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The Space Barbarians by Tom Godwin

The victory fleet was two days from Earth when the phantom ship appeared again.

It came without warning, as it always did. John Humbolt was in the control room of the *Ragnarok*, glancing idly at the forward view screen. It showed nothing but the featureless blackness of hyperspace, then the bright white spot was suddenly glowing in the center of it.

"Norman—it's here again," he said. He pushed the *Weapons Stations Alert* button and spoke into the ship's intercom: "The Ghost ship is dead ahead—this may be the time it shows us what it's after."

Norman Lake came over to the viewscreen, a blond, silently moving man with the face of a pale-eyed wolf.

"Not Gern," Norman said, watching the white spot on the screen. "After three bloody years the Gern Empire is no more—yet the Ghost still follows us."

"I wonder if the things on the Ghost will scare the mockers again?" John said. "They always—"

His answer came in the racing patter of tiny feet as two of the chipmunk-like telepathic mockers came running into the control room. They did not stop until they were on John's shoulders, their little paws clinging tightly to his collar.

"Scared!" Tip chattered. Freckles, his mate, repeated, "*Scared!*"

He used Tip to speak to Dale Ord, who had just gone to the drive room:

"Bring Tiny at once, Dale. Let's see what she can tell us."

He formed the mental image of Dale as he spoke and Tip sent the message telepathically to Tiny, Dale's mocker, who would then repeat it aloud to Dale.

There was a flash of black in the doorway and the huge tiger-wolf prowlers, Fenrir and Sigyn, came loping in. They stopped beside John with the fur half lifted on their shoulders and both wariness and question in their yellow eyes.

John looked at the white spot on the screen again. It was not really an image of the Ghost. Their own ships were in second-level-hyperspace—while the Ghost ship was always in third-level. The white spot on the viewscreen, they felt sure, was caused by secondary radiations from the Ghost's spy-ray as it probed into second-level.

Dale Ord came into the room; dark-eyed, dark-haired, a big man with an air of amiable good nature which was always in such contrast to the animal-like alertness and thinly veiled savagery of the pale-eyed Norman.

"Tiny is terrified," Dale said. "What kind of alien monsters could scare her like that?"

She was trembling violently and he was stroking her in an attempt to quiet her. She was a frail little mutant, hypersensitive telepathically, and this was their first opportunity to use her when the Ghost ship was near.

"What are you afraid of, Tiny?" John asked.

"Not know," Tiny quavered. "Scared to look."

"You have to, Tiny," he said. "Now, go ahead and look. All of us here, and Fenrir and Sigyn, too, will never let this thing hurt you." he little mocker's dark, frightened eyes looked from face to face, down at the big prowlers, then back to John. Reluctantly, still near the point of terror, she said, "I look."

Her eyes went vacant as she opened her mind to receive with all mental shields down. Then she shrieked, jerked convulsively, and was dead.

John said quickly, "Tip, what did Tiny see?"

"Not know!" Tip's reply came as such a frightened chatter that it was almost unintelligible. "Tiny know—Tiny die!"

"Were you enough in Tiny's mind to tell *where* the bad thing is?"

Tip lifted a shaking paw to point toward the stern of the ship.

"*That way—long, long that way.*"

The three men looked at one another. "*That way—*" the mocker had said. The Ghost ship was in the opposite direction. There was a silence as they realized what the little mocker could not tell them.

A long, long way in that direction lay the suns of Orion and the black, unknown Great Nebula.

"Is the bad thing still there?" John asked.

"So it's not on the Ghost, after all," John said to the others. "Yet there has to be a connection—the mockers are scared only when the Ghost is near."

"Six hundred lightyears is a long way to send a ship to spy on us," Dale said. "What kind of things sent it—and why?"

They knew only that the Ghost ship was not Gern. Ten days ago the surrender of the Gern Empire had taken place on the *Ragnarok*. The *Ragnarok* had been poised above the smoldering remains of the luxury city where once the Gern leaders had feasted on rare foods, drank rare wines, and gloried in their power as they made decisions that affected the fates of worlds and the lives of billions. The humble surrender had been broadcast to all worlds formerly held by the Gerns and the surrender terms given; terms that freed every world and every race from any vestige of Gern control and contained grim provisions for the punishment of any individual or groups which might try to hinder the change to freedom and independence.

Had the Ghost belonged to the Gerns, they would surely have used it. Now, the war was over and the Terran and Ragnarokan ships not needed for occupation duty were on their way to Earth, following the *Ragnarok*.

John could see the other ships in the rear viewscreens—an armada of battleships, cruisers, scout ships, observation ships...

And the Ghost was waiting ahead of them all, sending its spy-ray probing into every ship of the fleet.

The whiteness on the screen enlarged faster and faster as they neared the Ghost. They watched it, until the entire screen was white. Then, as suddenly as switching off a light, the whiteness was gone from the forward screen and was filling the rear screen instead.

"Well," Norman said, "we went through the Ghost again. How do we fight something like that?"

The whiteness on the rear screen dwindled in size. Then, when the entire fleet had passed it by, the Ghost ship suddenly accelerated. It took a course at an angle to the course of the fleet and was a diminishing white dot on the screen when it suddenly vanished.

Its course was almost straight toward their own world— Ragnarok.

John looked at Dale and Norman and in their eyes he saw the reflection of his own thoughts: a little over four thousand women, children, and men too old for any kind of war duty, were on Ragnarok. They represented the entire race of *Ragnarok* but for the fifteen hundred men on the ships. They had one medium-duty disintegrator for protection, mounted on a hill beside the little town, and nothing else. The speed of the Ghost ship was twenty-five times the speed of the *Ragnarok*—there was no way in the universe by which they could overtake it

"I'll call Ragnarok," John said, turning to the hyperspace communicator. "Athena must be warned, too, in case the Ghost veers over that way. One of you have Commander Hayden notified, so he can take care of that, himself."

He sent the message of warning to Ragnarok; specifically, to old Dan Destry, who had the prime responsibility for the welfare of all the others. He ended with the words: "If we had anywhere near the speed of the Ghost, we would be on our way to Ragnarok at once. We may decide to do that within the next two hours, anyway."

He turned back to face the other two men, glad that the communicator

he had just used transmitted at a velocity of ten thousand lightyears a day. The message would cross the two hundred and sixty lightyears in approximately thirty-seven minutes. The hyperspace transmitters known to Terrans or Gerns two hundred years before had had a transmission velocity of only five lightyears a day.

"I told Hayden," Dale said. "He sounded almost sober. He's having Athena, and Earth, and all ships warned of what happened."

"The Ghost might be bound for a world hundreds of light-years beyond Ragnarok," John answered. "After all, there's nothing on Ragnarok for strangers but barren rocks and Hell Fever. But we'll see—we may decide to drop our diplomatic mission and head straight for home, anyway."

"To me," Norman said, "this diplomatic business never made sense. Why should we go on to Earth for a psuedo-friendly reception by a race that hates us?"

"Not really hatred," John answered. "In a way, it's understandable. Two thousand of us did in three years what hundreds of millions of Earthmen hadn't been able to do in two centuries. We'll be on Earth for only a day or two, then we'll go on."

"Gesture of respect," Dale said, smiling a little at Norman. "We want to see Mother Earth again, home of our forefathers, before we go back to our own world. This is to remind them that we're still brothers under the skin, and all that."

"Brothers? Norman asked. His lip curled. "*Muties*—that's what they call us behind our backs. We're mutants—accidental freaks—especially to the Athenans. They can all go to hell so far as I'm concerned."

John was alone twenty minutes later when Earth's Grand Commander Hayden came in. Hayden was a tall man, tanned and hard by Earth standards, with a military bearing that was increased by his gray mustache and steel-blue eyes. There would have been both strength and dignity to him if it had not been for the bitterness which had kept increasing all through the war.

"Pardon me for intruding in your sanctum sanctorum, sir," Hayden said with the mocking courtesy characteristic of him. "I came to see if I could be of any assistance."

"Sit down, John invited. "And thanks—but all any of us can do is wait and see."

Hayden took a chair, almost misjudging the distance, and John knew he had been drinking more than his appearance indicated.

"There are two cruisers only ten lightyears out from Athena and I've ordered them to go to Athena at full acceleration. That will give Athena a total of four cruisers and ten land-based heavy-duty disintegrators for protection there. I regret that we have no ships near Ragnarok."

"Well—it can't be helped," he said.

"Actually," Hayden said, "I feel that Ragnarok is in no danger. With all due respect to your people there, the world, itself, is far too grim and barren to be of any interest to a race capable of building a third-level ship. In two hundred years you found only five hundred pounds of iron, I understand."

"That's right."

Hayden leaned back in the chair and said, "But the empire-changing qualities of that quarter-ton of iron! Most certainly one of the more fascinating chapters in the story of Ragnarok, sir. No ship with which to escape from your prison world, so you converted that iron into a transmitter and lured a Gern cruiser into your trap. Crossbows, unicorns, and tame prowlers against Gern disintegrators and blasters—and you captured their cruiser. With that cruiser, even before reaching Athena, you captured this battleship. Remarkable feats, sir—most remarkable."

"What is your true opinion of the Ragnarokans, Hayden?" he asked curiously.

"Do you refer to their superior physiques, sir? Or do you refer to such intangible but sterling qualities as their lion-like courage, their reckless daring, their indomitable determination, and so on?"

There it is again, he thought. A Ragnarokan can't even ask an Earthman or Athenan the time of day without running into that resentment.

He looked at Hayden, irritated by him yet feeling sorry for him. Hayden

had devoted his life to working toward the day when he would lead the forces of Earth to victory over the Gerns and make Earth forever free. But the Ragnarokans, not Hayden, had made the victory possible and had given the Gerns the surrender terms. Through no fault of his own, Hayden's name would never glow in the books of history as the man who ended the Two Hundred Years War...

"I mean the Ragnarokans as a race," he said to Hayden. "From the day the Gerns left the Rejects on Ragnarok to die."

"We were certain that no human could survive on Ragnarok. Imagine our astonishment when two thousand bold barbarians came bursting out of there to rescue us. From the caves to destruction of the Gern Empire in three years—a success story without parallel."

