern commander came, quick and harsh and brittle:

“This section of space, together with planet Athena, is an extension of the Gern Empire. This ship has deliberately invaded Gern territory in time of war with intent to seize and exploit a Gern world. We are willing, however, to offer a leniency not required by the circumstances. Terran technicians and skilled workers in certain fields can be used in the factories we shall build on Athena. The others will not be needed and there is not room on the cruisers to take them.

“Your occupation records will be used to divide you into two groups: the Acceptables and the Rejects. The Rejects will be taken by the cruisers to an Earth-type planet near here and left, together with the personal possessions in their compartments and additional, and ample, supplies. The Acceptables will then be taken on to Athena and at a later date the cruisers will return the Rejects to Earth.

“This division will split families but there will be no resistance to it. Gern guards will be sent immediately to make this division and you will wait in your compartments for them. You will obey their orders promptly and without annoying them with questions. At the first instance of resistance or rebellion this offer will be withdrawn and the cruisers will go their way again.”



In the silence following the ultimatum she could hear the soft, wordless murmur from the other compartments, the undertone of anxiety like a dark thread through it. In every compartment parents and children, brothers and sisters, were seeing one another for the last time....

The corridor outside rang to the tramp of feet; the sound of a dozen Gerns walking with swift military precision. She held her breath, her heart racing, but they went past her door and on to the corridor's end.

There she could faintly hear them entering compartments, demanding names, and saying, “*Out—out!*” Once she heard a Gern say, “Acceptables will remain inside until further notice. Do not open your doors after the Rejects have been taken out.”

Billy touched her on the hand. “Isn't Daddy going to come?”

“He—he can’t right now. We’ll see him pretty soon.”

She remembered what the Gern commander had said about the Rejects being permitted to take their personal possessions. She had very little time in which to get together what she could carry...

There were two small bags in the compartment and she hurried to pack them with things she and Dale and Billy might need, not able to know which of them, if any, would be Rejects. Nor could she know whether she should put in clothes for a cold world or a hot one. The Gern commander had said the Rejects would be left on an Earth-type planet but where could it be? The Dunbar Expedition had explored across five hundred light-years of space and had found only one Earth-type world: Athena.

The Gerns were almost to her door when she had finished and she heard them enter the compartments across from her own. There came the hard, curt questions and the command: “Outside—hurry!” A woman said something in pleading question and there was the soft thud of a blow and the words: “Outside—do not ask questions!” A moment later she heard the woman going down the corridor, trying to hold back her crying.

Then the Gerns were at her own door.

She held Billy’s hand and waited for them with her heart hammering. She held her head high and composed herself with all the determination she could muster so that the arrogant Gerns would not see that she was afraid. Billy stood beside her as tall as his five years would permit, his teddy bear under his arm, and only the way his hand held to hers showed that he, too, was scared.

The door was flung open and two Gerns strode in.

They were big, dark men, with powerful, bulging muscles. They surveyed her and the room with a quick sweep of eyes that were like glittering obsidian, their mouths thin, cruel slashes in the flat, brutal planes of their faces.

“Your name?” snapped the one who carried a sheaf of occupation records.

“It’s”—she tried to swallow the quaver in her voice and make it cool and unfrightened—“Irene Lois Humbolt—Mrs. Dale Humbolt.”

The Gern glanced at the papers. “Where is your husband?”

“He was in the X-ray room at—”

“You are a Reject. Out—down the corridor with the others.”

“My husband—will he be a—”

"Outside!"

It was the tone of voice that had preceded the blow in the other compartment and the Gern took a quick step toward her. She seized the two bags in one hand, not wanting to release Billy, and swung back to hurry out into the corridor. The other Gern jerked one of the bags from her hand and flung it to the floor. "Only one bag per person," he said, and gave her an impatient shove that sent her and Billy stumbling through the doorway.

She became part of the Rejects who were being herded like sheep down the corridors and into the port airlock. There were many children among them, the young ones frightened and crying, and often with only one parent or an older brother or sister to take care of them. And there were many young ones who had no one at all and were dependent upon strangers to take their hands and tell them what they must do.

When she was passing the corridor that led to the X-ray room she saw a group of Rejects being herded up it. Dale was not among them and she knew, then, that she and Billy would never see him again.



"Out from the ship—faster—faster—"

The commands of the Gern guards snapped like whips around them as she and the other Rejects crowded and stumbled down the boarding ramp and out onto the rocky ground. There was the pull of a terrible gravity such as she had never experienced and they were in a bleak, barren valley, a cold wind moaning down it and whipping the alkali dust in bitter clouds. Around the valley stood ragged hills, their white tops laying out streamers of wind-driven snow, and the sky was dark with sunset.

"Out from the ship—faster—"

It was hard to walk fast in the high gravity, carrying the bag in one hand and holding up all of Billy's weight she could with the other.

"They lied to us!" a man beside her said to someone. "Let's turn and fight. Let's take—"

A Gern blaster cracked with a vivid blue flash and the man plunged lifelessly to the ground. She flinched instinctively and fell over an unseen rock, the bag of precious clothes flying from her hand. She scrambled up again, her left knee half numb, and turned to retrieve it.

The Gern guard was already upon her, his blaster still in his hand. "Out from the ship—faster."

The barrel of his blaster lashed across the side of her head. "Move on—move on!"

She staggered in a blinding blaze of pain and then hurried on, holding tight to Billy's hand, the wind cutting like knives of ice through her thin clothes and blood running in a trickle down her cheek.

"He hit you," Billy said. "He hurt you." Then he called the Gern a name that five-year-old boys were not supposed to know, with a savagery that five-year-old boys were not supposed to possess.

When she stopped at the outer fringe of Rejects she saw that all of them were out of the cruiser and the guards were going back into it. A half mile down the valley the other cruiser stood, the Rejects out from it and its boarding ramps already withdrawn.

When she had buttoned Billy's blouse tighter and wiped the blood from her face the first blast of the drives came from the farther cruiser. The nearer one blasted a moment later and they lifted together, their roaring filling the valley. They climbed faster and faster, dwindling as they went. Then they disappeared in the black sky, their roaring faded away, and there was left only the moaning of the wind around her and somewhere a child crying.

And somewhere a voice asking, "Where are we? In the name of God—what have they done to us?"

She looked at the snow streaming from the ragged hills, felt the hard pull of the gravity, and knew where they were. They were on Ragnarok, the hell-world of 1.5 gravity and fierce beasts and raging fevers where men could not survive. The name came from an old Teutonic myth and meant: *The last day for gods and men*. The Dunbar Expedition had discovered Ragnarok and her father had told her of it, of how it had killed six of the eight men who had left the ship and would have killed all of them if they had remained any longer.

She knew where they were and she knew the Gerns had lied to them and would never send a ship to take them to Earth. Their abandonment there had been intended as a death sentence for all of them.

And Dale was gone and she and Billy would die helpless and alone....

"It will be dark—so soon." Billy's voice shook with the cold. "If Daddy can't find us in the dark, what will we do?"

"I don't know," she said. "There's no one to help us and how can I know—what we should do—"

She was from the city. How could she know what to do on an alien, hostile world where armed explorers had died? She had tried to be brave before the Gerns but now—now night was at hand and out of it would come terror and death for herself and Billy. They would never see Dale again, never see Athena or Earth or even the dawn on the world that had killed them....

She tried not to cry, and failed. Billy's cold little hand touched her own, trying to reassure her.

"Don't cry, Mama. I guess—I guess everybody else is scared, too."
Everyone else....

She was not alone. How could she have thought she was alone? All around her were others, as helpless and uncertain as she. Her story was only one out of four thousand.

"I guess they are, Billy," she said. "I never thought of that, before."

She knelt to put her arms around him, thinking: *Tears and fear are futile weapons; they can never bring us any tomorrows. We'll have to fight whatever comes to kill us no matter how scared we are. For ourselves and for our children. Above all else, for our children....*

"I'm going back to find our clothes," she said. "You wait here for me, in the shelter of that rock, and I won't be gone long."

Then she told him what he would be too young to really understand.

"I'm not going to cry any more and I know, now, what I must do. I'm going to make sure that there is a tomorrow for you, always, to the last breath of my life."



The bright blue star dimmed and the others faded away. Dawn touched the sky, bringing with it a coldness that frosted the steel of the rifle in John Prentiss's hands and formed beads of ice on his gray mustache. There was a stirring in the area behind him as the weary Rejects prepared to face the new day and the sound of a child whimpering from the cold. There had been no time the evening before to gather wood for fires—

"Prowlers!"

The warning cry came from an outer guard and black shadows were suddenly sweeping out of the dark dawn.

