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a/li/en worlds — alien refers to something that is not one's own, something *unfamiliar*. In science fiction, alien worlds are the setting for many, if not most, stories and novels. These worlds may be planets in our solar system, in known galaxies, or in currently uncharted areas of our universe. There have been many anthologies of stories about the exploration of alien worlds, including *Flight Into Space* (Frederick Fell, 1950); *Possible Worlds of Science Fiction* (Vanguard Press, 1951); *To The Stars* (Hawthorn Books, 1971); and *Explorers of Space* (Thomas Nelson, 1975).

Too Soon to Die

TOM GODWIN

The Constellation, bound for Athena with eight thousand colonists aboard, had not expected attack from the Gerns. There had been no indication when it left Earth that the cold war with the Gern Empire would suddenly flare into violence, and the world of Athena was a Terran discovery, four hundred light-years from the outer boundary of the Gern Empire.

The two Gern cruisers appeared without warning and attacked with silent, vicious efficiency, demolishing the Constellation's stern and rendering her driveless and powerless. Her single obsolete blaster fired once in futile defense and was instantly destroyed, together with the forward control room.

Within seconds the Constellation was helpless and leaderless, her air regen-

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erators lifeless. Gerns boarded her and a Gern officer delivered the ultimatum in quick, brittle words:

"A state of war now exists between the Gern Empire and Earth. This section of space, together with the planet Athena, is claimed as part of the Gern Empire.

"This ship has invaded Gern territory and fired upon a Gern cruiser, but we are willing to extend a leniency not required by the circumstances. Terran technicians and skilled workers in certain specific fields can be of use to us 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.

"You will be divided 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 ample supplies. The cruisers will then take the Acceptables on to Athena.

"This division will split families but there will be no resistance to it. At the first instance of rebellion the offer will be withdrawn and the cruisers will go on their way again."

There was no choice for the colonists. The air was already growing stale and within twenty hours they would start smothering to death. The division was made.

Six hours later the Rejects, four thousand of them, stood in a bleak, rocky valley, a 1.5 gravity dragging at them like a heavy burden, and watched the cruisers roar away into the gray sky. A moaning wind sent the alkali dust swirling in cold, bitter clouds, and things like gigantic black wolves could already be seen gathering in the distance.

They realized fully, then, what had happened. They were on Ragnarok, the hell-world, and their abandonment there was intended to be a death sentence for all of them.

The bright blue star dimmed and 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 in his group prepared to face the new day. A child whimpered from the cold. There had not been time the evening before to gather enough wood —

"Prowlers!"

The warning cry came from an outer guard as the enormous wolflike black shadows materialized out of the dark dawn, their white fangs gleaming in their devils' faces as they ripped through the outer guard line. Prentiss's rifle licked out thin tongues of flame as he added his fire to that of the inner guards. The prowlers came on, breaking through, but four of them went down and the others 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 in the dawn's dim light 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. For a moment her white face was turned in hopeless appeal to the others. Then she fell, deliberately, going to the ground with her child beneath her so that her body would protect it from the prowlers. A man was running toward her, slow in the high gravity, an axe in his hands and his cursing a raging, impotent snarl.

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

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

Full dawn had come by the time John Prentiss replaced the two guards killed by the last attack and made the rounds of the other guards. 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.

It was Irene.

He stopped, gripping the rifle hard, not feeling the rear sight as it cut into his hand.

Irene . . . He had not known she was on Ragnarok. His one consolation had been the thought that she and Billy were safe among the Acceptables . . .

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 had to." 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. "I didn't know she was on Ragnarok till just now."

"Oh." The bold, brassy look was gone from her face for a moment, 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 renew the fires. Mary, one of the volunteer cooks, was asking two men to carry water when he approached. The smaller

man picked up one of the clumsy containers, hastily improvised from canvas, and started for the creek, but the thick-chested man did not move.

"People are hungry and cold and sick," Mary said. "Aren't you going to help?"

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

"But —"

Mary looked at Prentiss in uncertainty and 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 got quickly to his feet and swung to face him challengingly, his heavy shoulders hunched.

"You overlook one little point," he said. "No one has appointed you the head cheese around here. Now, there's the container you want filled, old timer, and there —" he made a small motion with one hand "— is the creek. Do you know what to do?"

"Yes," Prentiss 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. He slumped to the ground, his eyes glazing and his broken jaw askew.

"Now, go ahead and name someone else," Prentiss said to Mary . . .

He found that the prowlers had killed seventy of his group during the night. One hundred more had died from the Hell Fever that seemed to follow quickly behind exposure on Ragnarok and killed within an hour.

He went to the group that had arrived on the second cruiser to urge them to combine with his own group in their forthcoming move into the woods, where there would be ample fuel for the fires and some protection from the wind.

He found a leader in the second group, as he had known he would. It was a characteristic of human nature that leaders should appear in times of emergency.

His name was Lake, a man with cold blue eyes under pale brows and a smile as bleak as moonlight on an arctic glacier, and he agreed that they should move into the woods at once. "We'll have to combine," he said. "The prowlers raised hell here last night and I don't want that to happen again."

When the brief discussion of plans was finished and Prentiss was ready to go, Lake said, "It might be of help if we knew more about Ragnarok, besides its name." He quoted dryly, "*'the last day of gods and men.'*"

"I was with the Dunbar Expedition that discovered Ragnarok," Prentiss said. "We didn't stay to study it very long — there wasn't any reason to. Six men died and we marked it on the chart as uninhabitable. The Gerns knew it — when they left us here they were giving us death."

"Yes." Lake looked out across the camp, at the dead and the dying and the snow whipping from the frosty hills. "But it's too soon to die," he said.

The dead were buried in shallow graves and men set to work building crude shelters among the trees. Inventory was taken of the promised "ample supplies," which were no more than the few personal possessions that each Reject had been permitted to take along. There was very little food, and an inventory of the firearms and ammunition showed the total there to be discouragingly small.

There were a few species of herbivores on Ragnarok, the woods-goats in particular, but they would have to learn how to make and use bows and arrows as soon as possible.

An overcast darkened the sky and at noon black storm clouds came driving in from the west. Efforts were intensified to complete the move before the storm broke. Lake's group established itself beside his and by late afternoon they were ready.

The rain came at dark, a roaring downpour. The wind rose to a velocity that made the trees lean, and hammered and ripped at the hastily built shelters. Many of them were destroyed. The rain continued, growing colder and driven in almost horizontal sheets by the wind. One by one, the fires went out.

The rain turned to snow at midnight. Prentiss walked through it wearily, 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 effort and sacrifice on his part than on the part of those he led. He had thought that what little he knew of Ragnarok might help the others to survive. So he had taken charge, tolerating no dispute to his claim as leader. It was, he supposed, some old instinct that forbids the individual to stand calmly 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, in sudden, ferocious attack.

Twenty got through, past the slaughtered south guards, and charged into the interior of the camp. As they did so, the call went up the guard lines: "Emergency guards — *close in!*"

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 guard 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, blood spurting from a severed artery and splashing dark in the starlight on the white snow.

The air was filled with the cracking of gunfire and the deep, savage snarling of the prowlers. Ten of them got through, leaving four dead guards behind them. The other ten lay where they had fallen and the emergency guards turned to hurry back to their stations, reloading as they went.

The wounded woman was lying in the snow and a first-aid man knelt over her. He straightened, shaking his head, and joined the others as they searched for the injured among the prowlers' victims.

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

"John —"

Chiara, in charge of the shelters in that section of the camp, hurried toward him, his dark eyes worried under ice-coated brows.