"Not three years," he said. "Two centuries. It wasn't easy —not on Ragnarok."

The Dunbar Expedition of two hundred and ten years before had discovered the hell-world and given it its name from Teutonic mythology: *Ragnarok; the last day for gods and men*. It had been classified as "Absolutely uninhabitable." It was devoid of metals, with no known edible plants, its long, elliptic orbit and two suns giving it extremes of summer heat and winter cold such as no human had ever known, the vicious prowlers and unicorns its dominant life forms, scourged by the Hell Fever, and with a 1.5 gravity to drag like a leaden weight, day and night.

It was near Ragnarok that two Gern cruisers had intercepted the unarmed *Constellation*, bound for the rich, uninhabited, Earth-discovered world of Athena with her eight thousand colonists.

The Gerns had destroyed the *Constellation's* drive and then divided the colonists into two groups, the Acceptables and the Rejects; a division that mercilessly split families. The Acceptables were those whose skills might be of value to Gerns in their development of Athena—which they now claimed as their own—and the cruisers would take them on to Athena.

Those whose skills were of little value to the Gerns—and virtually all the small children—were classified as Rejects and left in a cold, barren little valley on Ragnarok. Three hundred and seventy died the first night...

"I'm intelligent enough to realize that the Rejects must have endured

unimaginable hardships," Hayden said in a somewhat different tone. "Also, no doubt, they could have survived only by developing an extremely strong code of mutual trust and duty. There could have been no place for the selfish."

John thought of the rotting stump which still stood in front of the caves. It had been a tree that first terrible summer when six hundred and three emaciated scarecrows watched the yellow sun burn the land by day and the blue one burn it by night. Children were dying of malnutrition each day. Bemmon, the fault-finder, the only one who still carried a trace of fat, complained incessantly of his discomfort, blaming Vincent Lake and the other leaders for their plight and seeming never to hear the whimpers of the dying children. Then his cache of stolen food was found; food which he had been secretly eating at night and which would have been enough to have saved the lives of many children.

To Lake and the others, Bemmon's action was far more than theft. It was treason and the murder of children. Fifteen minutes later Bemmon was hanging from the tree...

Norman came back into the room, as silently as a prowler, and lifted his pale eyebrows in sardonic amusement at sight of Hayden. Hayden looked back with impersonal regard.

"It's about time we heard from Ragnarok, Johnny," Norman said.

John saw by the chronometer that it was a minute past the expected time. "Any second now," he said.

Hayden stood up, and said, "If you will excuse me, gentlemen, I'll go now to take care of some of my own humble duties."

Norman smiled after Hayden and said when he was gone, "He'll never forgive us for busting up his playhouse. Hell always—"

The communicator gave the signal that would precede the call from Ragnarok and both men listened.

"Hello, Johnny—"

It was not the gruff voice of old Dan Destry but the soft voice of Lora Lake.

"Your message just came," Lora said. "I'm on communicator duty right now, and I've sent for Dan. I know what Dan will tell you—go on to Earth. But I have a silly premonition— I've had it ever since the last time I saw you—and I wish you could bring the *Ragnarok* straight home so that we—here's Dan, now..."

"I don't have much in the way of feminine intuition," Destry's bass voice rumbled without preamble, "so I would say that there isn't any reason in the universe why the Ghost ship should ever stop here. Anything intelligent enough to build a third-level ship wouldn't be very apt to do anything as pointless as to slaughter women and children who had never bothered them and never would. For the next few days, though, I'll have most of the women and children in hiding, out in the hills. Go on to Earth—I don't think there's any danger and you couldn't get here in time, anyway..."

Lora spoke again, when Destry had finished, to say, "I'll be gone for the rest of the day and night—I'm going to help place all the in-hiding groups. Then Barbara will stay with the largest group while I come back to town. I'll call you again, then. Good-bye, Johnny..."

He sat for a while, still hearing her voice and seeing her face before him; the sweet, heart-shaped face framed with brown hair, the dark eyes that were a little too large and a little too somber for the face...

"The face that launched a thousand ships," Norman said, smiling faintly as he watched John. "If my little cousin had spoken a few more words, she'd have had you turning the *Ragnarok* toward home right now. Too bad she didn't."

"Get all the Ragnarokans that are on the other ships in this fleet back on the *Ragnarok*," he said. "And have all Earthmen and Athenans told to be ready to transfer to another ship on a minute's notice."

Norman quit smiling. "Do you think they're likely to be in danger at home?" he asked. "After first saying you didn't?"

"I can't imagine any reason for the Ghost ever to go there," he answered. "But Lora was afraid we would never meet again the last time I saw her. She cried—and I had never seen her cry before..."

The hours dragged by. Ragnarok made brief, negative, reports at

intervals. Athena called much more frequently, the alarm growing there, but had nothing to report.

He was alone when Hayden came in the second time. Dilmor was tagging along beside Hayden.

Toward Dilmor, the official representative from Athena, he could not feel the same half-amused tolerance that he felt toward Hayden. Dilmor was a huge, flabby man, his attempt to emulate Hayden's quick military stride resulting only in a paunch-jolting shamble. Dilmor was speaking to Hayden with the usual respectful deference on his pasty-jowled face:

"—and I want to thank you again, sir, for ordering those other cruisers to my world. Of course, if I may say so, Commander, this action you took was merely characteristic of Earthenan mutual loyalty."

Dilmor was the one who had coined the word, "Earthenan," which designated Earthmen and Athenans as one race and automatically made the Ragnarokans a race apart, and he was very proud of what he referred to as "My modest contribution to Earth-Athena oneness."

Dilmor stopped before John and spoke to him in an entirely different tone, one of self-importance:

"One of your men told me that I must permit all my possessions and my files of official papers to be taken to the freight transfer compartment. What do you have to say about that?"

Dilmor stood with his head tilted back a little so he could have the illusion of looking down on John. His fat lips, projecting beyond his receding chin, were compressed in the manner of a busy official impatiently waiting for an underling to answer his question.

It was an affected attitude characteristic of the Athenans; an almost psychotic refusal to believe that Ragnarokans could be their equals. The Athenans had been slaves for two hundred years and they had but one claim to pride; they were the descendants of the colonists who had been selected by the Gerns as too valuable to leave on Ragnarok. Their ancestors had been classified as Superiors, according to the Athenan belief, and the ones left on Ragnarok had been the Inferiors.

The Superiors, said Athenan legend, were so classified be-cause they

were the strong and healthy, the intelligent and talented, whose minds and skills were of great value to the Gern. The Inferiors were so classified because they were the ones of low intelligence, the weak, the infirm, the deformed. The Inferiors were of no value to the Gerns and were mercifully left to die on Ragnarok....

The Athenans had been astonished when they saw their Ragnarokan cousins for the first time. "*But how could you have ever survived?*" they had asked. "*Why is it that none of you have the weaknesses and deformities that were characteristic of your ancestors... ?*"

"I asked you a question!" Dilmor said sharply. "Answer it!"

With an effort he restrained the desire to slap Dilmor's fat lips back into his teeth and replied with emotionless civility, "If the Ghost ship should attack Ragnarok, we'll start for there at once and at accelerations which only Ragnarokans could survive. All Earthenans must be prepared to leave this ship at once."

Dilmor stared, fuming. "This is your ship—you can, I suppose, make any arbitrary decisions you desire. As for your fear that you may have to suddenly go dashing to the rescue of Ragnarok, however"—he shrugged with annoyed dismissal—"There is really no such danger. My own world of Athena, with its high technological level, its thousands of skilled workers and brilliant technicians, is the world that would attract the Ghost ship. There is nothing on Ragnarok —just women and children."

"*Just* women and children?" he asked. "They're the only women and children that we Ragnarokans have and we're sort of fond of them."

"You have no cause whatever for alarm." There was the gleam of vicious malice in Dilmor's eyes. "Your women and older children might show the aliens on the Ghost ship how to do such things as build a mud hut, make a fire by striking two stones together, skin a wild animal, but these primitive skills of simple savages would not interest any civilized—"

"How was that, Dilmor?"

Norman Lake was suddenly beside Dilmor; a thin, mirthless smile on his face and his tone softly inquiring.

Dilmor scowled at the interruption. "I was pointing out the lack of logic

in your alarm over—" Then he stopped with a gulp as he saw the expression on Norman's face. "I—I only—"

"You said that our women and children are only simple savages, didn't you?" Norman's soft tone was coaxing. "Didn't you, Dilmor?"

Norman's eyes had turned paler than ever, like pale gray ice, and he was as tense as a prowler ready to spring as he waited for Dilmor's answer. Dilmor stared in fascination at Norman's fingers on the hilt of his knife, his flabby jowls as white as paper and his lips hanging loosely as he realized that Norman intended to kill him the moment he said, "Yes."

"Get out of here," John said, and spun Dilmor around mid sent him reeling toward the door. Dilmor ran the rest of the way, in his ponderous, paunch-jolting gait There he turned, to look back with vindictive hatred and say quickly, "All Earthenans will hear about this attempted murder!"

Then he was gone and John laid a restraining hand on Norman's arm. "Calm down, Norman—he's only an insignificant windbag."

For a moment Norman remained tense, staring at the empty doorway, then he turned back to John and said in a fiat, emotionless voice:

"All right, Johnny. But I want to tell you this: I don't have the sweet, forgiving nature of you and Dale and the next time he pops off with that fat mouth of his about the Ragnarokans, I'm going to kill him. He would be kowtowing to the Gerns right now if it hadn't been for us. For three years, while the Ragnarokans led the attacks and took by far the heaviest casualties for their numbers, the Earthenans have made their sneaky remarks about the Ragnarokans. Now, our women and children are to be ridiculed, too. From now on, Johnny, the first remark about the Ragnarokans made by any Earthenan in my presence will also be his last."

Norman turned, his pale eyes looking at Hayden as though he did not exist, and left the room. John watched him go, thinking, *I hope Dilmor has sense enough to stay in his own compartment for the next few hours.*

Hayden, who had observed everything with a faint expression of detached amusement, said:

"I thought for a moment that Athena was going to suddenly need a new representative. You Ragnarokans can be quite impulsive, in a sanguinary

way."

"The next time you bring Dilmor in here," he said to Hayilen, "you had better warn him that not even Ragnarokans like to be deliberately insulted."