They were things that might have been half wolf, half tiger; each of them three hundred pounds of incredible ferocity with eyes blazing like yellow fire in their white-fanged tiger-wolf faces. They came like the wind, in a flowing black wave, and ripped through the outer guard line as though it had not existed. The inner guards fired in a chattering roll of gunshots, trying to turn them, and Prentiss's rifle licked out pale tongues of flame as he added his own fire. The prowlers came on, breaking through, but part of them went down and the others were swerved by the fire so that they struck only the outer edge of the area where the Rejects were grouped.

At that distance they blended into the dark ground so that he could not find them in the sights of his rifle. He could only watch helplessly and see a dark-haired woman caught in their path, trying to run with a child in her arms and already knowing it was too late. A man was running toward her, slow in the high gravity, an axe in his hands and his cursing a raging, savage snarl. For a moment her white face was turned in helpless appeal to him and the others; then the prowlers were upon her and she fell, deliberately, going to the ground with her child hugged in her arms beneath her so that her body would protect it.

The prowlers passed over her, pausing for an instant to slash the life from her, and raced on again. They vanished back into the outer darkness, the farther guards firing futilely, and there was a silence but for the distant, hysterical sobbing of a woman.

It had happened within seconds; the fifth prowler attack that night and the mildest.



Full dawn had come by the time he replaced the guards killed by the last attack and made the rounds of the other guard lines. He came back by the place where the prowlers had killed the woman, walking wearily against the pull of gravity. She lay with her dark hair tumbled and stained with blood, her white face turned up to the reddening sky, and he saw her clearly for the first time.

It was Irene.

He stopped, gripping the cold steel of the rifle and not feeling the rear sight as it cut into his hand.

Irene.... He had not known she was on Ragnarok. He had not seen her in the darkness of the night and he had hoped she and Billy were safe among the Acceptables with Dale.

There was the sound of footsteps and a bold-faced girl in a red skirt stopped beside him, her glance going over him curiously.

"The little boy," he asked, "do you know if he's all right?"

"The prowlers cut up his face but he'll be all right," she said. "I came back after his clothes."

"Are you going to look after him?"

"Someone has to and"—she shrugged her shoulders—"I guess I was soft enough to elect myself for the job. Why—was his mother a friend of yours?"

"She was my daughter," he said.

"Oh." For a moment the bold, brassy look was gone from her face, like a mask that had slipped. "I'm sorry. And I'll take care of Billy."



The first objection to his assumption of leadership occurred an hour later. The prowlers had withdrawn with the coming of full daylight and wood had been carried from the trees to build fires. Mary, one of the volunteer cooks, was asking two men to carry her some water when he approached. The smaller man picked up one of the clumsy containers, hastily improvised from canvas, and started toward the creek. The other, a big, thick-chested man, did not move.

"We'll have to have water," Mary said. "People are hungry and cold and sick."

The man continued to squat by the fire, his hands extended to its warmth. "Name someone else," he said.

"But—"

She looked at Prentiss in uncertainty. He went to the thick-chested man, knowing there would be violence and welcoming it as something to help drive away the vision of Irene's pale, cold face under the red sky.

"She asked you to get her some water," he said. "Get it."

The man looked up at him, studying him with deliberate insolence, then he got to his feet, his heavy shoulders hunched challengingly.

"I'll have to set you straight, old timer," he said. "No one has appointed you the head cheese around here. Now, there's the container

you want filled and over there”—he made a small motion with one hand—“is the creek. Do you know what to do?”

“Yes,” he said. “I know what to do.”

He brought the butt of the rifle smashing up. It struck the man under the chin and there was a sharp cracking sound as his jawbone snapped. For a fraction of a second there was an expression of stupefied amazement on his face then his eyes glazed and he slumped to the ground with his broken jaw setting askew.

“All right,” he said to Mary. “Now you go ahead and name somebody else.”



He found that the prowlers had killed seventy during the night. One hundred more had died from the Hell Fever that often followed exposure and killed within an hour.

He went the half mile to the group that had arrived on the second cruiser as soon as he had eaten a delayed breakfast. He saw, before he had quite reached the other group, that the *Constellation's* Lieutenant Commander, Vincent Lake, was in charge of it.

Lake, a tall, hard-jawed man with pale blue eyes under pale brows, walked forth to meet him as soon as he recognized him.

“Glad to see you’re still alive,” Lake greeted him. “I thought that second Gern blast got you along with the others.”

“I was visiting midship and wasn’t home when it happened,” he said.

He looked at Lake’s group of Rejects, in their misery and uncertainty so much like his own, and asked, “How was it last night?”

“Bad—damned bad,” Lake said. “Prowlers and Hell Fever, and no wood for fires. Two hundred died last night.”

“I came down to see if anyone was in charge here and to tell them that we’ll have to move into the woods at once—today. We’ll have plenty of wood for the fires there, some protection from the wind, and by combining our defenses we can stand off the prowlers better.”

Lake agreed. When the brief discussion of plans was finished he asked, “How much do you know about Ragnarok?”

“Not much,” Prentiss answered. “We didn’t stay to study it very long. There are no heavy metals on Ragnarok’s other sun. Its position in the advance of the resources of any value. We gave Ragnarok a quick survey and when the sixth man died we marked it on the chart as uninhabitable and went on our way.

“As you probably know, that bright blue star is Ragnarok’s other sun. It’s position in the advance of the yellow sun shows the season to be early spring. When summer comes Ragnarok will swing between the two suns and the heat will be something no human has ever endured. Nor the cold, when winter comes.

“I know of no edible plants, although there might be some. There are a few species of rodent-like animals—they’re scavengers—and a herbivore we called the woods goat. The prowlers are the dominant form of life on Ragnarok and I suspect their intelligence is a good deal higher than we would like it to be. There will be a constant battle for survival with them.

“There’s another animal, not as intelligent as the prowlers but just as dangerous—the unicorn. The unicorns are big and fast and they travel in herds. I haven’t seen any here so far—I hope we don’t. At the lower elevations are the swamp crawlers. They’re unadulterated nightmares. I hope they don’t go to these higher elevations in the summer. The prowlers and the Hell Fever, the gravity and heat and cold and starvation, will be enough for us to have to fight.”

“I see,” Lake said. He smiled, a smile that was as bleak as moonlight on an arctic glacier. “Earth-type—remember the promise the Gerns made the Rejects?” He looked out across the camp, at the snow whipping from the frosty hills, at the dead and the dying, and a little girl trying vainly to awaken her brother.

“They were condemned, without reason, without a chance to live,” he said. “So many of them are so young ... and when you’re young it’s too soon to have to die.”



Prentiss returned to his own group. The dead were buried in shallow graves and inventory was taken of the promised “ample supplies.” These were only the few personal possessions the Rejects had been permitted to take plus a small amount of food the Gerns had taken from the *Constellation’s* stores. The Gerns had been forced to provide the Rejects with at least a little food—had they openly left them to starve, the Acceptables, whose families were among the Rejects, might have rebelled.

Inventory of the firearms and ammunition showed the total to be discouragingly small. They would have to learn how to make and use bows and arrows as soon as possible.

With the first party of guards and workmen following him, Prentiss went to the tributary valley that emptied into the central valley a mile to the north. It was as good a camp site as could be hoped for; wide and thickly spotted with groves of trees, a creek running down its center.

The workmen began the construction of shelters and he climbed up the side of the nearer hill. He reached its top, his breath coming fast in the gravity that was the equivalent of a burden half his own weight, and saw what the surrounding terrain was like.

To the south, beyond the barren valley, the land could be seen dropping in its long sweep to the southern lowlands where the unicorns and swamp crawlers lived. To the north the hills climbed gently for miles, then ended under the steeply sloping face of an immense plateau. The plateau reached from western to eastern horizon, still white with the snows of winter and looming so high above the world below that the clouds brushed it and half obscured it.

He went back down the hill as Lake's men appeared. They started work on what would be a continuation of his own camp and he told Lake what he had seen from the hill.

"We're between the lowlands and the highlands," he said. "This will be as near to a temperate altitude as Ragnarok has. We survive here—or else. There's no other place for us to go."

An overcast darkened the sky at noon and the wind died down to almost nothing. There was a feeling of waiting tension in the air and he went back to the Rejects, to speed their move into the woods. They were already going in scattered groups, accompanied by prowler guards, but there was no organization and it would be too long before the last of them were safely in the new camp.

He could not be two places at once—he needed a subleader to oversee the move of the Rejects and their possessions into the woods and their placement after they got there.