"The wood is soaked," he said. "It's going to take some time to get the fires going again. There are babies and small children who lost their mothers when the prowlers attacked. They're already cold and wet — they'll freeze to death before we can get the fires going."

Prentiss looked at the ten prowlers lying in the snow and motioned toward them. "They're warm. Take out their guts."

"What —" Then Chiara's eyes lighted with comprehension and he hurried away without further question.

He went on, to make the rounds of the guard stations. When he returned he saw that his order had been obeyed.

The prowlers lay in the snow as before, their fangs bared and their devils' faces twisted in their dying snarls. But snug and warm inside them, children slept.

There were three hundred dead when the wan sun lifted to shine down on the white, frozen land; two hundred from Hell Fever and one hundred from prowler attacks.

Lake reported approximately the same number of dead and said, "Our guards were too far apart."

"We'll have to move everyone in closer together," Prentiss agreed. "And we're going to have to have a stockade wall around the camp."

All were moved to the center of the camp area that day and work was started on building a log wall around the camp. When the prowlers came that night, they found a ring of guards and fires which kept most of them out.

Men moved heavily at their jobs as the days went by. Of all the forces on Ragnarok, the gravity was the worst. Even at night there was no surcease from it. Men fell into an exhausted 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 living on Earth or Athena.

But overworked muscles strengthened and men moved with a little less laborious effort. The stockade wall was completed on the twentieth day and the camp was prowler-proof. The prowlers changed their tactics then and began lying in wait for the daytime hunting parties.

The days became weeks, and the giant blue star that was the other component of Ragnarok's binary grew swiftly in size as it preceded the yellow sun earlier each morning. The season was spring; 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 one 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 cemetery was thirty graves long by thirty 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. Among the first to marry was Julia, the girl who had volunteered to take care of Billy.

She stopped to talk to Prentiss one evening. She had changed in the past weeks. She still wore the red skirt, 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 try to have children in this gravity will die for it?"

"It's true," he said. "But you knew that when you married."

"Yes . . . I knew it." There was a little silence, then, "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 for us. I want there to be children, to live on after we're gone. So I'm going to try to have children. I'm not afraid and I won't be."

When he did not reply she said, almost self-consciously, "Coming from me that all sounds silly, doesn't it?"

"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 ways 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 work outside without protection.

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 dressing out the second woods-goat while I came in with the first one. He shouldn't have been over fifteen 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.

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

The answer came in the pounding of cloven hooves. A formless shadow beside the trees materialized into a monstrous charging bulk: a thing like a gray boar, eight feet tall at the shoulders with 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 snarling 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 front hooves swinging around like great clubs.

Prentiss shot again, his sights on what he hoped would be a vital spot, and the rifleman shot an instant later. The shots went true. The momentum of the unicorn's swing brought it on around, then 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. He commanded again, "Not the stockade — you'll lead the unicorns into it!"

Again the rifleman seemed not to hear him.

The unicorns were coming into sight, converging in from the east and south and north, the sound 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 the squealing of swirling, charging unicorns and the screams of the dying. It would be over very quickly and there would be no one left alive on Ragnarok.

There was only one thing for him to do.

He dropped to one knee so his aim would be steady and the sights 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 against the ground. He raised himself a little and looked back, his face white and accusing and unbelieving.

... "You shot me!"

Then he fell forward again 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 a man.

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 ordered a series of fires built around the inside of the stockade walls, quickly, for the unicorns were already moving on toward them.

The fires were started and green wood was thrown on to make them smoulder and smoke for as long as possible. Then the unicorns were just outside and every person in the stockade 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 whenever necessary.

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

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.

"That was close," Barber said, coming over to where Lake stood by the south wall. "It's hard to make two thousand people stay quiet hour after hour. Especially the children — they didn'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 will 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 and supplies as he or she could carry. In the 1.5 gravity of Ragnarok, 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, and some of them turned to take a last look at what had been the only home they had ever known on Ragnarok. Then they faced forward again to the northwest, where the foothills of the plateau might offer them sanctuary.

Lake stopped to look back to the south when they had climbed the first low ridge. The cloud of dust was much nearer and it was coming straight toward the stockade.

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

When they returned with the first load they reported that the second herd of unicorns had broken down the walls and ripped the interior of the stockade into wreckage. He 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.

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The blue star became a small sun and the yellow sun blazed hotter. The last of the unicorns disappeared to the north and there were suddenly very few woods-goats to be found. The final all-out hunt was made.

Preserving the meat was no problem — it was cut in strips and dried in the sun. But the hunters returned on the tenth day with an amount of meat far insufficient to last until fall brought the woods-goats back from the north.

Lake instituted rationing much stricter than before and bleakly contemplated the specter of famine that hovered over his charges.

Early summer came, to wither and curl the leaves of trees, and there were twelve hundred of them. The weeks dragged by and summer solstice arrived. The heat reached its fiercest height then and there was no escape from it, not even in the 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; nothing moved across the burned land but the swirling dust devils.

The death rate increased rapidly, especially among the children. The small supply of canned and dehydrated milk, fruit, and vegetables was reserved exclusively for them but it was far too little.

Each day thin and hollow-eyed mothers would come to him to plead with him to save their children. "It would take so little to save him — please — before it's too late —"

But the time was yet so long until fall would bring relief from the famine that he could only answer with a grim and final, "No."

And watch the last flickering hope fade from their eyes and watch them turn away, to go and sit beside their dying children.

There were six hundred and forty-three of them when the food theft was discovered. The thief was a man named Bemmon, one of the men who had been entrusted with storing the food supplies. His cache was found buried beside his pallet: dried meat, cans of milk, little plastic bags of dehydrated fruits and vegetables.

Lake summoned the four subleaders — Craig, Barber, Schroeder, Anders — and sent two of them to get Bemmon. Confronted by the evidence and by the grim quintet, Bemmon blustered briefly then broke and admitted his guilt.

"I won't ever do it again," he promised, wiping at his sweating face. "I swear I won't."

"I know you won't," Lake said. He spoke to Craig: "You and Barber take him to the lookout point."

"What —" Bemmon's protest was cut off as Craig and Barber took him by the arms and walked him swiftly away.

Lake turned to Anders. "Get a rope," he ordered.

Anders paled a little. "A — rope?"

"A rope. Do you object?"

"No," Anders said, a little weakly. "No — I don't object."

The lookout point was an out-jutting spur of the ridge, six hundred feet from the caves and in full view of them. A lone tree stood there, its dead limbs thrusting like white arms through the brown foliage of the limbs that still lived. Craig and Barber waited under the tree, Bemmon between them. The lowering sun shone hot and bright on his face as he squinted back toward the caves at the approach of Lake and the other two.

He twisted to look at Barber. "What is it — what are you going to do?" There was the tremor of fear in his voice. "What are you going to do to me?"

Barber did not answer and Bemmon turned back to Lake. He saw the rope in Anders's hand for the first time and his face went white with comprehension.

"No!"

He threw himself back with a violence that almost tore him loose from the grip of Craig and Barber. "No — no!"

Schroeder stepped forward to help hold him and Lake took the rope from Anders. He fashioned a noose in it while Bemmon struggled and made panting, animal sounds, his eyes fixed in horrified fascination on the rope.

When the noose was finished Lake threw the free end of the rope over the white limb above Bemmon. He released the noose and Barber caught it, to draw it snug around Bemmon's neck.

Bemmon stopped struggling then and sagged weakly. For a moment it appeared that he would faint. Then he worked his mouth soundlessly until words came: "You won't — you can't — really hang me?"