"As a matter of fact," Hayden answered, "I had nothing to do with his appearance here. He fell in step with me— more or less—as I was coming to tell you that President Elkot wishes to know if our previously scheduled time of arrival will remain unchanged."

"It will unless something happens back home. Why did he ask?"

"The official reception on Earth, sir—surely, you realize that tomorrow will be the day of stirring military marches, flags, parades, grand speeches, Hail-The-Conquering-Heroes, and all that. Does it not quicken your pulse just to think about it?"

No. We Ragnarokans would prefer to remain as inconspicuous as possible."

"Spoken with most commendable modesty, sir, but a desire which your public will not grant you. You Ragnarokans, with your ability to withstand much higher accelerations and much quicker ship's maneuvers than Gerns—or Earthenans— and with your quicker reflexes were the ones who really won the war; the ones who politely listened to the plans of strategy and attack made by myself and others, and then, with the same politeness, told us which Gern forces the Ragnarok ships would crack next and what our own duties of support and mop-up would be. You cannot hope to evade the recognition due you."

He sighed wearily—it seemed to him he was always sighing wearily when Hayden was around—and Hayden continued:

"Afterward, there will be a golden speech by President Elkot in which the valor of the Ragnarokans will be duly extolled and—"

The communicator signaled; a call from Cliff Schroeder on the *Unicorn*, three hundred lightyears away. John was relieved to see that Hayden was gone when the talk with Steve was finished and he wondered for the hundredth time about his wisdom when he had suggested that Hayden, Dilmor, and other upper-rank Earthenans all return together on the

Ragnarok. He had thought they might not only discuss various post-war plans but also get to know each other better and lower some of the barriers that had separated Earthenans from Ragnarokans during the war. None of it had worked out that way.

The hour came when the Ghost ship would reach Ragnarok if their estimate of its speed was correct Dale and Norman were with him in the forward portion of the control room when that time came.

There was a silence as the hour came; a silence which continued for ten minutes more, then the call came from Des-try on Ragnarok:

"Nothing. We're waiting but there's no sign of any guests coming..."

Destry called six more times, at half hour intervals, to report all well. Lora made the seventh report:

"It looks like my intuition was no good—but I didn't want to be a reliable seer in this case, anyway. John has already gone home for the night, leaving Ted Jones and the others here, and I'm going home to bed now. When I wake up you'll be on Earth at the victory celebration and only two days away from starting home. I'll see you soon—I know I will, won't I, Johnny?..."

Destry made the next two reports. On the second one he said:

"It's now eight hours since the Ghost should have been here and still no sign of it. I guess it was a false alarm. I'm going to leave Ted Jones here in my place and get some rest..."

The tension had been gradually lessening in the control room as the negative reports came in and with Destry's last report it was virtually gone.

"I feel better now," Dale said. "All we have left to worry about is that reception on Earth."

Hayden came into the control room five minutes later. He was drunk and the bitterness about him was greater than it had ever been. He had a book in his hand, which he extended to John with an exaggerated gesture of formality.

"Should have done this before—matter of trying to retain a little pride, I suppose—but now I want to present you with my own personal copy of *The Proud and the Defiant*. This is the book which stirred our souls as we read of our courage, as we were reminded that Earth was the one last hope of liberty for the enslaved and oppressed. This is the book which so inspired me when I read it at the age of thirteen that I immediately enrolled in the Preliminary-Training Military Academy and worked my way zealously upward to finally achieve the zenith of my career as Grand Commander Hayden, the Famous Figurehead. The Rejects are mentioned in this book, briefly but with pity. When we, the proud and defiant, had conquered the Gerns we were going to send a ship to Ragnarok and erect a monument in that valley where the Rejects were left to die; a simple little stone shaft, with duly sorrowful ceremony. I trust you will find this book both amusing and—"

The hyperspace communicator signaled in the high-pitched shriek of *Full Emergency*.

John knew, as he swung around to face the communicator, that the call was from Ragnarok.

"*Ghost Ship!*" The voice of Ted Jones spoke rapidly, as though he was afraid there would be no time to- finish. "Like a spike-studded torpedo—big as three battleships. Ignored our signals and sent a beam into the city. Everyone in sight is down—unconscious or dead—don't know. We're firing at the Ghost with all safety circuits cut out—can't break their disintegrator shield. Something in one of the spikes moved—I think they're going to fire back at—"

The words broke off as abruptly as though a switch had been snapped open. There was complete silence.

The silence continued, until someone released a breath he had been holding and someone else said in a soft, shocked tone: "*Damn!*"

John moved quickly, to punch the *All Hands Alert* button and to say into the ship's intercom system:

"The Ghost just attacked Ragnarok. Prepare for maximum acceleration—we're going home."

He turned to Dale, to find that Dale was already giving the order that

would bring an Earthenan battleship alongside the *Ragnarok*. Norman was giving the orders that would have the Earthenans at the airlocks by the time the battleship was in position.

After ten minutes of hurried activity, the word came from midships:

"Earthenan battleship now making airlock connections. Personnel and freight transfer will start in three minutes. What's holding up the Earthenans?—Only half of them are here."

With quick impatience, Norman switched on the ship's loudspeaker system. His warning went booming down all the corridors:

"ALL EARTHENANS TO AIRLOCK TWO ON THE RUN. OUR ACCELERATION WILL KILL YOU IF YOU STAY. ALL EARTHENANS TO AIRLOCK TWO ON THE RUN. WE WILL NOT TURN BACK FOR YOU. ALL EARTHENANS WHO DONT WANT TO DIE, TO AIRLOCK TWO ON THE RUN..."

"And now," Hayden said, "comes my cue to depart from the scene. A new peril has appeared and mere humans would get in your way and slow you down as you sally forth to combat it—"

"Hayden," John said, "if you were man enough to merit that much attention, I would give you the broken neck that you're asking for."

Hayden stared, surprise on his face. Never, before, had John spoken to him in such a manner. When his expression changed as the significance of what had happened penetrated through his resentment and the alcoholic haze; as he realized that every woman and child of the once-human race of Ragnarok might now be dead and the race at its end.

"Sir," Hayden said, and for the first time in three years there was no mockery in the word. "I am an ass."

He saluted, did an unsteady about-face, and went out into the corridor.

Ten minutes later the word came from midship:

"All Earthenan personnel and freight transferred. Ships now separated, airlocks closed, midship ready for flight."

One minute later the *Ready* lights glowed on the panel, from every section of the ship. Everyone in the control room was in his acceleration seat.

"All right," John said, "Let's go."

The *Ragnarok* swung her bow to take the new course, then the acceleration came: 4-G... 6-G... 8-G... 10-G...

They were pressed back into their seats, harder and harder, until the acceleration was such that not even Ragnarokans could withstand it to a greater degree. There it stopped and stayed and the *Ragnarok* hurled her great, black mass back toward the world after which she had been named.

The hours went by like little centuries. It was necessary to reduce the acceleration at intervals—such high acceleration could not be taken for days without surcease. This they did begrudgingly. The laws of second-level travel were entirely different from those of normal-space. A ship's speed in second-level was in fixed direct proportion to the degree of acceleration. Acceleration of 1-G gave a speed of five light-years per day. At 5-G acceleration, the speed was twenty-five lightyears per day. There was no increase in speed beyond the point decreed by the degree of acceleration. An acceleration of 10-G produced a speed of fifty lightyears a day, whether the period of acceleration was for a few minutes or for hours.

There was no further word from Ragnarok. This was to be expected—the hyperspace communicator had been in the same metal building which housed the now-destroyed disintegrator—but the silence, continuing for hours and then days, made their anxiety all the worse.

Athena, forty hours from Ragnarok at the Ghost ship's normal cruising speed, was in a state of near-hysteria and reported to Earth almost continuously. At the end of sixty hours, however, and with great relief, Athena said:

"Still no sign of the Ghost ship. We now feel hopeful that they have passed us by and there is no longer any danger of attack."

Earth then sent a message to the *Ragnarok*:

"At the end of another sixty hours, if there is still no evidence of the alien ship in the Athenan space sector, one of the Athenan cruisers will be

sent to the assistance of Ragnarok."

The *Ragnarok* sent back a brief reply:

"Thanks, but we'll be there long before the cruiser could be."

In the minds of all of them on the *Ragnarok* were the questions: Why had the Ghost ship showed no interest in rich Athena and attacked only barren Ragnarok? What could the men—or things on the Ghost ship have wanted—except the Ragnarok women and children?

He thought again and again of Lora as he had seen her six months ago; when he had stopped briefly on Ragnarok just before the all-out drive that would bring either victory or annihilation. She had been smiling as she told him goodbye in the cold, gray dawn, her words as light as though he would be gone only for the day. Then her words had caught in her throat and tears had mingled with the misty rain on her cheeks as she held to him... "*Johnny, I'm afraid! I'm afraid that we'll never—never meet again ...*"

It was almost night when the battleship reached Ragnarok and the snow clouds of early winter lay like a shroud across half the continent. There was a tense silence as the ship dropped down through the clouds that hid the city, in the minds of all of them the question: *Did the Ghost kill them all?*

The ship broke through the clouds and the viewscreens showed the town below them.

It seemed unchanged and there was life in the snowy streets; the movement of many people as they heard the roar of the *Ragnarok's* descent and hurried out of the stone houses.

John felt the tension around him relax, like the release of a bow string that had been drawn to the snapping point. He spoke into the All Ship intercom, for the information of those on duty and still waiting to know what had been found:

"The town looks the same as ever—everyone is running out to meet us, now."

He looked again at the town and then on to the hill where the defense

disintegrator had been. The hill was not the same. It was gone, a ragged crater marking the spot where it had stood.

The *Ragnarok* landed at the edge of the town and the town's population poured out to meet it, the children and prowlers running in the lead. The *Ragnarok's* landing ramp was hardly in place before men were on their way down it to greet their families.

But there was a hush in the manner of the women and children, a low-voiced quietness that told him even as he stood at the top of the ramp that far more than the destruction of the defense installation had taken place.