He found the man he wanted already helping the Rejects get started: a thin, quiet man named Henry Anders who had fought well against the prowlers the night before, even though his determination had been greater than his marksmanship. He was the type people instinctively liked and trusted; a good choice for the subleader whose job it would be to handle the multitude of details in camp while he, Prentiss, and a second subleader he would select, handled the defense of the camp and the hunting.

"I don't like this overcast," he told Anders. "Something's brewing. Get everyone moved and at work helping build shelters as soon as you can."

"I can have most of them there within an hour or two," Anders said. "Some of the older people, though, will have to take it slow. This gravity—it's already getting the hearts of some of them."

"How are the children taking the gravity?" he asked.

"The babies and the very young—it's hard to tell about them yet. But the children from about four on up get tired quickly, go to sleep, and when they wake up they've sort of bounced back out of it."

"Maybe they can adapt to some extent to this gravity." He thought of what Lake had said that morning: *So many of them are so young ... and when you're young it's too soon to have to die.* "Maybe the Gerns made a mistake—maybe Terran children aren't as easy to kill as they thought. It's your job and mine and others to give the children the chance to prove the Gerns wrong."

He went his way again to pass by the place where Julia, the girl who had become Billy's foster-mother, was preparing to go to the new camp.

It was the second time for him to see Billy that morning. The first time Billy had still been stunned with grief, and at the sight of his grandfather he had been unable to keep from breaking.

"The Gern hit her," he had sobbed, his torn face bleeding anew as it twisted in crying. "He hurt her, and Daddy was gone and then—and then the other things killed her—"

But now he had had a little time to accept what had happened and he was changed. He was someone much older, almost a man, trapped for a while in the body of a five-year-old boy.

"I guess this is all, Billy," Julia was saying as she gathered up her scanty possessions and Irene's bag. "Get your teddy bear and we'll go."

Billy went to his teddy bear and knelt down to pick it up. Then he stopped and said something that sounded like *No.* He laid the teddy bear back down, wiping a little dust from its face as in a last gesture of farewell, and stood up to face Julia empty-handed.

"I don't think I'll want to play with my teddy bear any more," he said. "I don't think I'll ever want to play at all anymore."

Then he went to walk beside her, leaving his teddy bear lying on the ground behind him and with it leaving forever the tears and laughter of childhood.



The overcast deepened, and at midafternoon dark storm clouds came driving in from the west. Efforts were intensified to complete the move before the storm broke, both in his section of the camp and in Lake's. The shelters would be of critical importance and they were being built of the materials most quickly available; dead limbs, brush, and the limited amount of canvas and blankets the Rejects had. They would be inadequate protection but there was no time to build anything better.

It seemed only a few minutes until the black clouds were overhead, rolling and racing at an incredible velocity. With them came the deep roar of the high wind that drove them and the wind on the ground began to stir restlessly in response, like some monster awakening to the call of its kind.

Prentiss knew already who he wanted as his other subleader. He found him hard at work helping build shelters; Howard Craig, a powerfully muscled man with a face as hard and grim as a cliff of granite. It had been Craig who had tried to save Irene from the prowlers that morning with only an axe as a weapon.

Prentiss knew him slightly—and Craig still did not know Irene had been his daughter. Craig had been one of the field engineers for what would have been the Athena Geological Survey. He had had a wife, a frail, blonde girl who had been the first of all to die of Hell Fever the night before, and he still had their three small children.

"We'll stop with the shelters we already have built," he told Craig. "It will take all the time left to us to reinforce them against the wind. I need someone to help me, in addition to Anders. You're the one I want.

"Send some young and fast-moving men back to last night's camp to cut all the strips of prowler skins they can get. Everything about the shelters will have to be lashed down to something solid. See if you can find some experienced outdoorsmen to help you check the jobs.

"And tell Anders that women and children only will be placed in the shelters. There will be no room for anyone else and if any man, no matter what the excuse, crowds out a woman or child I'll personally kill him."

“You needn’t bother,” Craig said. He smiled with savage mirthlessness. “I’ll be glad to take care of any such incidents.”

Prentiss saw to it that the piles of wood for the guard fires were ready to be lighted when the time came. He ordered all guards to their stations, there to get what rest they could. They would have no rest at all after darkness came.

He met Lake at the north end of his own group’s camp, where it merged with Lake’s group and no guard line was needed. Lake told him that his camp would be as well prepared as possible under the circumstances within another hour. By then the wind in the trees was growing swiftly stronger, slapping harder and harder at the shelters, and it seemed doubtful that the storm would hold off for an hour.

But Lake was given his hour, plus half of another. Then deep dusk came, although it was not quite sundown. Prentiss ordered all the guard fires lighted and all the women and children into the shelters. Fifteen minutes later the storm finally broke.

It came as a roaring downpour of cold rain. Complete darkness came with it and the wind rose to a velocity that made the trees lean. An hour went by and the wind increased, smashing at the shelters with a violence they had not been built to withstand. The prowler skin lashings held but the canvas and blankets were ripped into streamers that cracked like rifle shots in the wind before they were torn completely loose and flung into the night.

One by one the guard fires went out and the rain continued, growing colder and driven in almost horizontal sheets by the wind. The women and children huddled in chilled misery in what meager protection the torn shelters still gave and there was nothing that could be done to help them.

The rain turned to snow at midnight, a howling blizzard through which Prentiss’s light could penetrate but a few feet as he made his rounds. He walked with slogging weariness, forcing himself on. He was no longer young—he was fifty—and he had had little rest.

He had known, of course, that successful leadership would involve more sacrifice on his part than on the part of those he led. He could have shunned responsibility and his personal welfare would have benefited. He had lived on alien worlds almost half his life; with a rifle and a knife he could have lived, until Ragnarok finally killed him, with much less effort than that required of him as

leader. But such an action had been repugnant to him, unthinkable. What he knew of survival on hostile worlds might help the others to survive.

So he had assumed command, tolerating no objections and disregarding the fact that he would be shortening his already short time to live on Ragnarok. It was, he supposed, some old instinct that forbade the individual to stand aside and let the group die.

The snow stopped an hour later and the wind died to a frigid moaning. The clouds thinned, broke apart, and the giant star looked down upon the land with its cold, blue light.

The prowlers came then.

They feinted against the east and west guard lines, then hit the south line in massed, ferocious attack. Twenty got through, past the slaughtered south guards, and charged into the interior of the camp. As they did so the call, prearranged by him in case of such an event, went up the guard lines:

“Emergency guards, east and west—*close in!*”

In the camp, above the triumphant, demoniac yammering of the prowlers, came the screams of women, the thinner cries of children, and the shouting and cursing of men as they tried to fight the prowlers with knives and clubs. Then the emergency guards—every third man from the east and west lines—came plunging through the snow, firing as they came.

The prowlers launched themselves away from their victims and toward the guards, leaving a woman to stagger aimlessly with blood spurting from a severed artery and splashing dark in the starlight on the blue-white snow. The air was filled with the crackling of gunfire and the deep, savage snarling of the prowlers. Half of the prowlers broke through, leaving seven dead guards behind them. The others lay in the snow where they had fallen and the surviving emergency guards turned to hurry back to their stations, reloading as they went.

The wounded woman had crumpled down in the snow and a first aid man knelt over her. He straightened, shaking his head, and joined the others as they searched for injured among the prowlers’ victims.

They found no injured; only the dead. The prowlers killed with grim efficiency.



“John—”

John Chiara, the young doctor, hurried toward him. His dark eyes were worried behind his frosted glasses and his eyebrows were coated with ice.

“The wood is soaked,” he said. “It’s going to be some time before we can get fires going. There are babies that will freeze to death before then.”

Prentiss looked at the prowlers lying in the snow and motioned toward them. “They’re warm. Have their guts and lungs taken out.”

“What—”

Then Chiara’s eyes lighted with comprehension and he hurried away without further questions.

Prentiss went on, to make the rounds of the guards. When he returned he saw that his order had been obeyed.

The prowlers lay in the snow as before, their savage faces still twisted in their dying snarls, but snug and warm inside them babies slept.



The prowlers attacked again and again and when the wan sun lifted to shine down on the white, frozen land there were five hundred dead in Prentiss’s camp: three hundred by Hell Fever and two hundred by prowler attacks.

Five hundred—and that had been only one night on Ragnarok.

Lake reported over six hundred dead. “I hope,” he said with bitter hatred, “that the Gerns slept comfortably last night.”

“We’ll have to build a wall around the camp to hold out the prowlers,” Prentiss said. “We don’t dare keep using up what little ammunition we have at the rate we’ve used it the last two nights.”

“That will be a big job in this gravity,” Lake said. “We’ll have to crowd both groups in together to let its circumference be as small as possible.”