Lake spoke to him: "We're going to hang you. We trusted you and what you stole would have saved the lives of ten children. You've heard the children cry because they were so hungry. You've watched them become too weak to cry or care any more and you've watched them die.

"Your crime is the murder of ten children and the betrayal of our trust in you. If you have anything to say, say it now while you can."

"You can't — I have a right to live!" The words came quick and ragged with hysteria and he twisted to appeal to the ones who held him. "I have a right to live — you won't let him murder me."

Only Craig answered him, with a smile that was like the thin snarl of a wolf: "Two of the children who died were mine."

Lake nodded to Craig and Schroeder, not waiting any longer. They stepped back to seize the free end of the rope and Bemmon screamed at what was coming, tearing loose from the grip of Barber.

Then his scream was abruptly cut off as he was jerked into the air. There was a cracking sound and he kicked spasmodically, his head setting grotesquely to one side.

Craig and Schroeder and Barber watched him with hard, expressionless faces, but Anders turned quickly away, to be suddenly and violently sick.

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"He was the first to betray us," Lake said. "Snub the rope and let him swing there. If there are any others like him, they'll know what to expect." The blue sun rose as they went back to the caves. Behind them Bemmon swung and twirled aimlessly on the end of the rope. Two long, pale shadows swung and twirled with him; a yellow one to the west and a blue one to the east.

They numbered four hundred when the first rain came, the rain that meant the end of summer. The yellow sun moved southward and the blue sun shrank steadily. Grass grew again and the woods-goats returned. For a while there was meat in plenty and green herbs to prevent the diet deficiencies. Then the unicorns came, to make hunting dangerous, and behind them the prowlers to make hunting with bows and arrows almost impossible. But the supply of cartridges was at the vanishing point and the bowmen learned, through necessity, how to use their bows with increasing skill and deadliness.

They were prepared as best they could be when winter came. Wood had been gathered in great quantities and the caves had been fitted with crude doors and a ventilation system.

Men were put in charge of the food supplies. Lake took inventory at the beginning and held checkup inventories at irregular and unannounced intervals. He found no shortages. He had expected none — Bemmon had long since been buried, but the rope still hung from the dead limb, the noose swinging and turning in the wind.

A Ragnarok calendar was made and the corresponding Earth dates marked on it. By a coincidence, Christmas fell near the middle of the winter. There was still the same rationing of food on Christmas Day, but little brown trees were cut for the children and decorated with such ornaments as could be made from the materials at hand.

There were toys under the trees, toys that had been patiently whittled from wood or made from scraps of cloth and prowler skins while the children slept. They were crude and humble toys, but the pale, thin faces of the children were bright with delight when they beheld them. The magic of an Earth Christmas was recaptured for a few fleeting hours that day.

That night a child was born to the girl named Julia, on a pallet of dried grass and prowler skins. She asked for her baby before she died and they let her have it.

"I wasn't afraid, was I?" she asked. "But I wish it wasn't so dark — I wish I could see my baby before I go . . ."

They took the baby from her arms when she was gone and removed from it the enveloping blanket that had concealed from her that it was stillborn and pathetically deformed.

There were three hundred and fifty of them when the first violent storms of spring came. By then eighteen children had been born. Twelve were stillborn, four were deformed and lived only a little while, but two were like any normal babies on Earth. There was one difference: the 1.5 gravity of Ragnarok did not seem to affect the Ragnarok-born children as it had the ones born on Earth.

There were deaths from Hell Fever again, but two little boys and a girl contracted it and survived; the first proof that Hell Fever was not always and invariably fatal.

That summer there was not the famine of the first summer. There was sufficient meat and dried herbs; a diet rough and plain but adequate for those who had become accustomed to it.

Lake had taken a wife that spring and his son was born that following winter. It altered his philosophy and he began thinking of the future, not in terms of years to come but in terms of generations to come.

There was a man named West who had held degrees in philosophy on Earth, and he said to Lake one night, as they sat together by the fire: "Have you noticed the way the children listen to the stories of what used to be on Earth, what might have been on Athena, and what would be if only we could find a way to escape from Ragnarok?"

"I've noticed," he said.

"These stories already contain the goal for the future generations," West went on. "Someday, somehow, they will go to Athena, to kill the Gerns there and free the Terran slaves and reclaim Athena as their own."

He had listened to them talk of the interstellar flight to Athena as they sat by their fires and worked at making bows and arrows. Without the dream of someday leaving Ragnarok there would be nothing before them but the vision of generation after generation living and dying on a world that could never give them more than existence.

The dream was needed. But it, alone, was not enough. How long, on Earth, had it been from the Neolithic age to advanced civilization — how long from the time men were ready to leave their caves until they were ready to go to the stars?

Twelve thousand years.

There were men and women among the Rejects who had been specialists in various fields. There were a few books that had survived the trampling of the unicorns, and the unicorn hides possessed an inner skin that would make a parchment for writing upon with ink made from the black lance-tree bark.

The knowledge contained in the books and the learning of the Rejects still living should be preserved for the future generations. With the advantage of that learning perhaps they really could, someday, somehow, escape from their prison and reclaim Athena.

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"We'll have to have a school," he said, and told West of what he had been thinking.

Tom Godwin 17

West nodded in agreement. "We should get started with the school and the writings as soon as possible. Especially the writings. Some of the textbooks will require more time to write than Ragnarok will give the authors."

A school for the children was started the next day and the writing of the textbooks begun. Two of the textbooks would be small but of such importance that it was decided to make four copies of each: *Craig's Interior Features of a Gern Cruiser* and Schroeder's *Operation of Gern Blasters*.

Spring came and the school and writings were interrupted until hot summer arrived; then they were resumed. There was another cessation of school and writing during the fall and they were resumed when winter came.

Year followed year, each much like the one that had preceded it but for the rapid aging of the Old Ones, as Lake and the others called themselves, and the growing up of the Young Ones. Five years passed and no woman among the Old Ones could any longer have children, but there had been eight normal, healthy children born. Twelve years passed and there were twenty of the Old Ones left, ninety Young Ones, ten Ragnarok-born children of the Old Ones, and two Ragnarok-born children of the Young Ones.

West died in the winter of the fifteenth year and Lake was the last of the Old Ones. White-haired and aged far beyond his years, he was still leader of the group that had shrunk to ninety. He knew, before spring arrived, that he would not be able to accompany the younger ones on the hunts. He could do little but sit by his fire and feel the gravity dragging at his heart, warning him the end was near.

It was time he chose his successor.

He had hoped to live to see his son take his place, but Jim was only thirteen. There was a scar-faced, silent boy of twenty among the Young Ones, not the oldest among them but the one who seemed to be the most thoughtful and stubbornly determined: John Prentiss's grandson, Bill Humbolt.

A violent storm was roaring outside the caves the night he told the others he wanted Bill Humbolt to be his successor. There were no objections and, with few words and without ceremony, he terminated his fifteen years of leadership.

He left the others, his son among them, and went back to the place where he slept. His fire was low, down to dying embers, but he was too tired to build it up again. He lay down on his pallet and saw, with neither surprise nor fear, that his time was much nearer than he had thought — it was already at hand.

He let the lassitude enclose him, not fighting it. He had done the best he could for the others and now the weary journey was ended.

The thought dissolved into the memory of the day fifteen years before. The

roaring of the storm became the thunder of the Gern cruisers as they disappeared into the gray sky. Four thousand Rejects stood in the cold wind and watched them go, the children not yet understanding that they had been condemned to die. Somehow, his own son was among them —

He tried feebly to rise. There was work to do — a lot of work . . .

