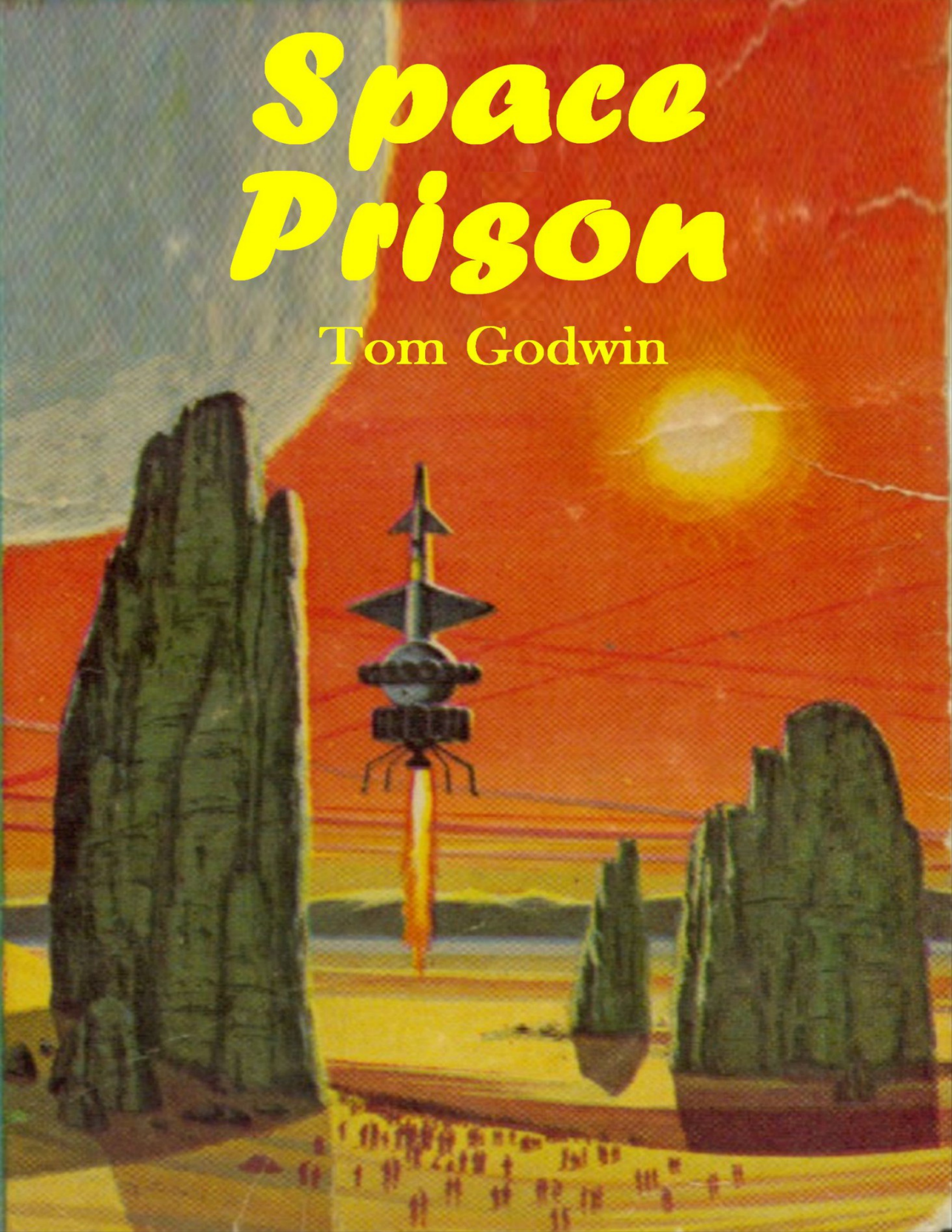


Space Prison

Tom Godwin



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(original title: The Survivors)

a science-fiction adventure by

TOM GODWIN

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!

To
JOE AND BLANCHE KOLARIK,
whose friendship and encouragement in the years gone by will never be
forgotten.

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 prowl 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 cracking 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