It was the way Prentiss had planned to do it. One thing would have to be settled with Lake: there could not be two independent leaders over the merged groups.

Lake, watching him, said, “I think we can get along. Alien worlds are your specialty rather than mine. And according to the Ragnarok law of averages, there will be only one of us pretty soon, anyway.”

All were moved to the center of the camp area that day and when the prowlers came that night they found a ring of guards and fires through which they could penetrate only with heavy sacrifices.

There was warmth to the sun the next morning and the snow began to melt. Work was commenced on the stockade wall. It would have to be twelve feet high so the prowlers could not jump over it and, since the prowlers had the sharp claws and climbing ability of cats, its top would have to be surmounted with a row of sharp outward-and-downward projecting stakes. These would be set in sockets in the top rail and tied down with strips of prowler skin.

The trees east of camp were festooned for a great distance with the remnants of canvas and cloth the wind had left there. A party of boys, protected by the usual prowler guards, was sent out to climb the trees and recover it. All of it, down to the smallest fragment, was turned over to the women who were physically incapable of helping work on the stockade wall. They began patiently sewing the rags and tatters back into usable form again.

The first hunting party went out and returned with six of the tawny-yellow sharp-horned woods goats, each as large as an Earth deer. The hunters reported the woods goats to be hard to stalk and dangerous when cornered. One hunter was killed and another injured because of not knowing that.

They also brought in a few of the rabbit-sized scavenger animals. They were all legs and teeth and bristly fur, the meat almost inedible. It would be a waste of the limited ammunition to shoot any more of them.

There was a black barked tree which the Dunbar Expedition had called the lance tree because of its slender, straightly outthrust limbs. Its wood was as hard as hickory and as springy as cedar. Prentiss found two amateur archers who were sure they could make efficient bows and arrows out of the lance tree limbs. He gave them the job, together with helpers.

The days turned suddenly hot, with nights that still went below freezing. The Hell Fever took a constant, relentless toll. They needed adequate shelters—but the dwindling supply of ammunition and the nightly prowler attacks made the need for a stockade wall even more imperative. The shelters would have to wait.

He went looking for Dr. Chiara one evening and found him just leaving one of the makeshift shelters.

A boy lay inside it, his face flushed with Hell Fever and his eyes too bright and too dark as he looked up into the face of his mother who sat beside him. She was dry-eyed and silent as she looked down at him but she was holding his hand in hers, tightly, desperately, as though she might that way somehow keep him from leaving her.

Prentiss walked beside Chiara and when the shelter was behind them he asked, "There's no hope?"

"None," Chiara said. "There never is with Hell Fever."

Chiara had changed. He was no longer the stocky, cheerful man he had been on the *Constellation*, whose brown eyes had smiled at the world through thick glasses and who had laughed and joked as he assured his patients that all would soon be well with them. He was thin and his face was haggard with worry. He had, in his quiet way, been fully as valiant as any of those who had fought the prowlers. He had worked day and night to fight a form of death he could not see and against which he had no weapon.

"The boy is dying," Chiara said. "He knows it and his mother knows it. I told them the medicine I gave him might help. It was a lie, to try to make it a little easier for both of them before the end comes. The medicine I gave him was a salt tablet—that's all I have."

And then, with the first bitterness Prentiss had ever seen him display, Chiara said, "You call me 'Doctor.' Everyone does. I'm not—I'm only a first-year intern. I do the best I know how to do but it isn't enough—it will never be enough."

"What you have to learn here is something no Earth doctor knows or could teach you," he said. "You have to have time to learn—and you need equipment and drugs."

"If I could have antibiotics and other drugs ... I wanted to get a supply from the dispensary but the Gerns wouldn't let me go."

"Some of the Ragnarok plants might be of value if a person could find the right ones. I just came from a talk with Anders about that. He'll provide you with anything possible in the way of equipment and supplies for research—anything in the camp you need to try to save lives. He'll be at your shelter tonight to see what you want. Do you want to try it?"

"Yes—of course." Chiara's eyes lighted with new hope. "It might take a long time to find a cure—maybe we never would—but I'd like to have help so I could try. I'd like to be able, some day once again,

to say to a scared kid, 'Take this medicine and in the morning you'll be better,' and know I told the truth."

The nightly prowler attacks continued and the supply of ammunition diminished. It would be some time before men were skilled in the use of the bows and arrows that were being made; and work on the wall was pushed ahead with all speed possible. No one was exempt from labor on it who could as much as carry the pointed stakes. Children down to the youngest worked alongside the men and women.

The work was made many times more exhausting by the 1.5 gravity. People moved heavily at their jobs and even at night there was no surcease from the gravity. They could only go into a coma-like sleep in which there was no real rest and from which they awoke tired and aching. Each morning there would be some who did not awaken at all, though their hearts had been sound enough for working on Earth or Athena.

The killing labor was recognized as necessary, however, and there were no complaints until the morning he was accosted by Peter Bemmon.

He had seen Bemmon several times on the *Constellation*; a big, soft-faced man who had attached much importance to his role as a minor member of the Athena Planning Board. But even on the *Constellation* Bemmon had felt he merited a still higher position, and his ingratiating attitude when before his superiors had become one of fault-finding insinuations concerning their ability as compared with his when their backs were turned.

This resentment had taken new form on Ragnarok, where his former position was of utterly no importance to anyone and his lack of any skills or outdoor experience made him only one worker among others.

The sun was shining mercilessly hot the day Bemmon chose to challenge Prentiss's wisdom as leader. Bemmon was cutting and sharpening stakes, a job the sometimes-too-lenient Anders had given him when Bemmon had insisted his heart was on the verge of failure from doing heavier work. Prentiss was in a hurry and would have gone on past him but Bemmon halted him with a sharp command:

"You—wait a minute!"

Bemmon had a hatchet in his hand, but only one stake lay on the ground; and his face was red with anger, not exertion. Prentiss

stopped, wondering if Bemmon was going to ask for a broken jaw, and Bemmon came to him.

"How long," Bemmon asked, anger making his voice a little thick, "do you think I'll tolerate this absurd situation?"

"What situation?" Prentiss asked.

"This stupid insistence upon confining me to manual labor. I'm the single member on Ragnarok of the Athena Planning Board and surely you can see that this bumbling confusion of these people"—Bemmon indicated the hurrying, laboring men, women and children around them—"can be transformed into efficient, organized effort only through proper supervision. Yet my abilities along such lines are ignored and I've been forced to work as a common laborer—a wood chopper!"

He flung the hatchet down viciously, into the rocks at his feet, breathing heavily with resentment and challenge. "I demand the respect to which I'm entitled."

"Look," Prentiss said.

He pointed to the group just then going past them. A sixteen-year-old girl was bent almost double under the weight of the pole she was carrying, her once pretty face flushed and sweating. Behind her two twelve-year-old boys were dragging a still larger pole. Behind them came several small children, each of them carrying as many of the pointed stakes as he or she could walk under, no matter if it was only one. All of them were trying to hurry, to accomplish as much as possible, and no one was complaining even though they were already staggering with weariness.

"So you think you're entitled to more respect?" Prentiss asked. "Those kids would work harder if you were giving them orders from under the shade of a tree—is that what you want?"

Bemmon's lips thinned and hatred was like a sheen on his face. Prentiss looked from the single stake Bemmon had cut that morning to Bemmon's white, unblistered hands. He looked at the hatchet that Bemmon had thrown down in the rocks and at the V notch broken in its keen-edged blade. It had been the best of the very few hatchets they had....

"The next time you even nick that hatchet I'm going to split your skull with it," he said. "Pick it up and get back to work. I mean *work*. You'll have broken blisters on every finger tonight or you'll go on the log-carrying force tomorrow. Now, move!"

What Bemmon had thought to be his wrath deserted him before Prentiss's fury. He stooped to obey the order but the hatred remained on his face and when the hatchet was in his hands he made a last attempt to bluster:

"The day may come when we'll refuse to tolerate any longer your sadistic displays of authority."

"Good," Prentiss said. "Anyone who doesn't like my style is welcome to try to change it—or to try to replace me. With knives or clubs, rifles or broken hatchets, Bemmon—any way you want it and any time you want it."

"I—" Bemmon's eyes went from the hatchet in his half raised hand to the long knife in Prentiss's belt. He swallowed with a convulsive jerk of his Adam's apple and his hatchet-bearing arm suddenly wilted. "I don't want to fight—to replace you—"

He swallowed again and his face forced itself into a sickly attempt at an ingratiating smile. "I didn't mean to imply any disrespect for you or the good job you're doing. I'm very sorry."