Bill Humbolt thought of the plan early that spring and considered it during the coming months.

For him the dream of someday leaving Ragnarok and taking Athena from the Gerns was a goal toward which they must fight with unswerving determination. He could remember a little of Earth and he could remember the excitement and high hopes as the *Constellation* embarked for Athena. Quite clearly he remembered the day the Gerns left them on Ragnarok, the wind moaning down the barren valley, his father gone and his mother trying not to cry. Above all other memories was the one of the cold, dark dawn when his mother had held him and shielded him while the prowlers tore the life from her. She could have escaped them, alone . . .

He would remember what the Gerns had done and hate them till the day he died. But to future generations the slow, uneventful progression of centuries might bring a false sense of security; might turn the stories of what the Gerns had done to the Rejects and the warnings of the Old Ones into legends and then into half-believed myths.

The Gerns would have to be lured to Ragnarok before that could happen.

He set the plan in action as soon as the spring hunting ended. Among the Young Ones was a man who had been fascinated by the study of electronics and had read all the material available on the subject and he went to him to ask him the question: "George, could you build a transmitter — one that would send a signal to Athena?"

George laid down the arrow he had been straightening. "A transmitter?"

"I know it would have to be a normal-space transmitter — you couldn't possibly rig up a hyperspace transmitter," he said. "That would be enough — just a dot-dash transmitter."

"It would take two hundred years for the signal to get to Athena," George said. "And forty days for a Gern cruiser to come to Ragnarok through hyperspace."

"I know."

"So you want our showdown with the Gerns to come no later than two hundred years from now?" George asked.

"You're as old as I am," he said. "You still remember the Gerns and what they did, don't you?"

"I'm older than you," George said. "I was nine when they left us here. They kept my father and mother and my sister was only three. I tried to keep her warm by holding her but I couldn't. The Hell Fever got her

that first night. Yes . . . I remember the Gerns and what they did."

"The generations to come won't have the memories that we have. Someday the Gerns will come to Ragnarok, even if only by chance and a thousand years from now, and our people might by then have forgotten what the Gerns did to us and would do to them. But if they know the Gerns will be here two hundred years from now they won't have time to forget."

"You're not supposed to sit in a cave and build an interstellar transmitter," George said. "But it doesn't take much power with the right circuit. There's wire and various electronic gadgets here. There's metal that can be heated and shaped into a water-driven generator. It *might* be done . . ."

George completed the transmitter and generator five years later. It was set in operation and George observed its output as registered by the various meters, several of which he had made himself.

"Weak, but it will reach the Gern monitor station on Athena," he said. "It's ready to send — what do you want to say?"

"Make it something short," Humbolt told him. "Make it 'Ragnarok calling.' That will be enough to bring a Gern cruiser."

George poised his finger over the transmitting key. "This will set something in motion that will end two hundred years from now with either the Gerns or us going under. These signals can never be recalled."

"I think the Gerns will be the ones to go under," he said. "Send the signal."

"I think the same thing," George said. "I hope we're right. It's something we'll never know."

He began depressing the key.

A boy was given the job of sending the signals, and the call went out twice daily toward distant Athena until winter froze the creek and stopped the waterwheel that powered the generator.

Humbolt sent out prospecting expeditions that year and in following years to search for metallic ores. The Dunbar Expedition had reported Ragnarok to be virtually devoid of minerals, but he held to the hope that they might find enough metals to make weapons with which to meet the Gerns. Perhaps — fantastic hope though it was — even enough to plan the building of a small rocket ship with a hyperspace shuttle.

But no ores were found, other than iron ore of such low grade as to be useless. Neither did Ragnarok possess any fiber-bearing plants from which thread and cloth could be made.

At the end of ten years he was forced to accept the fact that Ragnarok did not and would never offer men more than the bare necessities of life. There would be no weapons or spaceship built in the future; there were no metals with which to build them. Ragnarok was a prison devoid of all means of

escape but one: the possibility of luring the jailer to the cell door and overpowering him.

The sound had been made ten years before and was being made every year, that would bring the jailer to investigate, with his weapons and with his keys.

He was forty-five and the last of the Young Ones when he awoke one night to find himself burning with the Hell Fever. He waited quietly. There was no reason to call to the others. They could do nothing for him and he had already done all he could for them. Now they must carry on, forty-nine men, women, and children, and know that their last living link with the past was gone; that they were truly on their own.

They represented the lowest ebb in numbers of human life on Ragnarok, but they were all Ragnarok-born and their number would increase. For a while, perhaps, the immediate problems of survival would overshadow everything else. But the books would keep and there would always be some who would study them. They would grow in numbers as the generations went by and the lapse would be short-lived; the time for the coming of the Gerns, when measured in terms of generations, was already near.

Forces were in motion that would bring the seventh generation the trial of combat and the opportunity for freedom. But they, themselves, would have to achieve their own destiny.

He refused to let doubt touch his mind as to what that destiny would be. The men of Ragnarok were only furclad hunters who crouched in caves, but the time would come when they would walk as conquerers before beaten and humbled Gerns.

It was fifty years from the sending of the first signal and there were eighty-four of them . . .

Dave West stopped under a tree, his bow and padded arrow in his hands, and repressed a sigh of weariness as he scanned the clearing before him. He was fifteen and it was his third day of the intensive training that began for each boy when he reached that age; the hunter-and-hunted game in which his father, at the moment, was a prowler he was stalking and which was in turn stalking him. It was a very important game but the sun was hot and it seemed to him his father was unduly demanding —

He heard, too late, the whisper of running feet behind him. He whirled, bringing up the bow with the arrow notched in the string, and fell sprawling backward over a root he had not seen.

His father's body struck him and he was knocked blind and helpless under a rain of hard, openhanded blows. His efforts to resist were in vain and it seemed to him the lesson would never end.

When his father was finished he sat up dizzily and wiped the blood from his nose. His father squatted before him, his muscles rippling as he rocked

on the balls of his feet and regarded him with thoughtful speculation. "Didn't I tell you that prowlers will circle a hunter and attack him from the rear?" he asked.

"Yes, but I'd still have got you with the arrow if it hadn't been for that root," he defended himself.

His father reached out with a blow that caught him alongside the head and knocked him rolling in a blaze of white light.

"What did I tell you about watching your step?" he asked.

Dave sat up and gingerly held his hand to his ear. "To pay attention so I won't ever trip over anything. Next time I will."

He got to his feet to retrieve the arrow he had dropped, moving more quickly than before and with his desire to stop and rest forgotten.

His nose was still bleeding and all the other places still hurt, but it never occurred to him to feel the slightest resentment toward his father. His father was doing what all fathers did with their sons: teaching him how to survive. Soon he would have to hunt real prowlers and unicorns and they didn't give careless hunters a second chance — they killed them.

He wiped the blood from his nose again and looked at his father. "I'm ready," he said. "This time I'm going to make a dead prowler out of you."

It was one hundred years from the sending of the first signal and there were two hundred and ninety-four of them . . .

"You can kill prowlers and unicorns," Leader John Lake said, "but killing Gerns is harder to do."

The group of boys he addressed had recently and successfully gone through their first hunting season. They had proven they could face anything that walked on Ragnarok. Duane Craig answered with the confidence of youth, "An arrow will go through a Gern."

"If you get the chance to shoot it. But what do you think the Gern would be doing? Suppose the Gerns came today — what would you do?"

Duane Craig's answer came without hesitation: "Fight."

"An arrow won't go through a steel cruiser. One of their turret blasters could kill every human being on Ragnarok in one sweep."