He tried to locate Lora among those below, hoping to see her hurrying toward him in the familiar little red jacket and green cap. But she was not there and it seemed to him he could hear again her last words, like one afraid and asking for reassurance: "*—and I'll see you soon—I know I will, won't I, Johnny?*"

He saw the broad shoulders and gray beard of old Dan Destry among the people at the foot of the ramp and went down to meet him, cold dread inside him at the thought of what Destry might have to tell.

"They took a hundred women and children," Destry said.

Then seeing the unspoken question, Destry said, "Lora was one of them—I suppose you already guessed that."

"Yes." He looked out across the snow-covered clearing where the others were going back into town; families reunited at last, walking close together. There was no sound of laughter as there would normally have been. Too many of the men who had hurried out of the *Ragnarok* were now walking alone, or with only their children.

"Yes," he said again. "I didn't see her and I knew."

Destry handed him a sheet of paper. "Here's a list of the ones they took."

He looked at the names: Elaine Anders, Lora Lake, Charlotte Taylor, Don West, Mary Craig... women and girls hut for twenty of the oldest among the boys that had been there—

"How did it happen, Dan?" he asked. "What kind of men or things were they?"

"No one ever saw them. They had a paralysis beam that dropped all of us, whether we were indoors or out. When we became conscious again, the Ghost was gone and there was that hole there, where the hill used to be."

"Wasn't there even a track to show what they might have looked like?"

"No tracks in the hard-packed gravel—that was before the snow."

"Well hold a general meeting at once, and decide on what we want to do," he said.

"*What* we want to do—or just when?" Destry asked.

John looked up at the black, towering *Ragnarok*, bristling with the most powerful weapons the Gern Empire had been able to devise, ready and waiting for the command to take them across the long space void to Orion and the Great Nebula.

"Just when," he said.

It began to snow as he went toward town, bringing complete darkness, and the floodlights of the *Ragnarok* went on. He passed by Red Anders, one of the *Ragnarok's* best disintegrator men. Red was standing alone, a lost, forlorn look on his freckled young face as he watched the women and girls who had come to meet their men and knew that his Elaine could never be found among them.

"Johnny—"

Barbara Lake was hurrying toward him; a dark-haired girl so much like her sister as seen through the swirling snow that for an instant he had the poignant illusion that it was really Lora.

"They took her, Johnny." Barbara stopped before him, her sixteen-year-old face set in lines of determination, concern in her dark eyes, and a holstered knife and blaster sagging from her slim waist. "We're going to do something about it, aren't we? Right now, I mean."

"The *Ragnarok* will be leaving before morning," he said.

"I'm going with it."

There was nothing tentative about her statement, no questioning inflection to indicate that she was asking for his permission.

"Well see," he replied. "You're a girl, and pretty young."

"I'm a woman," she said, "and Lora is my sister. I'm going."

The meeting was held in the town's central hall; a room which had space for no more than forty representatives.

This was more than the needed number. John was leader under the informal Ragnarokan social system—a social system which was very similar to that of the American Indian tribes of many centuries before—and he would be trusted and obeyed for so long as he proved by his actions and decisions that he merited that trust. It was not a situation wherein any of the highly individualistic Ragnarokans regarded themselves as surrendering any of their individualism—it was merely the practical acceptance of the fact that when an emergency existed they could act with much greater efficiency under a single leadership than they could if composed of many consulting factions.

John stood behind the table on which the communicator had been placed and looked down the room at the others: Dan Destry; Dale Ord; Norman Lake; Dr. Paul Chiara, the usual smile gone from his dark, almost chubby face; Jim Tyson, limping on the artificial leg that was his souvenir of the day they had taken the Gern cruiser; Red Anders, standing restlessly by the wall, his fingers playing back and forth across the butt of his blaster; Barbara, standing as restlessly against the other wall, playing with the hilt of her knife...

John opened the meeting with the usual lack of formality:

"We have to get to Orion as soon as possible. We don't know what the aliens may already be doing to the ones they kidnapped. In less than two hours the *Ragnarok* will be ready to go. The *Unicorn* will start getting our men and ships together, to follow the *Ragnarok* as soon as possible..."

Various matters were quickly decided upon, such as the weapons and number of men to be left for protection of the town. The paralysis-ray problem seemed to have a simple solution. The men under the metal roof

of the disintegrator building had not been affected by the ray so it might be that lightweight metal helmets would be all the protection necessary. Construction of such helmets would begin at once in the *Ragnarok's* machine ship.

By then all Ragnarok crewmen present, as well as Dale and Norman, had already gone back to the ship, and there was little else to discuss.

"I guess that takes care of everything," Destry said. "As near as it can be taken care of before we ever meet the enemy or—"

He stopped, a strange expression on his face, and rubbed his eyes with his hand. He looked from John to the others, back again, and said in a tone of wonder:

"I'm blind!"

Dr. Paul Chiara hurried over and made what examination he could under the circumstances.

"Your eyes look perfectly normal, Dan," he said. "But I'll take you to the ship, where we have the facilities for a really thorough examination and—"

"Paul..."

Mary Sanders came running into the room, the north wind whipping a gust of snow in behind her and alarm on her face.

"Paul—Billy just went blind!"

In the hour that followed the blindness of sixty-year-old Destry and six-year-old Billy, the plan to leave before morning with the *Ragnarok* was dropped. Two more—a woman and an old man—went blind as Paul was examining Destry and Billy. By the end of the hour, twelve people had suddenly, painlessly, gone totally blind.

Paul and his assistants tried every test they could think of and learned nothing.

"In every case," Paul said to John, "the eyes appear normal. Apparently it's something that somehow blocks the optic nerves—I'm afraid it's an after-effect of the paralysis-ray. And if it is, that means that everyone who

was in town that day will go blind."

Earth had been called, and two hours later a sleepy-sounding ophthalmologist of the Federal Medical Board spoke briefly to Paul, to ask some questions and say:

"No such a disease—if it is a disease—was ever known on Earth. I think you will find that this blindness is an aftereffect of the paralysis-ray."

"That's what we thought an hour ago," Paul told the ophthalmologist. "But since then, fourteen more have gone blind—and eight of those fourteen were miles from the paralysis-ray when it was used."

When the cold, gray dawn came, one hundred and twenty were blind. The rate was increasing.

"One thing for sure," Norman said to John, "if this keeps up, everyone that was on Ragnarok when the Ghost came will soon be blind and helpless. So we can't start for Orion this morning—not go off and leave everybody blind."

Howard Deming went blind an hour later. He was one of the *Ragnarok's* crewmen and had been two hundred and sixty lightyears away when the Ghost ship raided the world of Ragnarok.

John went again to see Paul Chiara when he heard of Deming.

"It's not just a serious situation any more," he said to Paul. "It's the most dangerous emergency we've ever faced. Not just those who were on Ragnarok but every last one of us will be blind and helpless in a few more days. We'll have to find what causes the blindness, and find it soon."

Paul, who had been working ceaselessly with his small staff, stopped only long enough to say:

"Whatever it is, it doesn't affect animals—or hasn't so far, anyway. Prowlers, mockers, unicorns, woods goats— they all seem to be immune. We've ruled out our water supply as the dissemination medium they used to carry the virus, or whatever it may be, and now we're giving air samples every test imaginable. I'll let you know the minute we find anything suspicious."

Two hours later the news was brought to him: the air of Ragnarok now contained a strange isotope; somewhat radioactive, and one which could not be separated from the air.

"I think this is the cause," Paul said. "What else could it be?"

"Which brings up the next question," he said. "How long until that north wind moves all the contaminated air out of here? Or did they contaminate the atmosphere all the way to the pole? I'll take the *Prowler* and see."

"I'll show you how to use our air analyzer," Paul said, "Then I'll have it taken to the *Prowler*. You can be ready to go in ten minutes."

The *Prowler*, a small, two-man, special-built lightning-attack ship, consisting mainly of high-speed drives and heavy weapons—a ship easily operated by one man if necessary— was in the *Ragnarok's* largest storage bay.

So also, he discovered, was Barbara Lake.

"I'm going with you," she said. "I told Norman you had decided to take me instead of him."

"You *what?*"

"I looked him in the eye and told him a lie. I think he suspected it but he let me get by with it."

"It would be all right with me," he said, "but what do you know about taking air samples?"

"Just show me how—I can do it. And I'm so nervous and restless, Johnny—I keep thinking of how Lora was afraid something was going to happen and how I let her go back to town instead of making her stay in the hills and going myself. Let me go with you."

"All right—get in," he said.

They went north, up over the high, white plateau. The air was increasingly contaminated there. They went on, farther north, to the birthplace of the northern winds of winter, and found there the heaviest

concentration of all; a concentration thousands of times greater than that of the air over the town.

He called Paul and told him what he had found.

"There's enough here to poison half the atmosphere of Ragnarok," he said. "I'm going on over the pole, on to the other continent, the Lifeless Sea—I'd better make checks all over while I'm at it."

He called Norman Lake next, and said:

"It looks like the enemy is after our hides in earnest. The sooner we get a fleet to Orion, the better. Call Cliff Schroeder and tell him to get our little fleet together as fast as possible. We'll take all the ships we had before."

Barbara, who had learned the operation of the air tester with immediate comprehension—Barbara was one of those persons who seemed capable of learning anything without the slightest difficulty—asked innumerable questions about the *Prowler*, its operation, its weapon controls, and even which of the two small sleeping compartments he used during the times when he was on the *Prowler*.

He took the *Prowler* up into the thin, upper atmosphere, where higher speeds were possible without so much heating of the ship from *air* friction. They went over the north pole, a forbidding place of ice and snow thousands of feet thick, and over to the other continent of Ragnarok. The *Prowler* screamed down through the atmosphere three times to get air samples as it went southward. They checked the air four times over the vast, salt-laden Lifeless Sea, and checked various other points which John's limited knowledge of meteorology told him might be points of origin for seasonal air masses.

It was night again when they returned to the town and they had found ten places where the atmosphere had been very heavily poisoned—in each case a place where the poisoned air would spread out and cover a large section of Ragnarok within a few weeks. How many more such places there might be, they did not know.

With the exception of the south pole, every section of Ragnarok was already contaminated to at least some extent.

In the meantime, while they were gone, four hundred more had been

stricken with blindness.