Then he hurried away, like a man glad to escape, and began to chop stakes with amazing speed.

But the sullen hatred had not been concealed by the ingratiating smile; and Prentiss knew Bemmon was a man who would always be his enemy.



The days dragged by in the weary routine, but overworked muscles slowly strengthened and people moved with a little less laborious effort. On the twentieth day the wall was finally completed and the camp was prowler proof.

But the spring weather was a mad succession of heat and cold and storm that caused the Hell Fever to take its toll each day and there was no relaxation from the grueling labor. Weatherproof shelters had to be built as rapidly as possible.

So the work of constructing them began; wearily, sometimes almost hopelessly, but without complaint other than to hate and curse the Gerns more than ever.

There was no more trouble from Bemmon; Prentiss had almost forgotten him when he was publicly challenged one night by a burly, threatening man named Haggar.

"You've bragged that you'll fight any man who dares disagree with you," Haggar said loudly. "Well, here I am. We'll use knives

and before they even have time to bury you tonight I'm goin' to have your stooges kicked out and replaced with men who'll give us competent leadership instead of blunderin' authoritarianism."

Prentiss noticed that Haggar seemed to have a little difficulty pronouncing the last word, as though he had learned it only recently.

"I'll be glad to accommodate you," Prentiss said mildly. "Go get yourself a knife."

Haggar already had one, a long-bladed butcher knife, and the duel began. Haggar was surprisingly adept with his knife but he had never had the training and experience in combat that interstellar explorers such as Prentiss had. Haggar was good, but considerably far from good enough.

Prentiss did not kill him. He had no compunctions about doing such a thing, but it would have been an unnecessary waste of needed manpower. He gave Haggar a carefully painful and bloody lesson that thoroughly banished all his lust for conflict without seriously injuring him. The duel was over within a minute after it began.

Bemmon, who had witnessed the challenge with keen interest and then watched Haggar's defeat with agitation, became excessively friendly and flattering toward Prentiss afterward. Prentiss felt sure, although he had no proof, that it had been Bemmon who had spurred the simple-minded Haggar into challenging him to a duel.

If so, the sight of what had happened to Haggar must have effectively dampened Bemmon's desire for revenge because he became almost a model worker.



As Lake had predicted, he and Prentiss worked together well. Lake calmly took a secondary role, not at all interested in possession of authority but only in the survival of the Rejects. He spoke of the surrender of the *Constellation* only once, to say:

"I knew there could be only Ragnarok in this section of space. I had to order four thousand people to go like sheep to what was to be their place of execution so that four thousand more could live as slaves. That was my last act as an officer."

Prentiss suspected that Lake found it impossible not to blame himself subconsciously for what circumstances had forced him to do. It was irrational—but conscientious men were quite often a little irrational in their sense of responsibility.

Lake had two subleaders: a genial, red-haired man named Ben Barber, who would have been a farmer on Athena but who made a good subleader on Ragnarok; and a lithe, cat-like man named Karl Schroeder.

Schroeder claimed to be twenty-four but not even the scars on his face could make him look more than twenty-one. He smiled often, a little too often. Prentiss had seen smiles like that before. Schroeder was the type who could smile while he killed a man—and he probably had.

But, if Schroeder was a born fighter and perhaps killer, they were characteristics that he expended entirely upon the prowlers. He was Lake's right hand man; a deadly marksman and utterly without fear.

One evening, when Lake had given Schroeder some instructions concerning the next day's activities, Schroeder answered him with the half-mocking smile and the words, "I'll see that it's done, Commander."

"Not 'Commander,'" Lake said. "I—all of us—left our ranks, titles and honors on the *Constellation*. The past is dead for us."

"I see," Schroeder said. The smile faded away and he looked into Lake's eyes as he asked, "And what about our past dishonors, disgraces and such?"

"They were left on the *Constellation*, too," Lake said. "If anyone wants dishonor he'll have to earn it all over again."

"That sounds fair," Schroeder said. "That sounds as fair as anyone could ever ask for."

He turned away and Prentiss saw what he had noticed before: Schroeder's black hair was coming out light brown at the roots. It was a color that would better match his light complexion and it was the color of hair that a man named Schrader, wanted by the police on Venus, had had.

Hair could be dyed, identification cards could be forged—but it was all something Prentiss did not care to pry into until and if Schroeder gave him reason to. Schroeder was a hard and dangerous man, despite his youth, and sometimes men of that type, when the chips were down, exhibited a higher sense of duty than the soft men who spoke piously of respect for Society—and then were afraid to face danger to protect the society and the people they claimed to respect.



A lone prowler came on the eleventh night following the wall's completion. It came silently, in the dead of night, and it learned how to reach in and tear apart the leather lashings that held the pointed stakes in place and then jerk the stakes out of their sockets. It was seen as it was removing the third stake—which would have made a large enough opening for it to come through—and shot. It fell back and managed to escape into the woods, although staggering and bleeding.

The next night the stockade was attacked by dozens of prowlers who simultaneously began removing the pointed stakes in the same manner employed by the prowler of the night before. Their attack was turned back with heavy losses on both sides and with a dismayingly large expenditure of precious ammunition.

There could be no doubt about how the band of prowlers had learned to remove the stakes: the prowler of the night before had told them before it died. It was doubtful that the prowlers had a spoken language, but they had some means of communication. They worked together and they were highly intelligent, probably about halfway between dog and man.

The prowlers were going to be an enemy even more formidable than Prentiss had thought.

The missing stakes were replaced the next day and the others were tied down more securely. Once again the camp was prowler proof—but only for so long as armed guards patrolled inside the walls to kill attacking prowlers during the short time it would take them to remove the stakes.

The hunting parties suffered unusually heavy losses from prowler attacks that day and that evening, as the guards patrolled inside the walls, Lake said to Prentiss:

“The prowlers are so damnably persistent. It isn't that they're hungry—they don't kill us to eat us. They don't have any reason to kill us—they just hate us.”

“They have a reason,” Prentiss said. “They're doing the same thing we're doing: fighting for survival.”

Lake's pale brows lifted in question.

“The prowlers are the rulers of Ragnarok,” Prentiss said. “They fought their way up here, as men did on Earth, until they're master of every creature on their world. Even of the unicorns and swamp crawlers. But now we've come and they're intelligent enough to know that we're accustomed to being the dominant species, ourselves.”

“There can’t be two dominant species on the same world—and they know it. Men or prowlers—in the end one is going to have to go down before the other.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Lake said. He looked at the guards, a fourth of them already reduced to bows and arrows that they had not yet had time to learn how to use. “If we win the battle for supremacy it will be a long fight, maybe over a period of centuries. And if the prowlers win—it may all be over within a year or two.”



The giant blue star that was the other component of Ragnarok’s binary grew swiftly in size as it preceded the yellow sun farther each morning. When summer came the blue star would be a sun as hot as the yellow sun and Ragnarok would be between them. The yellow sun would burn the land by day and the blue sun would sear it by the night that would not be night. Then would come the brief fall, followed by the long, frozen winter when the yellow sun would shine pale and cold, far to the south, and the blue sun would be a star again, two hundred and fifty million miles away and invisible behind the cold yellow sun.

The Hell Fever lessened with the completion of the shelters but it still killed each day. Chiara and his helpers worked with unfaltering determination to find a cure for it but the cure, if there was one, eluded them. The graves in the cemetery were forty long by forty wide and more were added each day. To all the fact became grimly obvious: they were swiftly dying out and they had yet to face Ragnarok at its worst.

The old survival instincts asserted themselves and there were marriages among the younger ones. One of the first to marry was Julia.

She stopped to talk to Prentiss one evening. She still wore the red skirt, now faded and patched, but her face was tired and thoughtful and no longer bold.

“Is it true, John,” she asked, “that only a few of us might be able to have children here and that most of us who tried to have children in this gravity would die for it?”

“It’s true,” he said. “But you already knew that when you married.”

“Yes ... I knew it.” There was a little silence. “All my life I’ve had fun and done as I pleased. The human race didn’t need me and we

both knew it. But now—none of us can be apart from the others or be afraid of anything. If we're selfish and afraid there will come a time when the last of us will die and there will be nothing on Ragnarok to show we were ever here.

"I don't want it to end like that. I want there to be children, to live after we're gone. So I'm going to try to have a child. I'm not afraid and I won't be."

When he did not reply at once she said, almost self-consciously, "Coming from me that all sounds a little silly, I suppose."

"It sounds wise and splendid, Julia," he said, "and it's what I thought you were going to say."