"Then what should we do?" Duane asked.

"That's what you're going to learn next," he said. "You've learned how to kill prowlers and unicorns. Now you'll learn how to kill bigger game — Gerns. They'll be here in a hundred years for certain — a great many of your grandchildren will be alive yet when they come."

"But if you don't learn how to kill Gerns now you may never have any grandchildren. All of you know why — the Gerns might come tomorrow."

It was one hundred and twenty-five years from the sending of the first signal and there were five hundred and fifty-eight of them . . .

Bunker led the way into the starlit night just outside the mouth of the cave, his twelve pupils following him. They seated themselves beside him, ranging in age from a fourteen-year-old boy down to a girl of six, and waited for him to speak.

He pointed to the sky, where the group of stars called the Athena constellation blazed high in the east.

"There, at the tip of the Athena arrowhead, is Athena," he said. "But it's on beyond that star you see, so far that we can't see Athena's sun at all, so far that it takes light two hundred years to reach us from there.

"It will still be another seventy-five years before our first signal gets to Athena and the Gerns learn we are here. Why is it, then, that you and all the other groups of children have to study reading and writing and have to learn about all sorts of things you can't eat or wear, like history and physics and the way to fire a Gern blaster?"

The hand of every child went up. He selected eight-year-old Fred Humbolt. "Tell us, Freddy."

"Because we don't know when the Gerns will come," Freddy said. "In hyperspace their cruisers can travel a light-year every five days. One of their cruisers might pass by only forty or fifty light-years away and drop into normal space for some reason and pick up our signal. Then they would be here in only eight or nine days. So we have to know all about them and how to fight them because there aren't very many of us."

The little girl said, "The Gerns will come to kill part of us and make slaves out of the rest, like they did with the others a long time ago. They're awful mean and awful smart and we have to be smarter than they are."

The oldest boy, Steve Lake, was still watching the constellation of Athena.

"I hope they come," he said. "I hope they come just as soon as I'm old enough to kill them."

"How would a Gern cruiser look if it came at night?" Freddy asked. "Would it come from toward Athena?"

"It probably would," Bunker answered. "You would look toward Athena and you would see its rocket blast as it came down, like a bright trail of fire —"

A bright trail of fire burst suddenly into being, coming from the constellation of Athena and lighting up the woods and their startled faces as it arced down toward them.

"It's them!" a treble voice exclaimed, and there was a quick flurry of movement among the children.

Then the light vanished, leaving a faint glow where it had been.

"Only a meteor," Bunker said as he turned to the children.

He saw with deep satisfaction that none of them had run and that the older boys had shoved the smaller children behind them and were standing in a resolute little line, rocks in their hands with which to ward off the Gerns.

It was one hundred and fifty years from the sending of the first signal and there were twelve hundred and eighty of them . . .

Frank Schroeder opened the book to a fresh parchment page and dipped the pen in the clay bottle of lance-tree ink. What he would write would be only the observations of an old man who had recently transferred leadership to someone younger, but they were things he knew to be true, and he wanted those who lived in the years to come to read them and remember them.

He began to write:

We have adapted, as the Old Ones in the beginning believed we would do. We move as easily in the 1.5 gravity of Ragnarok as our ancestors did in the gravity of Earth. The Hell Fever has become unknown to us and the prowlers and unicorns are beginning to fear us.

We have survived; the generations that the Gerns presumed would never be born. We must never forget the characteristics that insured that survival: courage to fight, and die if necessary, and an unswerving loyalty of every individual to the group.

Fifty years from now the Gerns will come. There will be no one to help. Those on Athena are slaves and it is probable that Earth has been enslaved by now.

We will stand or fall, alone. But if we of today could know that those who meet the Gerns will still have the courage and the loyalty to one another that made our survival possible, then we would know that the Gerns are already defeated . . .

It was one hundred and seventy-five years from the sending of the first signal and there were two thousand and six hundred of them . . .

Julia Humbolt sat high on the hillside above the town, the book open in her lap and her short spear close to her right hand. Far below her the massive stockade wall, built to keep out unicorns, was a square surrounding the thick-walled houses. Wide canopies of logs and brush spread over the roofs to keep out the summer heat as much as possible. They were nice houses, she thought, much nicer to live in than the cave where she had been born.

Her own baby would be born in one of them in only seven months. And if it was a boy, he might be leader when the Gerns came!

She already knew what they would name him: John, after John Prentiss, the first of the great and wise Old Ones . . .

A twig snapped to her left. She reached instinctively for her spear as she jerked her head toward the sound.

It was a unicorn, just within the trees thirty feet away.

It abandoned its stealth at her movement and burst out of the trees in a squealing, pounding lunge. She came to her feet in one quick movement, the book falling unnoticed to the ground, and appraised the situation to determine what she must do to stay alive.

In her swift, calm appraisal she found but one thing to do: stand her

ground and make use of the fact that a human could jump to one side more quickly than a four-footed beast in headlong charge. It was coming with its head lowered to impale her, and for a fraction of a second, if she could jump aside quickly enough and at exactly the right moment, the vulnerable spot behind its jaw would be within reach of her spear.

She felt the sod firm under her moccasined feet as she shifted her weight a little, her eyes on the lowered head of the unicorn and the spear held ready. The ground trembled under the pounding of its hooves and the black horn was suddenly an arm's length from her stomach.

She jumped aside then, swinging as she jumped, and thrust the spear with all her strength into the unicorn's neck.

The thrust was hard and true and the spear went deep into the flesh. She released it and flung herself back to dodge the flying hooves. The force of the unicorn's lunge took it past her, then its legs collapsed under it and its massive body crashed to the ground. It kicked once and then lay still.

She went to it and retrieved the spear, feeling a stirring of pride as she walked past her bulky victim. Eighteen-year-old boys had been known to kill unicorns with spears, but never before had an eighteen-year-old girl tried to do it. The son she carried would be proud of her when he —

She saw the book and gasped in horror, all else forgotten. The unicorn had struck it with one of its hooves and it lay knocked to one side, battered and torn.

She ran to it and picked it up, to smooth the torn leaves as best she could. It had been a very important book: one of the old books, printed on real paper, that told them things they would need to know when the Gerns came. Now, her carelessness had resulted in such damage to it that page after page was unreadable.

She would be punished for it, of course. She would have to go to the town hall and stand up where everybody could see her, while the chief of the council told her how she had been trusted to take good care of the book and how she had betrayed their trust in her. It would all be true and she would not be able to look anyone in the eyes as she stood there.

She was a traitor; she was a — a *Bemmon!*

She started slowly back down the hill toward town, not seeing the unicorn as she walked past it, the bloody spear trailing disconsolately behind her and her head hanging in shame.

It was two hundred years from the sending of the first signal and there were five thousand of them . . .

John Humbolt stood on the wide stockade wall and looked to the southeast, to the distant valley where the Gern cruisers had set down so long ago.

It was a bleak and barren scene to him, despite all the years he had known it. Winter was coming again; the gray afternoon sky was spitting flakes of

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snow and an icy wind was moaning down from the north. Always, on Ragnarok, either winter was coming or the burned death of summer. They had adapted to their environment, but Ragnarok was a prison that had no key; a harsh and barren prison in which all the distant years of the future held only the never-changing monotony of mere existence.

But the imprisonment should end soon. Restlessness and impatience stirred in him at the thought. He was of the generation that the Old Ones had planned would meet and overpower the Gerns. He was twenty-five years old and he had studied since he was six for that meeting. He could draw diagrams of the interior of a Gern cruiser, placing the compartments and corridors exactly where the old drawings showed them to be. He and many of the others could speak Gern, though probably with an accent since they had had only the written lessons. And all of them had spent many hours practicing with wooden models of the Gern hand blasters.