Paul had been in almost constant contact with a now alarmed Federal Medical Board on Earth. President Elkot had declared a state of emergency and the fleet was on Full Alert patrol around Earth. The same situation existed on Athena; to a lesser degree so far as the size of their patrol fleet went and to a greater degree so far as the alarm went.

But no doctor—none of the specialists on Earth nor any of the Gern-trained Workers' Doctors on Athena—had any theory as to how the effect of the isotope might be prevented.

"We've been trying to find what the half-life of that isotope might be," Paul said. "So far as we can tell, it will be at least ten years, and maybe fifty, before the isotope disintegrates to the point where it won't produce blindness.

"As for our much more immediate future: that north wind is bringing down a heavier and heavier concentration of the isotope. Within two days and nights, the last one of us will be blind."

"We'll be gone long before then," John said. "We're leaving tonight."

There was only one place they could go that might be suitable: a wild island continent on Athena which the Athenans regarded as too harsh of environment and too barren of resources to be fit for human inhabitation but which, to the Ragnarokans, would be a rich, green land. There were even some low-grade veins of iron and copper with which they could produce their own metals.

The town was told of the developments and preparations for an immediate departure began at once. Due to time and space limitations, they would take with them only the possessions necessary for a new start on Athena. The space left over in the *Ragnarok* would be filled with the domesticated woods goats and two pairs of unicorns.

He sent a message to Earth and Athena, telling them that the entire atmosphere of Ragnarok was poisoned and that they would all have to leave there within a few hours.

"The women and children will be left on Athena," he said, "on the little continent called Grim Land. The *Ragnarok* will continue on, to

rendezvous with the *Unicorn*, the *Avenger*, and the other eight cruisers that were Ragnarokan-manned during the war, plus the battleship, *Wodin*. This will give us two battleships and ten cruisers, all of them already automated as much as possible so that there will be enough Ragnarokans to man all of them.

"Then we'll go on to Orion—or beyond—at all the acceleration we can take. Offense is the best form of defense and I doubt that the enemy will expect a retaliatory fleet so soon. I don't suppose there is any question in anyone's mind about the need to find the enemy as soon as possible rather than wait for the enemy to come again to our worlds with the blindness isotope.

"Detailed reports of everything we learn will be sent to you at once. Even if our fleet is completely destroyed, you will have first learned where the enemy world is, what kind of weapons they have, and perhaps why they are so interested in us. This information should be of a great deal of value in the organization of your defense systems here. I don't expect any complete annihilation of our fleet, but I can guarantee you that there will be far less enemy ships in existence before any such annihilation is completed..."

Everything he had said had also been given to everyone in town by means of the *Ragnarok's* outside-mounted public address speakers. The closed-door discussions of Earth's politicians and military leaders, discussions in which those affected were not supposed to be entitled to either voice or knowledge, had always puzzled the Ragnarokans.

He went down out of the ship and saw that the *Ragnarok's* floodlights and searchlights now had the town lighted as brightly as though the suns of summer had been shining. He heard the soft tinkle 'of ceramic bells and saw children and prowlers coming toward the ship with a herd of woods goats; the Ragnarokan source for milk, cheese, and the warm, strong wool of which their clothing was made and to which any synthetic fiber of Earth or Athena seemed inferior.

A hoarse scream came from his left and he saw a pair of unicorns coming, herded by two men with long spears and four prowlers. The unicorns, eight feet tall at the shoulders, were swinging their huge, boar-like heads, the light gleaming on their snarling tusks and long, needle-sharp horns. They wanted to kill the men and prowlers herding them—unicorns were always wanting to kill—but unicorns were the

principal source of both meat and tough leather.

He walked up the street, where there was a hurried activity as everyone ran back and forth into the houses, carrying out their possessions. The piles accumulating in front of the houses were all small—virtually all Ragnarokan possessions were necessities and these were few in number. Crossbows, clothing, knives—steel knives, now, imported from Athena during the war to replace the flint knives they had had—the orange corn, Ragnarok's only food plant...

And, of course, the manuscripts of the Old Ones, written with lance tree ink on parchment; no longer necessities but of considerable sentimental value. They contained not only the history of Ragnarok but had also been the source of their education for two hundred years. Earthenans had never been able to accustom themselves to the fact that all Ragnarokans spoke Gern and could discuss physics and the art of chipping flint arrowheads with equal authority.

He came to the house where Lora and Barbara had lived and saw that Barbara's possessions made a larger pile than could be accounted for by her own things.

"Lora's clothes," she said. "She'll need them when we bring her back to Athena."

Which meant, of course, that Barbara intended to go to Orion on the *Ragnarok* and that she would do so unless restrained physically.

He saw Anne Tyson going back into her house after another armload of clothing. Nine-year-old Eleanor was standing beside the possessions already in the street; the wind whipping her golden curls as she waited. She looked up at the sound of his steps; an exceptionally pretty child with wide blue eyes which now had the questioning expression he had seen so many times recently. Eleanor was blind...

"Daddy?" she asked, uncertainly.

"Johnny," he answered. "Is Jim blind, too?"

"No. He went to help Ed Barber get the things out of houses where everybody is already blind. I was going to help Mama with our stuff—and then, all at once, I couldn't see."

She added, with wistful question, "I don't like to have to and out here in the dark and cold and not be able to help Mama—will any of us ever see again, Johnny?"

"Of course," he said. "All of you—not long after we leave here."

He went on, thinking: *Well... Paul did say that the blind might recover after they got away from the isotope...*

He saw Jim Tyson and Ed Barber just finishing with the possessions of Dan Destry, who was on the *Ragnarok* helping with the general planning despite his blindness.

"It won't be long, now," Barber said. "One of the advantages of being a Ragnarokan—you can carry your two-hundred-years-gatherings on your back. I'm just as happy that we're going to Athena rather than Earth, too."

"Why?" John asked.

"We'll have our own schools. My wife wanted to help with the war work on Earth and she was there for a year with our son. The Earth kids resented it because his education at nine was the equivalent of theirs at sixteen—and him with a father and mother who had been born in caves, to make it more insulting for them. They kept picking on him, and he kept knocking the daylights out of them for it, until my wife was ordered to keep him away from the school area 'for the welfare of the more civilized children there.'"

"Athena was worse," Tyson said. "I would never have believed, if I hadn't seen it, that they would have more respect for the lowest Gern than they had for us. I can still hear the chant with which the Athenan children used to taunt Eleanor: '*Elean-or is an Inferi-or—Elean-or is an Inferi-or ...*' And then they'd say, '*Come on, Raggy, take off your clothes and show us your hump and your web fingers and your club feet...*' I'm not exactly elated at our having to go to Athena—but there's no other place to go."

"It won't be so bad," John said. "Well have our own little island continent and we'll keep up the Ragnarokan habit of minding our own business there. The Athenans don't like that continent and never go there, anyway."

He continued his circuit of the town, stopping often to help with the

work and listening to the conversation and comments. It was far from an attempt to kill time. The general opinion of the others was important. He could not do a good job of looking after their welfare and interests unless he could be sure that the decisions he made would meet with general approval.

He was back on the *Ragnarok* when it was time for the reply to come from Athena. He waited half an hour more, then heard the unexpected reaction from Athena, spoken by the Athenan Secretary of Foreign Affairs:

"We sympathize with you in the emergency now existing on Ragnarok and we regret the necessity of reminding you that Grim Land is Athenan domain. We cannot permit it to be used as a base of operations for punitive attacks against a powerful, unknown enemy. Such attacks would be certain to result in fierce counterattacks by the enemy; counterattacks and raids which would not single out the Ragnarokans on Grim Land alone, but would involve all Athena and Athenans.

"We extend to you the permission to settle upon Grim Land for so long as may be necessary provided you, in return, agree to keep the fleet you had intended to send to Orion on constant guard duty around Athena for all the time that Grim Land is occupied by Ragnarokans. Since even your mere presence on Athena will keep us always under the danger of an indiscriminate attack by the Ghost ship—and perhaps even the poisoning of our atmosphere—we feel that our decision in this matter is both very just and very fair.

"You will understand by the foregoing, of course, that if you should insist upon carrying out your mission of rescue and vengeance—the action which would so certainly bring a deadly attack in return upon Athena—we shall be forced to forbid you to stop upon Grim Land. We regret that we must be so stern in this matter but we cannot permit you to imperil three hundred thousand Athenans through a foolhardy attempt to avenge the deaths of only one hundred Ragnarokans."

There was a silence, then Norman said, "'—*Only one Hundred Ragnarokans'I*"

"I wouldn't have thought..." Dale did not finish the sentence, but shook his head, instead.

Both of them looked at John and Norman said, "They can't 'permit' us

to settle on Grim Land! Don't they know that all three hundred thousand of those weak-kneed ex-slaves couldn't keep the women and children, alone, from taking all of Athena?"

"They know," John said. "They're depending on us to be polite about it and remember that it's *their* world—even if we did take it away from the Gerns and give it to them."

"I'll be damned!" Dale shook his head again. "Here we are rushing to get away from Ragnarok before we're all blind and get on to our new home on Athena—woods goats and all— and we get slapped in the face by some jellyfish."

"We'll find a place," John said. "We'll go to Athena if we have to—but we'll see if Earth might not give our women and children a more friendly welcome—"

He was interrupted by the communicator. It was the message from Earth; spoken by President Elkot, himself.

"Due to the need for quick action on Ragnarok, and the long transmission-time lag of our messages, the governing cabinet of Earth held a hurried consultation with all officials concerned, including Lieutenant-Grand Commander Frendle and Athenan Representative Dilmor.

"It was agreed that your relatively small fleet sent against an enemy of unknown potential could very well result in an attack of retaliation against which our own forces could not stand. The unanimous decision of the military chiefs-of-staff was that a far better action would be to first send a scout ship to Orion. If the enemy is not so great but what we can be sure of success, we will make plans for a campaign that will result in disarmament of the enemy. If the enemy is very powerful—as the possession of a third-level ship indicates—we will have no choice but to concentrate upon developing our defensive power to the fullest extent and maintaining it to that extent until we are in position to take more aggressive actions.