Full spring came and the vegetation burst into leaf and bud and bloom, quickly, for its growth instincts knew in their mindless way how short was the time to grow and reproduce before the brown death of summer came. The prowlers were suddenly gone one day, to follow the spring north, and for a week men could walk and work outside the stockade without the protection of armed guards.

Then the new peril appeared, the one they had not expected: the unicorns.

The stockade wall was a blue-black rectangle behind them and the blue star burned with the brilliance of a dozen moons, lighting the woods in blue shadow and azure light. Prentiss and the hunter walked a little in front of the two riflemen, winding to keep in the starlit glades.

"It was on the other side of the next grove of trees," the hunter said in a low voice. "Fred was getting ready to bring in the rest of the woods goat. He shouldn't have been more than ten minutes behind me—and it's been over an hour."

They rounded the grove of trees. At first it seemed there was nothing before them but the empty, grassy glade. Then they saw it lying on the ground no more than twenty feet in front of them.

It was—it had been—a man. He was broken and stamped into hideous shapelessness and something had torn off his arms.

For a moment there was dead silence, then the hunter whispered, "*What did that?*"

The answer came in a savage, squealing scream and the pound of cloven hooves. A formless shadow beside the trees materialized

into a monstrous charging bulk; a thing like a gigantic gray bull, eight feet tall at the shoulders, with the tusked, snarling head of a boar and the starlight glinting along the curving, vicious length of its single horn.

“*Unicorn!*” Prentiss said, and jerked up his rifle.

The rifles cracked in a ragged volley. The unicorn squealed in fury and struck the hunter, catching him on its horn and hurling him thirty feet. One of the riflemen went down under the unicorn’s hooves, his cry ending almost as soon as it began.

The unicorn ripped the sod in deep furrows as it whirled back to Prentiss and the remaining rifleman; not turning in the manner of four-footed beasts of Earth but rearing and spinning on its hind feet. It towered above them as it whirled, the tip of its horn fifteen feet above the ground and its hooves swinging around like great clubs.

Prentiss shot again, his sights on what he hoped would be a vital area, and the rifleman shot an instant later.

The shots went true. The unicorn’s swing brought it on around but it collapsed, falling to the ground with jarring heaviness.

“We got it!” the rifleman said. “We—”

It half scrambled to its feet and made a noise; a call that went out through the night like the blast of a mighty trumpet. Then it dropped back to the ground, to die while its call was still echoing from the nearer hills.

From the east came an answering trumpet blast; a trumpeting that was sounded again from the south and from the north. Then there came a low and muffled drumming, like the pounding of thousands of hooves.

The rifleman’s face was blue-white in the starlight. “The others are coming—we’ll have to run for it!”

He turned, and began to run toward the distant bulk of the stockade.

“No!” Prentiss commanded, quick and harsh. “Not the stockade!”

The rifleman kept running, seeming not to hear him in his panic. Prentiss called to him once more:

“Not the stockade—you’ll lead the unicorns into it!”

Again the rifleman seemed not to hear him.

The unicorns were coming in sight, converging in from the north and east and south, the rumble of their hooves swelling to a thunder that filled the night. The rifleman would reach the stockade only a

little ahead of them and they would go through the wall as though it had been made of paper.

For a little while the area inside the stockade would be filled with dust, with the squealing of the swirling, charging unicorns and the screams of the dying. Those inside the stockade would have no chance whatever of escaping. Within two minutes it would be over, the last child would have been found among the shattered shelters and trampled into lifeless shapelessness in the bloody ground.

Within two minutes all human life on Ragnarok would be gone.

There was only one thing for him to do.

He dropped to one knee so his aim would be steady and the sights of his rifle caught the running man's back. He pressed the trigger and the rifle cracked viciously as it bucked against his shoulder.

The man spun and fell hard to the ground. He twisted, to raise himself up a little and look back, his face white and accusing and unbelieving.

"You shot me!"

Then he fell forward and lay without moving.

Prentiss turned back to face the unicorns and to look at the trees in the nearby grove. He saw what he already knew, they were young trees and too small to offer any escape for him. There was no place to run, no place to hide.

There was nothing he could do but wait; nothing he could do but stand in the blue starlight and watch the devil's herd pound toward him and think, in the last moments of his life, how swiftly and unexpectedly death could come to man on Ragnarok.



The unicorns held the Rejects prisoners in their stockade the rest of the night and all the next day. Lake had seen the shooting of the rifleman and had watched the unicorn herd kill John Prentiss and then trample the dead rifleman.

He had already given the order to build a quick series of fires around the inside of the stockade walls when the unicorns paused to tear their victims to pieces; grunting and squealing in triumph as bones crushed between their teeth and they flung the pieces to one side.

The fires were started and green wood was thrown on them, to make them smoulder and smoke for as long as possible. Then the

unicorns were coming on to the stockade and every person inside it went into the concealment of the shelters.

Lake had already given his last order: There would be absolute quiet until and if the unicorns left; a quiet that would be enforced with fist or club wherever necessary.

The unicorns were still outside when morning came. The fires could not be refueled; the sight of a man moving inside the stockade would bring the entire herd charging through. The hours dragged by, the smoke from the dying fires dwindled to thin streamers. The unicorns grew increasingly bolder and suspicious, crowding closer to the walls and peering through the openings between the rails.

The sun was setting when one of the unicorns trumpeted; a sound different from that of the call to battle. The others threw up their heads to listen, then they turned and drifted away. Within minutes the entire herd was gone out of sight through the woods, toward the north.

Lake waited and watched until he was sure the unicorns were gone for good. Then he ordered the All Clear given and hurried to the south wall, to look down across the barren valley and hope he would not see what he expected to see.

Barber came up behind him, to sigh with relief. "That was close. It's hard to make so many people stay absolutely quiet for hour after hour. Especially the children—they don't understand."

"We'll have to leave," Lake said.

"Leave?" Barber asked. "We can make this stockade strong enough to hold out unicorns."

"Look to the south," Lake told him.

Barber did so and saw what Lake had already seen; a broad, low cloud of dust moving slowly toward them.

"Another herd of unicorns," Lake said. "John didn't know they migrated—the Dunbar Expedition wasn't here long enough to learn that. There'll be herd after herd coming through and no time for us to strengthen the walls. We'll have to leave tonight."



Preparations were made for the departure; preparations that consisted mainly of providing each person with as much in the way of food or supplies as he or she could carry. In the 1.5 gravity, that was not much.

They left when the blue star rose. They filed out through the northern gate and the rear guard closed it behind them. There was almost no conversation among them. Some of them turned to take a last look at what had been the only home they had ever known on Ragnarok, then they all faced forward again, to the northwest, where the foothills of the plateau might offer them sanctuary.

They found their sanctuary on the second day; a limestone ridge honey-combed with caves. Men were sent back at once to carry the food and supplies left in the stockade to the new home.

They returned, to report that the second herd of unicorns had broken down the walls and ripped the interior of the stockade into wreckage. Much of the food and supplies had been totally destroyed.

Lake sent them back twice more to bring everything, down to the last piece of bent metal or torn cloth. They would find uses for all of it in the future.



The cave system was extensive, containing room for several times their number. The deeper portions of the caves could not be lived in until ventilation ducts were made, but the outer caves were more than sufficient in number. Work was begun to clear them of fallen rubble, to pry down all loose material overhead and to level the floors. A spring came out of the ridge not far from the caves and the approach to the caves was so narrow and steep that unicorns could scramble up it only with difficulty and one at a time. And should they ever reach the natural terrace in front of the caves they would be too large to enter and could do no more than stand outside and make targets of themselves for the bowmen within.

Anders was in charge of making the caves livable, his working force restricted almost entirely to women and children. Lake sent Barber out, with a small detachment of men, to observe the woods goats and learn what plants they ate. And then learn, by experimenting, if such plants could be safely eaten by humans.

The need for salt would be tremendously increased when summer came. Having once experienced a saltless two weeks in the desert Lake doubted that any of them could survive without it. All hunting parties, as well as Barber's party, were ordered to investigate all deposits that might contain salt as well as any stream or pond that was white along the banks.

The hunting parties were of paramount importance and they were kept out to the limits of their endurance. Every man physically able to do so accompanied them. Those who could not kill game could carry it back to the caves. There was no time to spare; already the unicorns were decreasing in numbers and the woods goats were ranging farther and farther north.

At the end of twenty days Lake went in search of Barber and his party, worried about them. Their mission was one that could be as dangerous as any hunting trip. There was no proof that humans and Ragnarok creatures were so similar as to guarantee that food for one might not be poison for the other. It was a very necessary mission, however; dried meat, alone, would bring grave deficiency diseases during the summer which dried herbs and fruits would help prevent.