They were as prepared as they could ever be, and during the past year the anticipation of the coming of the Gerns had become a fever of desire among them all. It was hard to compel themselves to go patiently about their routine duties when any day or night the cruiser might come that would carry them to the stars; tall and black and incredibly deadly, and theirs if they could take it.

The Gerns would come, to look upon the men of Ragnarok with contempt. They would not fear the men of Ragnarok, thinking they were superior to them, and their belief in their superiority would bring their defeat —

A sound came above the moan of the wind, a roaring that raised in pitch and swelled in volume as it came nearer. He listened, watching the gray sky, and his heart hammered with exultation. As he watched it broke through the clouds, riding its rockets of flame.

The cruiser had come!

It settled to the ground, so near the stockade that it loomed high and menacing above the town with its blaster turrets looking down into it. It was beautiful in its menace — it was like some great and savage prowler that might be tamed and used to kill the other prowlers.

He turned and dropped the ten feet to the ground inside the stockade, landing lightly. The warning signal was being sounded from the center of the town; a unicorn horn that gave out the call they had used in the practice alarms. But this time it was real, this time there might never be an All Clear sounded. Already the women and children would be hurrying along the tunnels that led to the safety of the woods beyond the town. The Gerns might use their turret blasters to destroy the town and all in it before the day was over. There was no way of knowing what might happen before it ended, but whatever it was, it would be the action they had all been wanting.

He ran to where the others would be gathering, hearing the horn ring wild and savage and triumphant as it announced the end of two centuries of waiting.

"So we came two hundred light-years to find *this!*"

Commander Gantho indicated the viewscreen with a pudgy white hand — heavy in the gravity of Ragnarok — where the bearded savages could be seen among their pole and mud hovels.

Occasionally one of them would glance toward the cruiser with something like mild curiosity, and Subcommander Narth frowned with a combination of perplexity and resentment. These descendants of the Rejects had obviously degenerated into utter primitives, and primitives always reacted to the presence of a cruiser with a high degree of awe and fear. These merely ignored it.

"They behave like mindless animals," he said to the commander. "They couldn't have sent those signals."

"The transmitter was built two hundred years ago, before they degenerated," the commander said. "It must have been fitted with some means for automatic operation that required no further attention. Obviously, those specimens down there represent retrogression to the point where they have no knowledge whatever of the past."

"I suppose the medical students will want some of them for study since it had been assumed survival was impossible here," Narth remarked absently, his eyes on the viewscreen. "But the reason for sending the signals — I wonder what that could have been?"

The commander shrugged. "To ask us for assistance, no doubt." He glanced at the chronometer and his manner became brisk. "It's almost meal-time. Send out a detachment to bring some of them in for observation. They seem to be strong enough — if their intelligence isn't too abysmally low we can use them on Athena for simple manual labor."

"I'll go myself," Narth said. "I know a little Terran and it should be mildly entertaining to take a closer look at them."

"Take your detachment straight toward the stockade wall, not down it to the gate," the commander ordered. "I'll have one of the turret blasters destroy that section of the wall just before you get to it. The best way to get eager cooperation from primitives is to impress them with the futility of resistance."

The blaster beam lashed down from one of the cruiser's turrets and disintegrated three hundred feet of stockade wall into a billow of dust. Narth and his twelve men marched through the breach, their weapons in their hands. The thought occurred to him that they must appear to the natives as strange and terrible gods, striding through the dust created by their own genius for destruction.

But when he and his men emerged from the cloud of dust the natives were watching them with the same mild curiosity as before. He felt the gall of sharp irritation. He was a Gern and bearded savages did not ignore Gerns.

As if to add to his irritation, several of the watching men turned away and went back into the houses, not as men who sought concealment but as men who saw nothing of sufficient interest to keep them outside in the cold wind any longer.

He scowled in frustration.

He ordered his men to a halt when they were some distance from the first house and they stood in a line, their weapons held on the four natives who stood under the canopy of the house before them. He beckoned to the natives, a gesture too imperative for them to fail to understand, and ordered commandingly in Terran, "Come here!"

One of the natives yawned and went back in the house. The other three continued to watch with the same infuriating lack of interest.

"What's the matter?" The voice of the commander spoke from the communicator that hung from his neck.

"There are three natives by the house in front of me," Narth said. "You can't see them from the ship because of the canopy. I ordered them to come here, but apparently they no longer understand Terran."

"Then give them some action they can understand — drag them out by the heels. I can't wait all day for you to bring back a few specimens."

"Very well," Narth said. "It won't take long."

He and his men approached the natives again, Narth marveling at the ease with which they moved in the dragging gravity. They were splendidly muscled, not bulkily but in the way a Gern *themo* cat was muscled. If only their intelligence was not too low, Ragnarok would become the source of an endless supply of the strongest, most docile slaves the Gern Empire had ever possessed. The discard of the Rejects two hundred years before had produced a wholly unexpected reward —

The thought vanished like a punctured bubble as his approach brought him near enough to see them at close range. He had expected their eyes to be like the eyes of some near-mindless beast, dull and vacant. Instead, they were sharp with intelligence and waiting purpose.

Warning touched him like a cold finger and he would have ordered his men to halt again, but the brown-bearded native in the center spoke first, not in Terran but in Gern and to all of them: "Look up on the roof — and keep walking!"

Narth looked, and saw that thirteen bowmen had suddenly appeared along the edge of the roof, invisible to the ship because of the canopy. Thirteen broad-headed arrows were aimed at their throats and thirteen coldly intent pairs of eyes were watching them for the first move to lift a weapon.

Trapped!

They had walked into the simplest kind of trap, set for them by dull-witted savages. In his surge of surprise and anger he did not wonder how they had learned to speak Gern. The important thing was that they had tricked him

and his men into a position that was not at all in keeping with his dignity as a Gern officer.

They would not live long enough to regret it, of course. He opened his mouth, to speak the quick words into the communicator that would bring the blaster beam lashing down and transform the house and the natives into disassociated atoms —

"Don't!"

The warning came from the brown-bearded one again. "Your next action was obvious before you thought of it," he said. "An arrow will go through you at the first word. We have nothing whatever to lose by killing you."

Narth looked again at the arrow aimed at his throat. The flint head of it looked broad enough and sharp enough to decapitate him, and the bowman seemed to be holding the taut bowstring in a dangerously careless manner.

His anger dwindled a little. It was true the natives had nothing to lose by killing him. He, on the other hand, had a lot to lose — his life. And their victory would be short-lived. It was inconceivable that such an absurd situation could last for long —

"A little faster," the native ordered. "Under the canopy here — move!"

They obediently quickened their pace and the bowmen on the roof dipped their arrows to follow their progress.

John Humbolt surveyed the line of Gerns, holding the Gern officer's communicator in one hand, the microphone muffled.

The red-bearded giant, Charley Craig, shook his head as though in wonder. "It was as easy as trapping a herd of woods-goats," he said.

"Young ones," the blond-bearded Norman Lake amended. His pale gray eyes went down the line of Gerns and back again. "And almost as dangerous."

To Humbolt the appearance of the Gerns was entirely different from what he had expected. They moved heavily and awkwardly, their bellies and faces were soft, and the officer before him was trying to conceal a high degree of uncertainty with bluster.

"The longer you hold us, the more painful and severe your punishment will be," he threatened. "Your trickery has gained you nothing."