"We have been assured by Representative Dilmor that the Athenan government will agree with us in all respects. He also stated that his government would never sanction use of any part of Athena as a base of operations for attacks upon the enemy and that the presence of

Ragnarokans on Athena would make mandatory the use of the two battleships and ten cruisers as a guard fleet around Athena.

"Should you decide you would prefer Earth to Athena, you will be very welcome to settle here. In that case, of course, since your presence here might at any time bring another raid from the enemy, we regard it as only logical and just that we should attach this one single provision to our welcome: you must agree to abandon your plan to take your fleet to Orion and, instead, put it in guard orbit around Earth."

Again there was a silence, then Norman said, "More polite than Athena's slap but it boils down to the same thing: we're not to go there unless we forget the hundred who were kidnapped."

"And so"—Dale looked questioningly at the other two—"we seem to suddenly be a race without a world. And while we sit here, people are going blind at a faster and faster rate."

"Well go to Athena," Norman said. "Let them cry."

"No," John said. "I don't think any of us would like to live on a world where we would be regarded as dangerous and unwanted intruders—where our most bitter enemy would be our own distant cousins."

"In that case, then," Dale said, "We would have to—"

The communicator signaled again. The call was from Cliff Schroeder on the cruiser, *Unicorn*:

"I have been forbidden to take the other battleship and cruisers. The Earthenans have declared the present situation -Q be a State of General Peril and they brought up the Mutual -Security Pact which we were naive enough to sign and which pro-rates the ships needed for protection according to the populations of the worlds to be protected. Since there are only six thousand Ragnarokans, we aren't even entitled to a rowboat, let alone ten ships. They said they cannot consider permitting us to both deprive them of needed ships and use those ships to increase the danger of attack. Do we knock their ears down and take the ships anyway?"

Again there was a silence. It seemed to John that it was a day for unexpected reactions from the Earthenans and long silences as he and the

other two readjusted themselves to new situations.

"What next?" Dale asked with a touch of bitterness. "Now, we aren't even supposed to have any right to the ships that we, alone, captured from the Gerns."

"If I was in Cliffs place," Norman said, "I wouldn't have bothered to ask—I'd already have their ears knocked down."

"We signed an agreement," he said to them. "We had never had any experience with complexly worded interworld agreements. On top of that, we didn't expect any emergency and we took it for granted that even if an emergency should develop, the Earthenans would never object to us using our own ships."

"Well, they do now," Norman said. "So what do we do about it?"

"Well keep our agreement, but for the fact that we'll also keep the *Unicorn* and *Ragnarok*—after all, we had both of those before the Earthenans even knew we existed. As for what we should do—you both know as well as I what everyone outside will want to do."

"We don't have any other choice," Dale said. He stood up, restlessly. "Half of them are already on board and the others soon will be. We should be on our way in another hour. The sooner we get there, the more hope there will be of finding our people still alive."

The thought of Lora, never far away, came back again to John. He saw her face, with the tears and cold mist mingled on her cheeks, and heard her say again: "*I'm afraid that we'll never—never meet again...*"

"I'll go ahead of all of you in the *Prowler*," he said, and turned to the communicator to send their answer to Earth and Athena:

"We have no desire to hide under the bed with you while a hundred of our women and children are left to whatever torture or death the enemy may have in store for them. We are giving you all our ships but for the *Ragnarok* and *Unicorn*. We are giving you our share of what used to be the Gern Empire. You are welcome to all of it.

"We are leaving Ragnarok tonight. You may all go to hell and we'll go to Orion."

It was almost exactly three hours later that the *Ragnarok* was ready to go. Cliff Schroeder had long since been told to transfer all Ragnarokans to the *Unicorn* and set a course for Orion. All food supplies of com and dried meat on Ragnarok had been loaded into the ship. Part of the domesticated woods goats had been taken out, to make room for enough grass to feed them until a new world was found, and also to feed the unicorns.

John went out of the *Ragnarok*. Fenrir and Sigyn with him and the two mockers, Tip and Freckles, riding on his shoulders.

The last of the emigrants were going up the boarding ramp. Jim Tyson was one, limping under his burden. His wife was carrying as much as he and the little blind Eleanor was stumbling along behind, carrying her father's crossbow in one hand, holding to her mother's skirt with the other for guidance, and saying, "—Gee, I'm glad we're not going back to Athena. Now that I'm blind, they would laugh at me more than ever and this time they would know it would be safe for them to throw rocks at me..."

He met Red Anders hurrying toward the ship from town with a small bundle of clothing.

"I thought I ought to take along some of Elaine's clothes," Red said. "It's all right, isn't it Johnny?"

"Of course, Red," he answered. "She'll be needing them a few weeks from now."

"Do you really think we'll get there in time?" Red asked, hope in his tone. "I mean, honest, Johnny—do you?"

"As a matter of fact," he lied, "I was just going back to get Lora's clothes. That's how sure I am."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," Red said. "Elaine and I had been married only two days when my ship left for the war again—I don't like to have to think I'll never see her anymore..."

A whistle sounded from the *Ragnarok*, high-pitched and impatient: the *All Aboard* signal. The floodlights went out, to leave a single spotlight which enveloped the two men on the ground. The whistle sounded again and John said, "They're waiting for you, Red."

"I'll see you in Orion," Red said. "Good luck." He ran toward the ship.

The *Ragnarok* lifted a minute later, roaring up into the black storm clouds and the sound fading away.

John stood alone in the wind-and-snow-driven darkness that was relieved only by the single floodlight burning on the *Prowler*. Somewhere to the south, so far away he could only faintly hear it, came the scream of a unicorn. They had all been released from their stockade, of course, and they were already obeying instinct and migrating southward. A dozen woods goats came by as he watched, uncertainly, as though not sure what they should do. Then a harder drive of wind and snow came and they seemed to make their decision. They turned and went in a trot toward the south.

"I guess we're the only ones left in town, now," he said to Fenrir and Sigyn. "Let's take a last look around, before we go..."

A final-check crew had made the rounds of all the houses, Making sure that nothing needed had been overlooked and making sure that all doors were closed against the storms and unicorns. In a way it had been pointless to close the doors. It might be fifty years before Ragnarok was inhabitable again. But Ragnarok was their world and they had not wanted to leave it without at least pretending that some of them might some day come back.

He opened the door of the house where Lora and Barbara had lived together after the death of their parents. Barbara had selected the necessities with her usual practical efficiency. All weapons and all needed clothing were gone. Lore's violin is still there; made of red-gold lance tree wood and silent now. No one had ever played a violin as Lora had. Sometimes, when she stood outside in the starlit evenings and played, it seemed that the entire town would become silent to listen...

Fenrir shoved against him and made a restless sound—a sound which Sigyn echoed.

"All right," he said to them. "I'm being more sentimental than intelligent, I guess—I *could* go blind any moment."

He hesitated, then took the violin and bow, thinking, *I've told hopeful lies to everyone else—why shouldn't I tell myself that Lora will be playing*

this again?

He shut the door behind him and went through the poison-laden wind to the *Prowler*. Two minutes later the *Prowler* was screaming up through the clouds and the town was truly empty and deserted.

He caught up with the *Ragnarok* at the south pole. Both ships discharged the poisonous air they contained, flushed the interiors several times, and thoroughly flushed the air-regenerators. It was cold inside the *Prowler* when the two ships lifted up through the polar night and went into outer space. He knew it would be just as cold in the *Ragnarok* and made to seem even colder, perhaps, by the fact that a little race was leaving the world which had created it and none of them might ever return.

He called the *Ragnarok*, to say, "I'm going on."

"Dig in your spurs, Johnny," Norman said. "We'll be coming right behind you."

Both ships accelerated, the acceleration of the *Prowler* greater than that of the *Ragnarok*, and the *Ragnarok* slowly dropped behind.

Two hundred lightyears farther on he passed Athena; so close to it that he could see the blue oceans and green continents under the warm yellow sun. He did not contact Athena as he went by. There was nothing for him to say.

The days and nights—arbitrary time divisions as set forth by the ship's chronometer—passed in slow succession of long maximum-acceleration periods and short lesser-acceleration periods. The little mockers did no playing with each other, due to the acceleration drag, and slept most of the time. The ship would have seemed very still and empty if it had not been for the company of Fenrir and Sigyn. They stayed near him all the time, fully aware of the reason for the voyage and looking as somber as he felt when he spoke to them of Lora.

Prowlers, with their high degree of intelligence and their proud, fierce natures, had been the greatest enemy the Rejects had faced on Ragnarok but for the Hell Fever. It had not been until the Ragnarokan Year of One Sixty-one that an opportunity had come to bridge the gulf between men and prowlers. His grandfather had saved the life of a prowler trapped in a

canyon by a cloudburst that year. Before the Jay was over, the prowler saved the life of his rescuer in return. From that day on, the prowlers made no more attacks against men.

Nineteen years later the same prowler—dying as he fought off a vicious unicorn attack, and his mate already dead—had appealed to the man who had once saved his life to now save 1, is young ones.

So the Ragnarokans had their beginning of the prowlers they would need as allies to fight the Gerns; two whimpering, starving little pups who would be named Fenrir and Sigyn.

He, John, had been only a baby then but it seemed to him he could almost remember those hungry days when his Mother's breasts were dry from an injury and there was only a very small amount of woods goat milk to be had. There had been only one way to save the lives of the starving little pups—by sharing what little milk he had. So his mother had rationed the limited supply of milk with equal impartiality to her baby and the two little prowlers.

Thinking of it one day, as the *Prowler* bored her way through the long, empty space void, he said to them:

"Without you two and your many descendants, I doubt that we could have taken that Gern cruiser. No Ragnarokan will ever forget the part you prowlers played. But there is something odd about the behavior, ever since this trip started, of a couple of prowlers named Fenrir and Sigyn—did you know I had noticed it? You both act like you had guilty consciences for some reason."

Fenrir gave him a vacant look, as though his mind was on other matters, and Sigyn started working industriously on an already well-groomed front paw.

The *Prowler* was ninety lightyears ahead of the *Ragnarok* when he went into another lesser-acceleration period and looked up to see Barbara walking out of the second sleeping compartment, smiling triumphantly.

"According to my calculations," she said, "the *Ragnarok* should now be so far behind that it's safe for me to show myself."