When he located Barber's party he found Barber lying under a tree, pale and weak from his latest experiment but recovering.

"I was the guinea pig yesterday," Barber said. "Some little purple berries that the woods goats nibble at sometimes, maybe to get a touch of some certain vitamin or something. I ate too many, I guess, because they hit my heart like the kick of a mule."

"Did you find anything at all encouraging?" Lake asked.

"We found four different herbs that are the most violent cathartics you ever dreamed of. And a little silvery fern that tastes like vanilla flavored candy and paralyzes you stiff as a board on the third swallow. It's an hour before you come back out of it.

"But on the good side we found three different kinds of herbs that seem to be all right. We've been digging them up and hanging them in the trees to dry."

Lake tried the edible herbs and found them to be something like spinach in taste. There was a chance they might contain the vitamins and minerals needed. Since the hunting parties were living exclusively on meat he would have to point out the edible herbs to all of them so they would know what to eat should any of them feel the effects of diet deficiency.

He traveled alone as he visited the various hunting parties, finding such travel to be safer each day as the dwindling of the unicorns neared the vanishing point. It was a safety he did not welcome; it meant the last of the game would be gone north long before sufficient meat was taken.

None of the hunting parties could report good luck. The woods goats, swift and elusive at best, were vanishing with the unicorns. The last cartridge had been fired and the bowmen, while improving all the time, were far from expert. The unicorns, which should have been their major source of meat, were invulnerable to arrows unless shot at short range in the side of the neck just behind the head. And at short range the unicorns invariably charged and presented no such target.

He made the long, hard climb up the plateau's southern face, to stand at last on top. It was treeless, a flat, green table that stretched to the north for as far as he could see. A mountain range, still capped with snow, lay perhaps a hundred miles to the northwest; in the distance it looked like a white, low-lying cloud on the horizon. No other mountains or hills marred the endless sweep of the high plain.

The grass was thick and here and there were little streams of water produced by the recently melted snow. It was a paradise land for the herbivores of Ragnarok but for men it was a harsh, forbidding place. At that elevation the air was so thin that only a moderate amount of exertion made the heart and lungs labor painfully. Hard and prolonged exertion would be impossible.

It seemed unlikely that men could hunt and dare unicorn attacks at such an elevation but two hunting parties were ahead of him; one under the grim Craig and one under the reckless Schroeder, both parties stripped down to the youngest, strongest men among all the Rejects.

He found Schroeder early one morning, leading his hunters toward a small band of woods goats. Two unicorns were grazing in between and the hunters were swinging downwind from them. Schroeder saw him coming and walked back a little way to meet him.

"Welcome to our breathtaking land," Schroeder greeted him. "How are things going with the rest of the hunting parties?"

Schroeder was gaunt and there was weariness beneath his still lithe movements. His whiskers were an untamed sorrel bristling and across his cheekbone was the ugly scar of a half healed wound. Another gash was ripped in his arm and something had battered one ear. He reminded Lake of a battle-scarred, indomitable tomcat who would never, for as long as he lived, want to relinquish the joy of conflict and danger.

“So far,” he answered, “you and Craig are the only parties to manage to tackle the plateau.”

He asked about Schroeder’s luck and learned it had been much better than that of the others due to killing three unicorns by a method Schroeder had thought of.

“Since the bowmen have to be to one side of the unicorns to kill them,” Schroeder said, “it only calls for a man to be the decoy and let the unicorns chase him between the hidden bowmen. If there’s no more than one or two unicorns and if the decoy doesn’t have to run very far and if the bowmen don’t miss it works well.”

“Judging from your beat-up condition,” Lake said, “you must have been the decoy every time.”

“Well—” Schroeder shrugged his shoulders. “It was my idea.”

“I’ve been wondering about another way to get in shots at close range,” Lake said. “Take the skin of a woods goat, give it the original shape as near as possible, and a Bowman inside it might be able to fake a grazing woods goat until he got the shot he wanted.

“The unicorns might never suspect where the arrows came from,” he concluded. “And then, of course, they might.”

“I’ll try it before the day is over, on those two unicorns over there,” Schroeder said. “At this elevation and in this gravity my own method is just a little bit rough on a man.”



Lake found Craig and his men several miles to the west, all of them gaunt and bearded as Schroeder had been.

“We’ve had hell,” Craig said. “It seems that every time we spot a few woods goats there will be a dozen unicorns in between. If only we had rifles for the unicorns....”

Lake told him of the plan to hide under woods goats’ skins and of the decoy system used by Schroeder.

“Maybe we won’t have to use Schroeder’s method,” he said. “We’ll see if the other works—I’ll give it the first try.”

This he was not to do. Less than an hour later one of the men who helped dry the meat and carry it to the caves returned to report the camp stricken by a strange, sudden malady that was killing a hundred a day. Dr. Chiara, who had collapsed while driving himself on to care for the sick, was sure it was a deficiency disease. Anders was down with it, helpless, and Bemmon had assumed command;

setting up daily work quotas for those still on their feet and refusing to heed Chiara's requests concerning treatment of the disease.

Lake made the trip back to the caves in a fraction of the length of time it had taken him to reach the plateau, walking until he was ready to drop and then pausing only for an hour or two of rest. He spotted Barber's camp when coming down off the plateau and he swung to one side, to tell Barber to have a supply of the herbs sent to the caves at once.

He reached the caves, to find half the camp in bed and the other half dragging about listlessly at the tasks given them by Bemmon. Anders was in grave condition, too weak to rise, and Dr. Chiara was dying.

He squatted down beside Chiara's pallet and knew there could be no hope for him. On Chiara's pale face and in his eyes was the shadow of his own foreknowledge.

"I finally saw what it was"—Chiara's words were very low, hard to hear—"and I told Bemmon what to do. It's a deficiency disease, complicated by the gravity into some form not known on Earth."

He stopped to rest and Lake waited.

"Beri-beri—pellagra—we had deficiency diseases on Earth. But none so fatal—so quickly. I told Bemmon—ration out fruits and vegetables to everybody. Hurry—or it will be too late."

Again he stopped to rest, the last vestige of color gone from his face.

"And you?" Lake asked, already knowing the answer.

"For me—too late. I kept thinking of viruses—should have seen the obvious sooner. Just like—"

His lips turned up a little at the corners and the Chiara of the dead past smiled for the last time at Lake.

"Just like a damned fool intern...."

That was all, then, and the chamber was suddenly very quiet. Lake stood up to leave, and to speak the words that Chiara could never hear:

"We're going to need you and miss you—Doctor."



He found Bemmon in the food storage cavern, supervising the work of two teen-age boys with critical officiousness although he was making no move to help them. At sight of Lake he hurried forward, the ingratiating smile sliding across his face.

"I'm glad you're back," he said. "I had to take charge when Anders got sick and he had everything in such a mess. I've been working day and night to undo his mistakes and get the work properly under way again."

Lake looked at the two thin-faced boys who had taken advantage of the opportunity to rest. They leaned wearily against the heavy pole table Bemmon had had them moving, their eyes already dull with the incipient sickness and watching him in mute appeal.

"Have you obeyed Chiara's order?" he asked.

"Ah—no," Bemmon said. "I felt it best to ignore it."

"Why?" Lake asked.

"It would be a senseless waste of our small supply of fruit and vegetable foods to give them to people already dying. I'm afraid"—the ingratiating smile came again—"we've been letting him exercise an authority he isn't entitled to. He's really hardly more than a medical student and his diagnoses are only guesses."

"He's dead," Lake said flatly. "His last order will be carried out."

He looked from the two tired boys to Bemmon, contrasting their thinness and weariness with the way Bemmon's paunch still bulged outward and his jowls still sagged with their load of fat.

"I'll send West down to take over in here," he said to Bemmon. "You come with me. You and I seem to be the only two in good health here and there's plenty of work for us to do."

The fawning expression vanished from Bemmon's face. "I see," he said. "Now that I've turned Anders's muddle into organization, you'll hand my authority over to another of your favorites and demote me back to common labor?"

"Setting up work quotas for sick and dying people isn't organization," Lake said. He spoke to the two boys, "Both of you go lie down. West will find someone else." Then to Bemmon, "Come with me. We're both going to work at common labor."

They passed by the cave where Bemmon slept. Two boys were just going into it, carrying armloads of dried grass to make a mattress under Bemmon's pallet. They moved slowly, heavily. Like the two boys in the food storage cave they were dull-eyed with the beginning of the sickness.

Lake stopped, to look more closely into the cave and verify something else he thought he had seen: Bemmon had discarded the prowler skins on his bed and in their place were soft

wool blankets; perhaps the only unpatched blankets the Re-jects possessed.