"Trickery?" Humbolt asked. "All we did was go about our usual activities. Of course, when you destroyed a section of the wall that required months of hard labor to build and then invaded our town with drawn weapons we could only classify you as hostile intruders. As for punishment: your degree of punishment will depend upon how well you cooperate."

"Our punishment?" The Gern glared, his face purpling. "Our punishment? You ignorant fool — you insane, megalomaniac savage!"

Humbolt turned to Charley Craig. "Have we let him talk long enough for you to mimic his voice?" he asked.

"Long enough," Charley said.

"Mimic?" Question momentarily crossed the Gern's face, to be replaced by the rage. "I warn you for the last time: your death will be painful enough at best. Return that communicator at once!"

He reached for the communicator as he spoke. Humbolt flicked out his hand and there was the sharp snapping of finger bones. The Gern gasped, his face whitening, and the fury drained out of him as he held his broken hand.

Humbolt turned to Charley again and handed him the communicator. Charley slipped it around his neck and let his flaming beard conceal the microphone.

"Let's hope my accent won't be too conspicuous," he said as he pressed the call button.

The response came almost immediately from the ship. "Narth — what are you doing? Where are the natives you were sent after?"

Charley's beard parted in a smile at the words and Humbolt felt a sense of relief. What might have been a serious obstacle did not exist. Apparently Gern communicators were designed for serviceability rather than faithful tonal reproduction: the voice that came from the communicator was very metallic.

Charley answered in a voice that was almost a perfect imitation of that of the Gern officer: "We have thirteen captives and we're taking them to the ship now."

"He's referring to you Gerns, of course," Humbolt said to the officer. "Now, each of you Gerns will walk hand in hand with one of us. This may give your commander the idea you're leading us to the ship, which is all right. It may give one of you Gerns the idea to try to reach for his blaster. Don't try it. Our reflexes are far faster than yours and you would never touch it. Make no attempt to signal the ship or warn the others in any way. You will all thirteen be killed with your own blasters the moment we're discovered."

He saw nothing on the faces of the Gerns that resembled defiance. He said crisply to his own men, "Let's go."

They went as a group of thirteen pairs, the Gerns walking obediently a little in front of the humans and with the bone-crushing grip of the humans bringing wincing of pain from them. The speaker in Charley's communicator made a surprised sound at their appearance and demanded, "What's the meaning of this? Why are you leading the natives? And why don't you have your blasters in your hands?"

"Our captives are very docile," Charley said, "and we can get them into the ship more easily if we lead them. Only one of them can speak Terran at all and he is very stupid."

The Terran-speaking officer reddened at the reference to himself but made no other move to show his resentment.

The airlock slid open when they reached the bottom of the boarding ramp and six armed Gerns stepped out, shackles in their hands.

"Orders of the commander, sir," the officer in charge of them said to the Gern officer beside Humbolt, looking down at him. "The natives will be chained together before taking them to the examination chamber. They will —"

He saw, belatedly, the strained expressions on the faces of the Gerns below him. He snapped a command as he jerked at the blaster he carried: "The natives — *kill them!*"

Humbolt shot him with the blaster of the officer beside him before he could fire. The other five went down a moment later, but not before one of them had killed Chiara.

The commander would have seen it all in his viewscreen. They had seconds left in which to carry out their plan.

"Into the ship!" he said. "Leave the Gerns."

They ran, the airlocks beginning to slide shut as they did so. They crowded through before the locks closed completely, leaving thirteen Gerns suddenly locked outside their own ship.

Alarm bells were ringing shrilly inside the ship and from the multiple-compartment shafts came the sounds of elevators dropping with reinforcements. They ran past the elevator shafts without pausing, to split forces as they had long ago planned; five men going with Charley to try to fight their way to the drive room and five going with Humbolt in the attempt to take the control room.

Humbolt found the manway ladder and they began to climb. There was one factor much in their favor; the Gerns would waste some time looking for them near the bottom of the elevator shafts.

They came to the control room level and ran down the short corridor. They turned left into the one that had the control room at its end and into the fire of six waiting Gerns.

For three seconds the corridor was an inferno of blaster beams that cracked and hissed as they met and crossed, throwing little chips of metal from the walls. When it was over one man remained standing beside Humbolt: the blond and nerveless Lake.

Thomsen and Barber and Leandro were dead and Jimmy West was bracing himself against the wall, a blaster hole in his chest and his legs giving way under him. He tried to smile and tried to say something: "We showed — showed —" He slid to the floor, the sentence unfinished.

They ran on, leaping the bodies of the Gerns. The control room door swung open a crack as they neared it, then was knocked wide open as Humbolt shot the Gern who had intended to take a cautious look outside.

They went through the door, to engage in the last brief battle. There were

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two officers in addition to the one who wore a commander's uniform, and the three of them swung up their blasters in the way that seemed so curiously slow to the men of Ragnarok. They killed the two officers before either could fire, and the commander's blaster was knocked across the room as Lake's hurled blaster smashed him across the knuckles.

Humbolt closed the door behind him and Lake recovered his blaster. The commander stared at them, astonishment and apprehension on his pale, fat face.

"What — how did you get past the guards?" he asked in heavily accented Terran, rubbing his bruised knuckles. Then he seemed to regain some of his courage and his tone became ominous with threat. "More guards will be here within a minute. Lay down your weapons and —"

"Don't talk until you're asked a question," Lake said.

"Lay down your weapons and surrender to me and I'll let you go free —"

Lake slapped him across the mouth with a backhanded blow that snapped his head back on his shoulders and split his lip.

"I said, don't talk. And above all, never lie to us like that."

The commander spat out a tooth and held his hand to his bleeding mouth. He did not speak again.

Humbolt located the communicator that would connect him with Charley. There was a rustling sound coming from it as though Charley were breathing heavily.

"Charley?" he asked.

"Here," the voice of Charley answered. "We made it to the drive room — three of us. How about you?"

"Lake and I have the control room. Cut their drives, just in case something should go wrong up here. I'll let you know as soon as the ship is ours."

He turned to the commander. "First, I want to know how the war is going."

"I —" The commander looked uncertainly at Lake.

"Just tell the truth," Lake said. "Whether you think we'll like it or not."

"We have all the planets but Earth itself," the commander said. "We'll have that soon."

"And the Terrans on Athena?"

"They're still — working for us."

"Now," Humbolt said, "you will order your men to return to their sleeping quarters. All of them. They will leave their blasters in the corridors outside and they will not resist the men who will come to take charge of the ship."

The commander made a last effort toward defiance: "And if I refuse?"

Lake answered, smiling at him with the smile of his that was no more than a quick showing of white teeth and with the savage eagerness in his pale eyes.

"If you refuse I'll start with your fingers and break every bone to your

shoulders. If that isn't enough, I'll start with your toes and go to your hips."

The commander hesitated, sweat filming his face as he looked at them. Then he reached out to switch on the all-stations communicator and say into it, "Attention, all personnel: You will return to your quarters at once, leaving your weapons in the corridors outside. You are ordered to make no resistance when the natives come . . ."

There was a silence when the commander had finished. Humbolt and Lake looked at each other, bearded and clad in prowler skins but standing at last in the control room of the ship that was theirs; in a ship that could take them to Athena, to Earth, to the end of the galaxy.

The commander, watching them, could not conceal his last vindictive anticipation.

"You have the cruiser," he said, "but what can you do with it?"

"I'll tell you what we can do with it," Humbolt said kindly. "We've planned it for two hundred years. We have the cruiser and sixty days from now we'll have Athena. That will be only the beginning and you Gerns are going to help us do it."