He looked at the prowlers. Fenrir was pretending an absorbed interest

in the napping mockers. Sigyn hung her head sheepishly.

"They knew from the start I was here," she said. "I told them not to tell on me so that I could help find Lora."

Fenrir and Sigyn had an affection for the Lake sisters which was exceeded only by their loyalty to him. They would, of course, have joined in the conspiracy.

"When did you hide out in there?" he asked. "And why is it no one on the *Ragnarok* said anything about you being missing?"

"I told Norman what I was going to do and he said he'd take care of that part. Of all my many cousins, I think Norman is the handiest to have around. I was hiding back in that compartment before you ever left the *Ragnarok*"

"How did you manage to keep hidden for so long without my knowing it?"

"That was a matter of slipping out for something to eat and drink and other necessary chores when you were asleep. I'm glad you were methodical about the sleep periods you set up for yourself."

"Well... it's too late to take you back," he said. "Since you're here, you might as well start in doing useful things, such as fixing us something to eat right now."

"And you can teach me how to operate the *Prowler*," she said, "and how to fire its disintegrators. I can learn, and two heads are always better than one, even if one of them is a cabbage head."

"Yes, I guess so," he said. "You could learn how to—" He stopped, and asked with sudden suspicion, "Which one is supposed to be the cabbage head?"

The stars of Orion slowly crept closer, changing in form until they no longer remotely resembled Orion as seen from Earth. Barbara asked endless questions, about the ship, its weapons, battle strategy of all kinds, the vague theories the more daring scientists of Earth had had regarding the principles of the third-level drive, and a multitude of other subjects. She had a quick, intelligent mind and an amazing memory.

Occasionally—not often—they would speak of Lora and the other captives. They tried to make the slow days pass faster and lessen the futile worry by occupying themselves with other thoughts.

Chess was Barbara's favorite pastime, next to asking questions. The game, with its possibility of millions of different combinations of moves, fascinated her. She became very good at the game; so good, in fact, that he was hard put to hold his own with her.

"The bishops are the sneaky ones," she said once. "They lurk back in a corner until you forget about them, then one of them will slip out and have your queen before you know it. When I first started playing chess, I even dreamed chess. All the people in my dreams moved according to chess rules and Lora was the white queen and the captain of the Ghost ship was a black bishop trying to sneak out and get her..."

On the tenth day he received the news from the *Ragnarok* which he had been hoping would come, even though there was really little basis for such hope.

"Dan Destry could see a little when he woke up this morning," Paul Chiara said. "It's four hours later, and his vision is definitely improving. The Sanders boy and several others are recovering their vision. It looks like no one will have to remain blind, after all."

They passed within detector-search range of a great many suns but only a few possessed planets and the few planets found were devoid of any of the electronic emissions that would certainly be a characteristic of a high-level civilization.

The Great Nebula drew closer: a huge, green cloud tinged with rose, suns shining dimly from within it. The cloud became a far-flung haziness as they entered it and suns were visible for many lightyears; blue-white, white, red, orange, and yellow.

By then the *Ragnarok* was two days behind them. The *Unicorn*, which had started from a more distant point and which had been delayed by the necessity of gathering up all Ragnarokans in the occupation forces, was hurrying to catch up with the *Ragnarok*.

He sent another negative report to the two ships, to which he added:

"I should be getting close to enemy territory now. I'll keep reporting—but don't send me any communications or they'll pick up the signals and know that other ships are following me."

Two days later the detectors picked up the first faint signs of electronic emissions, from somewhere almost directly ahead of them. The *Prowler* changed course slightly, to follow them to their source.

They passed out of the cloud and into an open star cluster region. Behind them the nebula was a green and red curtain, hiding all the stars ever seen from Earth or Ragnarok.

The closest sun of all before them was a bright yellow white Class F, with two planets. One was so far from the sun that it was frozen and lifeless. The other, at an intermediate distance, possessed an oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere.

Six hours later they descended through the atmosphere; an atmosphere which the air analyzers declared to be perfectly pure and breathable. It was a big world, as big as Ragnarok, with a gravity of 1.52. But where Ragnarok had been bleak and barren, this world was one of wide, green continents and blue seas, with ice and snow only in the polar regions and no evidence that it had Ragnarok's intensely cold winters and hot summers.

The detectors showed the mountains to contain metals in great abundance. There were many rivers for hydroelectric power, vast areas ideal for agriculture, and yet nothing in the way of life was to be seen but the wild animals grazing on the grassy plains and in the green forests.

"Funny," he said to Barbara. "We'll go on around it and see what we find."

"We know we've found one thing," she said. "We've found the ideal world for ourselves. They were taking a terrible chance, Johnny, all those on the *Ragnarok*, because they might have had to go on and on until they were starving and never have found a world where they could live."

They went around over the night side of the world, then back into day again. There, near the center of another continent, they found the dead city.

It was on a tree-dotted green plain, looked down upon from the north by the ragged spires and peaks of a red mountain.

The detectors showed the mountain to be almost pure iron oxide. A tremendous, sheer cliff on the south side of the mountain was like a rainbow curtain with its copper ore.

It had once been a large and beautiful city, with tall, graceful buildings and many parks. Now it was all ruin and rubble; only portions of the buildings and slender towers standing, trees and other vegetation growing up through the piles of broken masonry and out through the empty windows and doorways. Steel girders and beams, red with rust, projected everywhere. The rusted remains of vehicles and other machines were numerous. The broken shells of three small battle cruisers could be seen, one in the city and two near the edge of the city.

The detectors showed nothing whatever in the way of electronic or atomic radiations and the viewscreens showed the dead city to be without movement of any kind.

"Somebody had a city here," he said, "and somebody else came along and destroyed it. Now, they both seem to be gone — victor and vanquished."

"But why," Barbara wondered, "should anyone want to go to the trouble of completely destroying a city like that and then just go away and leave it?"

"We don't really know for sure that something might not still live there. There's something wrong here—I'm going to take a closer look."

There was a gently sloping hill at the east edge of the city and he landed the *Prowler* there, not far from a tall tree with bayonet-like leaves—a tree very similar to the lance trees of Ragnarok.

From the hilltop the entire city could be seen as well as the river to the west and the forested plain to the east, which ended far in the distance at the foot of a high, black range of mountains.

"You can keep watch in all directions from here," he said to Barbara. "I'll see what I can find in the city. You know enough about handling the *Prowler* to take it up and head back to meet the others if anything should

happen to me."

He put on the light metal helmet, hot though it would be in the summer sunshine, took Fenrir and Tip with him, and went down into the city.

It was the same, everywhere he went; rubble and ruins, with huge blocks of stone in tumbled masses and the red, twisted girders and remains of unknown machines scattered through it all.

There was no clue as to the kind of beings who had built the city until he came to one of the parks. He saw the remains of elaborate fountains, rock-walled gardens—the shrubs and flowers now a tangled thicket—and he found the broken remnants of sculpture.

One statue was still standing. At first he was not sure but what it was alive; so perfect was the craftsmanship and so lifelike the colors.

But it was synthetic stone—a figure of a creature which resembled a small bear with large, dark intelligent eyes. It was standing upright, like a man, holding a huge sphere high above its head in paws that were long-fingered and almost like human hands.

The sphere was a planet—the world on which he stood.

At the end of an hour he had found a large number of statues—most of them broken—and many fresco paintings. All of it featured the activities of the bear-like creatures but in no case was there ever anything of a military or warlike nature depicted. Apparently the little bears had been both very industrious and very peaceful.

There was no clue, anywhere, as to the reason why the city should have been destroyed nor was there any faintest clue as to what the invaders had looked like.

He started back toward the *Prowler*. Several times he found scattered bones in the rubble and once he found the skull of one of the bear-things. The skull was gray and crumbling with age, the eye sockets staring up into the sky, the teeth those of a harmless noncarnivorous creature.

Not far from the foot of the hill on which the *Prowler* waited he came to another area which had once been a park. He saw two more of the lifelike statues, one fallen to the ground. He was pushing his way through

the flowering vines at the farther edge of the park when Tip suddenly cowered down close to him, clutching at his shoulder with both little paws and chattering:

"Bad thing—kill Tiny!"

His blaster was in his hand as he shoved through the vines and saw the thing on the terrace before him.

It was like a great cat, larger than a Terran lion, shining golden-yellow in color, with eyes as green as emeralds. There was an impression of potential violence about it. It observed him with haughty aloofness as though it represented the lords of all races. There was something like sardonic amusement as it looked at the blaster in his hand and he had the feeling that it was going to spring.

He flipped up the muzzle of the blaster, in line with the broad yellow chest—and the cat was suddenly no longer there. It was off the terrace and gone from view in one swift blur of movement.

Tip was still terrified, still chattering, *"Bad thing—bad thing/"*

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Sure," Tip said. "Kill Tiny!"

Fenrir was half snarling as he ran back and forth, trying to pick up the cat's trail where it had disappeared. He seemed unable to do so, as though the cat had no odor.

Ten minutes later there was no doubt about it. Try as he might, Fenrir could detect no trail to follow.

He was back in the main street again, the *Prowler* visible, when he looked to the right, where a side street was cluttered with stone and broken machines, and saw the metal monster coming.

It was a weasel-like thing thirty feet long, cleverly camouflaged to resemble the rusted iron and gray debris of the city, and would have been undetectable had it not been moving. It was creeping silently toward him on soft-padded feet, its triangular head raised and black, multiple-faceted eyes fixed on him. Two steel arms, ending in grasping claws, were already

extended to seize him.

Something flickered on the thing's metal face and he felt a tingling near-numbness as a hazy pink beam enveloped him. Something like probing fingers seemed to be trying to touch his brain through the metal helmet.

This, then, was the stun beam used by the Ghost ship.

He fired, the blaster at full intensity, thinking, *This is the world -where they took Lora and the Others—These are our enemies—the cats ...*

A force-field screen flashed up around the Weasel, like an envelope of frosty white, and the pale blue beam of the blaster hissed and spluttered impotently against it.

Then the Weasel humped its back and darted toward him. It came with amazing speed, the clawed hands extended at lull length.

He ran for the temporary safety of the broken walls, Fenrir running beside him and Tip clinging to his shoulder. The ground shook as the Weasel crashed over and through the walls and rubble behind him, gaining on him as it came.