“Go back to your caves,” he said to the boys. “Go to bed and rest.”

He looked at Bemmon. Bemmon’s eyes flickered away, refusing to meet his.

“What few blankets we have are for babies and the very youngest children,” he said. His tone was coldly unemotional but he could not keep his fists from clenching at his sides. “You will return them at once and sleep on animal skins, as all the men and women do. And if you want grass for a mattress you will carry it yourself, as even the young children do.”

Bemmon made no answer, his face a sullen red and hatred shining in the eyes that still refused to meet Lake’s.

“Gather up the blankets and return them,” Lake said. “Then come on up to the central cave. We have a lot of work to do.”

He could feel Bemmon’s gaze burning against his back as he turned away and he thought of what John Prentiss had once said:

“I know he’s no good but he never has guts enough to go quite far enough to give me an excuse to whittle him down.”



Barber’s men arrived the next day, burdened with dried herbs. These were given to the seriously ill as a supplement to the ration of fruit and vegetable foods and were given, alone, to those not yet sick. Then came the period of waiting; of hoping that it was all not too late and too little.

A noticeable change for the better began on the second day. A week went by and the sick were slowly, steadily, improving. The not-quite-sick were already back to normal health. There was no longer any doubt: the Ragnarok herbs would prevent a recurrence of the disease.

It was, Lake thought, all so simple once you knew what to do. Hundreds had died, Chiara among them, because they did not have a common herb that grew at a slightly higher elevation. Not a single life would have been lost if he could have looked a week into the future and had the herbs found and taken to the caves that much sooner.

But the disease had given no warning of its coming. Nothing, on Ragnarok, ever seemed to give warning before it killed.

Another week went by and hunters began to trickle in, gaunt and exhausted, to report all the game going north up the plateau and not a single creature left below. They were the ones who had tried and failed to withstand the high elevation of the plateau. Only two out of three hunters returned among those who had challenged the plateau. They had tried, all of them, to the best of their ability and the limits of their endurance.

The blue star was by then a small sun and the yellow sun blazed hotter each day. Grass began to brown and wither on the hillsides as the days went by and Lake knew summer was very near. The last hunting party, but for Craig's and Schroeder's, returned. They had very little meat but they brought with them a large quantity of something almost as important: salt.

They had found a deposit of it in an almost inaccessible region of cliffs and canyons. "Not even the woods goats can get in there," Stevens, the leader of that party, said. "If the salt was in an accessible place there would have been a salt lick there and goats in plenty."

"If woods goats care for salt the way Earth animals do," Lake said. "When fall comes we'll make a salt lick and find out."

Two more weeks went by and Craig and Schroeder returned with their surviving hunters. They had followed the game to the eastern end of the snow-capped mountain range but there the migration had drawn away from them, traveling farther each day than they could travel. They had almost waited too long before turning back: the grass at the southern end of the plateau was turning brown and the streams were dry. They got enough water, barely, by digging seep holes in the dry stream beds.

Lake's method of stalking unicorns under the concealment of a woods goat skin had worked well only a few times. After that the unicorns learned to swing downwind from any lone woods goats. If they smelled a man inside the goat skin they charged him and killed him.

With the return of the last hunters everything was done that could be done in preparation for summer. Inventory was taken of the total food supply and it was even smaller than Lake had feared. It would be far from enough to last until fall brought the game back from the north and he instituted rationing much stricter than before.

The heat increased as the yellow sun blazed hotter and the blue sun grew larger. Each day the vegetation was browner and a morning came when Lake could see no green wherever he looked.

They numbered eleven hundred and ten that morning, out of what had so recently been four thousand. Eleven hundred and ten thin, hungry scarecrows who, already, could do nothing more than sit listlessly in the shade and wait for the hell that was coming. He thought of the food supply, so pitifully small, and of the months it would have to last. He saw the grim, inescapable future for his charges: famine. There was nothing he could do to prevent it. He could only try to forestall complete starvation for all by cutting rations to the bare existence level.

And that would be bare existence for the stronger of them. The weaker were already doomed.

He had them all gather in front of the caves that evening when the terrace was in the shadow of the ridge. He stood before them and spoke to them:

“All of you know we have only a fraction of the amount of food we need to see us through the summer. Tomorrow the present ration will be cut in half. That will be enough to live on, just barely. If that cut isn’t made the food supply will be gone long before fall and all of us will die.

“If anyone has any food of any kind it must be turned in to be added to the total supply. Some of you may have thought of your children and kept a little hidden for them. I can understand why you should do that—but you must turn it in. There may possibly be some who hid food for themselves, personally. If so, I give them the first and last warning: turn it in tonight. If any hidden cache of food is found in the future the one who hid it will be regarded as a traitor and murderer.

“All of you, but for the children, will go into the chamber next to the one where the food is stored. Each of you—and there will be no exceptions regardless of how innocent you are—will carry a bulkily folded cloth or garment. Each of you will go into the chamber alone. There will be no one in there. You will leave the food you have folded in the cloth, if any, and go out the other exit and back to your caves. No one will ever know whether the cloth you carried contained food or not. No one will ever ask.

“Our survival on this world, if we are to survive at all, can be only by working and sacrificing together. There can be no selfishness. What any of you may have done in the past is of no conse-

quence. Tonight we start anew. From now on we trust one another without reserve.

“There will be one punishment for any who betray that trust—death.”



Anders set the example by being the first to carry a folded cloth into the cave. Of them all, Lake heard later, only Bemmon voiced any real indignation; warning all those in his section of the line that the order was the first step toward outright dictatorship and a police-and-spy system in which Lake and the other leaders would deprive them all of freedom and dignity. Bemmon insisted upon exhibiting the emptiness of the cloth he carried; an action that, had he succeeded in persuading the others to follow his example, would have mercilessly exposed those who did have food they were returning.

But no one followed Bemmon's example and no harm was done. As for Lake, he had worries on his mind of much greater importance than Bemmon's enmity.



The weeks dragged by, each longer and more terrible to endure than the one before it as the heat steadily increased. Summer solstice arrived and there was no escape from the heat, even in the deepest caves. There was no night; the blue sun rose in the east as the yellow sun set in the west. There was no life of any kind to be seen, not even an insect. Nothing moved across the burned land but the swirling dust devils and shimmering, distorted mirages.

The death rate increased with appalling swiftness. The small supply of canned and dehydrated milk, fruit and vegetables was reserved exclusively for the children but it was far insufficient in quantity. The Ragnarok herbs prevented any recurrence of the fatal deficiency disease but they provided virtually no nourishment to help fight the heat and gravity. The stronger of the children lay wasted and listless on their pallets while the ones not so strong died each day.

Each day thin and hollow-eyed mothers would come to plead with him to save their children. “... it would take so little to save his life.... Please—before it's too late....”

But there was so little food left and the time was yet so long until fall would bring relief from the famine that he could only answer each of them with a grim and final "No."

And watch the last hope flicker and die in their eyes and watch them turn away, to go and sit for the last hours beside their children.

Bemmon became increasingly irritable and complaining as the rationing and heat made existence a misery; insisting that Lake and the others were to blame for the food shortage, that their hunting efforts had been bungling and faint-hearted. And he implied, without actually saying so, that Lake and the others had forbidden him to go near the food chamber because they did not want a competent, honest man to check up on what they were doing.

There were six hundred and three of them the blazing afternoon when the girl, Julia, could stand his constant, vindictive, fault-finding no longer. Lake heard about it shortly afterward, the way she had turned on Bemmon in a flare of temper she could control no longer and said:

"Whenever your mouth is still you can hear the children who are dying today—but you don't care. All you can think of is yourself. You claim Lake and the others were cowards—but you didn't dare hunt with them. You keep insinuating that they're cheating us and eating more than we are—but your belly is the only one that has any fat left on it—"

She never completed the sentence. Bemmon's face turned livid in sudden, wild fury and he struck her, knocking her against the rock wall so hard that she slumped unconscious to the ground.

"She's a liar!" he panted, glaring at the others. "She's a rotten liar and anybody who repeats what she said will get what she got!"

When Lake learned of what had happened he did not send for Bemmon at once. He wondered why Bemmon's reaction had been so quick and violent and there seemed to be only one answer:

Bemmon's belly was still a little fat. There could be but one way he could have kept it so.

He summoned Craig, Schroeder, Barber and Anders. They went to the chamber where Bemmon slept and there, almost at once, they found his cache. He had it buried under his pallet and hidden in cavities along the walls; dried meat, dried fruits and milk, canned vegetables. It was an amount amazingly large and