It was not, Narth thought, the kind of homecoming he and the others had expected. Ragnarok lay a hundred and eighty-five light-years behind them and Athena was only three ship's days ahead of them. It had been only forty-nine days since he had gone out to bring back some of the natives for observation in the examination chamber and for appraisal of their worth as slaves. In those forty-nine days the men of Ragnarok had forced the Gerns to teach them how to operate the cruiser, learning with amazing speed.

"You have to learn fast on Ragnarok," the one called Charley had remarked. "Those who are slow in learning don't live long enough to produce any slow-learning children."

In retrospect, it seemed to Narth that the first two days had been an insane nightmare of bearded monsters who asked endless questions about the ship and calmly, deliberately, broke the bones of anyone who refused to answer or gave an answer that was not true. By the end of the second day they had learned that passive resistance was painful and futile, and two of them had learned that active resistance was fatal.

So they had ceased resisting in any manner, but it was only a temporary submission for strategic reasons. The savages had gained the upper hand by means of deceit and ruthlessness; they had been lucky in their trickery and had become masters of the cruiser but they were still savages from a mud and log village. They had dared to defy Gerns and when their luck ran out they would pay the penalty.

He clenched his hands at the thought. It was something to look forward to, the day when these savages would be taken back to Ragnarok and an

example made of them in the center of the village, while their wives and their children and all the savages left behind watched and learned what it meant to defy the Gerns . . .

The red-bearded Charley was smiling at him from the copilot's chair.

"It's not much use to resent what happened," he said. "You Gerns made two big mistakes and this is the result."

Narth quickly forced his face into an expression of civil interest. "We made two big mistakes?" he asked.

It was very seldom that he held a conversation with any of the Ragnarok men. Humbolt would occasionally exchange a few words not relevant to the savages' plans, but only Charley ever exhibited any desire to engage in idle conversation with the Gerns. It seemed to amuse him to observe their reactions. Galling as it was, it was more comfortable than the cold menace that was so characteristic of the others. Especially the one called Lake. Lake had never threatened him in any way but there was an appalling aura of dangerousness about him that made threats unnecessary. It had been Lake who had avenged the death of the Ragnarok boy whom two Gerns had stabbed to death with long knives stolen from the galley. Lake had cornered them and then, without touching his weapons, he had proceeded to disembowel them with their own knives. He had stood and smiled down at them as they writhed and moaned and finally died . . .

"First, you Gerns underestimated us," Charley said. "You thought we were as primitive as we looked. Actually, we let our beards grow for the past year to help you think that. You were stupid enough to take it for granted we were stupid.

"Then you were afraid to do anything while there was yet time. You, yourself, were afraid to warn the ship. The commander was afraid to resist and hoped the men at the different stations would do something. The men at the different stations hoped that someone else would do something.

"Hope is a good thing but —" Charley smiled at him again "— you have to fight together and not be afraid of getting hurt."

Humbolt strode into the control room.

"We'll make the test now," he said to Charley.

He went to the board and seated himself, then punched the BATTLE STATIONS button. "You" — he looked at Narth — "strap yourself in for high-acceleration maneuvers."

Narth did so and asked, "High acceleration?"

"We want to make some tests with this cruiser so we'll know what we can do with the two we'll get at Athena. And there *are* two more cruisers at Athena — you didn't lie about it, did you?"

He asked the question in the tone that had so often presaged painful violence for Gerns who had lied, and Narth hastily assured him, "No — there are two cruisers there, as we told you. But what — when you get them —"

He stopped, wondering if he could tactfully ask Humbolt what he thought he could do with them.

"We'll take the three cruisers back to Ragnarok," Humbolt said. "We'll pick up the rest of the Ragnarok men who are neither too old nor too young and go on to Earth. I'll show you, in a minute, why we expect no trouble breaking through your lines around Earth. These Ragnarok men will be given training in the handling of both Gern and Terran ships and then we will destroy all the Gern ships around Earth that refuse to surrender."

Narth restrained a smile, some of his depression leaving him. It was a plan so fantastic it was amusing; it would be the last ambitious attempt the savages would ever make.

"As you know," Humbolt said, "the largest ship's blasters are good for only a relatively short range due to the dispersion. A space battle consists of firing your long-range projectiles and trying to dodge the projectiles of the enemy. The acceleration limiter makes certain that the projectile evader mechanism doesn't cause such a sudden change of direction or such a degree of acceleration that the crew will be injured or killed.

"We from Ragnarok are accustomed to a 1.5 gravity. We can withstand much higher degrees of acceleration than Gerns or men from Earth. Now, we're going to make some preliminary tests. We've had the acceleration limiter disconnected."

"*Disconnected?*" Narth heard the frantic note in his own cry. "Don't — you'll kill us all!"

"No," Humbolt said. "We won't go any farther right now than to make you unconscious."

"But it —"

Humbolt touched the acceleration control and Narth was shoved deep in the seat, his breath cut off as his diaphragm sagged. The cruiser swung in a curve and Narth was slammed sideways, the straps cutting into his flesh and his vision blurring. He thought Humbolt was watching him; he could not see to tell for sure.

"Now," he heard Humbolt say, his voice dim and distant, "We'll see how many G's you can take."

An instant later something smashed at him like a physical force and consciousness vanished.

"You didn't give us a chance to come anywhere near our own acceleration limit," Humbolt said to him after he had regained consciousness. "But you can see now that the Gern ships around Earth can never hope to outmaneuver us nor hope to hit us."

Narth saw, and what he saw was unpleasant to behold. The Ragnarok savages possessed a physical abnormality that would enable them to do as

they planned. Earth and Athena would be lost and a corner of the Gern Empire thrust back.

But the Gerns were a race of conquerors who ruled across a thousand light-years of space. The existence of the Empire was proof of their superiority. While the savages strutted on Earth and Athena, boasting of their prowess, the Empire would be laying plans and preparing for their annihilation.

When the time was right the Gerns would strike, and when it was over the fate of Earth and Athena would be a grim example to all other subject worlds of the utter futility of defying Gern domination.

He looked at Humbolt, feeling the hatred and anticipation twist his face.

"We'll go on to engage the Gern home fleet without any waste of time," Humbolt said. "Then we'll destroy your Empire, world by world."

It seemed to Narth that the full and terrible implications were slow in coming to him.

"Destroy the Empire — *now?*"

"Were you foolish enough to think we would stop with the freeing of Earth and Athena? When a race has been condemned to die and manages, somehow, to survive, it learns a lesson well: it must never again let the other race be in a position to destroy it. So we're not going to give you time to do that. You yourselves sowed the seeds on Ragnarok two hundred and twenty years ago when you condemned us to die. Now, the time has come to reap the harvest.

"You understand, don't you?" Humbolt smiled at him in the mirthless way that Ragnarok men smiled at Gerns, and his voice was almost gentle. "You are a menace which we must remove."

Narth did not answer. There was no answer he could make. He sat without moving, the triumphant anticipation draining away from him. He had not thought they would dare challenge the Gern Empire — not so soon, before it was prepared to defeat them . . .

You yourselves sowed the seeds.

They would remember an incident that had happened two centuries before and they would shatter the Empire into dust, coldly, ruthlessly, without mercy.

The time has come to reap the harvest.

Only an incident in the Empire's history, unimportant, almost unrecorded, and the harvest would be destruction by the descendants of the unwanted, terror and death at the hands of the children of the condemned.

You are a menace which we must remove.

He wet his lips, feeling the weakness of a cold and bitter sickness inside him.

"But it's too soon to die . . ."