He had no doubt but that it possessed weapons which could quickly kill him yet it, or the things who controlled it, wanted him alive.

Why?

It might also possess a disintegrator capable of destroying the *Prowler* once it had captured him—

He sent the warning to Barbara as he ran:

"Barbara—get the Prowler up and out of here!"

But the *Prowler* did not move. Instead, the weapons ports flickered open. The blue disintegrator beam came a second later.

It swept down the hill toward him, erratically but determinedly, plowing a wide furrow as it came and filling the air with its roar and the scream of shrapnel flying from disintegrated stone. One piece struck him painfully on the knee.

He dodged to the left, to get out of its path, and it swung in the same direction as Barbara tried to miss him. It was almost upon him and he leaped back to the right. With a quick frantic jerk, Barbara swung the beam directly in front of him again.

Damn it! he thought with a feeling of desperation, jumping once more to the left. *The Weasel was the safest—*

The beam flicked off, roared into being behind him as it was raised slightly, and swung into the Weasel.

The Weasel's screen gave way in a bright flash and the forward half of the monster was suddenly gone. The beam was cut off and the rear half of the Weasel slid with a metallic sound down into the crater made by the beam.

Tip spoke in Barbara's voice:

"What in the world was it?" Then, with a note of pride, "I did pretty good, didn't I?"

"Excellently," he said, limping over to the crater. "Just as soon as you made up your mind which one of us you were after."

There was a silence and he said, "To be honest, you did better than a lot of trained Earthenan disintegrator men. I'm going to take a look at the remains..."

He learned nothing, other than that the Weasel was a complex product of a race with a very high technological level. He doubted that the Weasel had been made on the cat world. There were neither cities nor factories there. But the cats must certainly have directed it.

It was not yet noon when he took the *Prowler* up again. The circuit of the world was continued until they came to the region where they had started. Nothing had been seen, other than the wild animals.

"Tip was certain the cat was the thing that killed Tiny," he said to Barbara, "but this *can't* be the world that produced the Ghost ship. So the home world of our enemy— cats, or whatever they are—is somewhere else. That's where our people should be. We'll go on toward those signals we heard—on to the orange sun."

A voice spoke in his mind, aloof and alien, and he knew it came from the cat in the dead city a third of a world away:

"There you will find the ones who captured your people; the ones who left the metal robot here to capture any living creature it sees moving. You will be given much information. All of it will be lies with a purpose. The ones who built this city once believed such lies.

He looked at Barbara, but she was watching the view* screen, no change of expression on her face.

"I don't think I'm losing my mind," he said. "That cat back there just spoke to me—"

After he had told her about it, and reported to the *Ragnarok*, he said, "We'll head on to the orange sun. We'll see what we find, then form our own conclusions."

They made the one-day journey to the orange sun. The outer planet was a warm, green world, devoid of minerals. Slow-moving, muscular humanoids were plowing fields with slow-moving lizard-like draft animals. There was no machinery of any kind, although there were numerous landing fields where ships could pick up the agricultural produce.

"Enough farms to feed billions of people," he said. "Who picks the produce up and where is it taken?"

In one of the subtropic seas they found what appeared to be a paradise island. Trees, vines, shrubs, all of them loaded with fruit and flowers, covered the large island and grew almost to the water's edge, where the blue sea lapped gently at the snow-white sand.

Barbara said, "The sort of South Sea island they were supposed to have on Earth three hundred years ago—the kind where the brown natives lived a simple, carefree life as they ate fruit, went swimming, and danced happily along the shore in their birthday suits..."

But there seemed to be no life of any kind there aside from swarms of insects and they left the bread-basket world behind.

They went on, around the sun, and the other planet appeared.

The *Prowler's* detectors jumped to life. The world was emitting a barrage of electronic emissions of every conceivable kind.

The warning system beeped as a speck appeared on the viewscreen. It grew swiftly larger, coming head-on toward them; a battle cruiser of an alien design but not the Ghost ship.

He dropped to a very low acceleration. The other ship swung in a circle and came in alongside the *Prowler*, matching the *Prowler's* speed.

The *Prowler's* force-field disintegrator shields were already up, the disintegrators on automatic target fix. The communicator was in circuit with the communicators of the *Ragnarok* and *Unicorn* so that all of any exchange of messages would be transmitted to the two ships.

A white light flashed from the alien ship—on and off, on and off...

"It has a sort of a questioning blink," Barbara said. "I think we're supposed to do something."

He was already trying the communicator on all-wave reception. It was silent. He tried the ship-to-ship normal-space radio. Squarely in the middle of the band he encountered the signal from the other ship.

He listened incredulously as a voice said in Gern:

—Identify yourself at once. Repeat: if you can understand this order, you will identify yourself at once..."

He checked again to make sure the *Prowler* was ready to fire with all weapons that could be trained on the other ship, then he said:

"What are you Gerns doing here? Where did you get that ship?"

"For your information, I am Commander Garron," a deep, hard voice said. "We are not Gerns—we are Shomarians. Sector Commander Hesnar will now speak to you."

Another voice spoke in curt tones:

"You will be escorted to Shomar where you will be questioned and your ship searched for Kilvarl."

"Why is it that you can speak Gern?" he asked. "Your world is hundreds of lightyears from what used to be the Gern Empire."

"Gern was the logical language choice," the curt voice said. "Your ship has lines similar to those of the Gern exploration ship which crashed on Shomar years ago. We learned the Gern language from the one survivor."

"What are these Kilvarl you speak of?"

"The Kilvarl are large, yellow-furred, carnivorous quadrupeds from Kilvar, the first planet of the yellow-white sun."

The cats! he thought, and asked, "Are they supposed to be dangerous?"

"Due to their powers of hypnotism they are very dangerous," the voice replied. "You will now confine yourself to answering my questions. Why are you here? How many others are coming behind you?"

The peremptory tone used by the Shomarian rubbed him the wrong way. "I'll tell you what we'll do," he said. "Your questions will be answered when you find it convenient to answer mine. Let's get on to Shomar."

"You know," Barbara said, "I don't think I'm going to like the Shomarians."

Closer approach to Shomar showed it to be a world of even greater development than he had assumed. They curved around the world, into the shadow of sunset, and the Shomarian ship led the way down toward a green valley, at the head of which a small city set like an architectural jewel. Forested hills made a semicircle around the northern border of the city, with no roads to mar their natural beauty.

He said to Barbara, "I have an idea that the reason this is so extra-carefully laid out is because it's the capitol city of Shomar."

They followed the other ship down to a large space port near the city. He automatically appraised the ships on the field. There was one cruiser-type ship, similar to the ship they followed, a dozen smaller ships of various types—apparently interplanetary freighters—and at the far end of the field an oddly designed ship of cruiser proportions.

"Now we'll see what we've found," he said. "Stay in here, keep watching

that viewscreen, and be ready to take the *Prowler* out of here. Once you get away they could never take the acceleration necessary to catch you."

He hid Tip inside his shirt—Freckles would stay with Barbara—and went out of the ship.

The gentle, sleepy warmth of a summer evening was in the air. A faint breeze was coming from off the green hills and it carried the sweet scent of flowers. There was a feeling of lazy serenity and peace; an illusion that was broken when the three Shomarrians came out of the other ship.

Two of the men, large and thick-muscled, seemed to be under-officers. The third was obviously an officer of very high rank despite his youth—his polished insignia gleaming even in the twilight and his walk almost a strut. He stopped before John and appraised him with objective curiosity, his mouth a tight little line between a large vulture-like nose and a small chin.

"I am Sector Commander Hesnar," he said in the same curt tone he had used on the ship. "My men will search your ship while you answer various questions that I shall ask."

Another officer came up, one whose insignia was not as elaborate as Hesnar's but who had an air of authority about him that was entirely different from Hesnar's self-importance. He was taller than Hesnar, his face hard and scarred, his eyes a cold, frosty blue. John knew he would be Cruiser Commander Garron.

Garron spoke to Hesnar, received a brief consent of some kind, then said to John, "What is your name and the name of your world?"

"John Humbolt, of Ragnarok."

"Ragnarok would be in or near the Gern sector of space, I assume. Why are you here and how did you find this world?"

"I came this way to do some exploring," he answered. Tell me, why should you and Commander Hesnar have gone to the trouble of learning the Gern language?"

"Men in Extra-Shomarian Relations Service know many languages. We have an electronic memory-impression method with which a language can

be learned in a few hours. How did you find this world?"

Hesnar said something to Garron in Shomarian, impatience on his face, and Garron turned away to meet an approaching vehicle. Hesnar indicated the muscular enlisted man on his left with a jerk of his hand and said to John:

"For your own benefit, in case you might make the mistake of trying to use it against a Shomarian, you will hand your weapon to this man."

"For my own benefit," John answered, "I'll just keep it. Let's get on to this Kilvarl stowaway search."

Hesnar's face darkened and his tight mouth became even tighter. Then he said, "We shall take up this matter of your weapon later. In the meantime, lead the way to your ship— I don't have all evening to stand out here."

John walked in such a manner that he could watch all three Shomarrians as they went to the *Prowler*. He wondered why a Sector Commander should personally take charge of *tine Prowler's* inspection. It would seem to be a job much below a Sector Commander's dignity—

Or were the Kilvarl really so dangerous that it was not?

Until and if the Shomarrians proved themselves not to be the enemy, it would be better for Fenrir and Sigyn to remain unseen. There was an easily removed ventilator grill behind which they could hide. Barbara knew about it.

He spoke in quick, low Ragnarokan to Tip:

"Black king and queen vulnerable to bishops."

"What was that?" Hesnar was staring at him suspiciously. "What did you say?"

"I was thinking about some moves in a certain chess game," he answered. "Chess is a war game—very interesting. Remind me to teach you how to play it someday."

Hesnar stared harder and John wondered whether Hesnar thought him

to be a liar or an idiot.

They entered the ship, the Shomarrians darting curious glances at Barbara. She stood by the control panel and looked back at them with a high-headed objectiveness. Fenrir and Sigyn were not in sight.

"Where is your crew?" Hesnar demanded. "Have them gather here at once."

"There is no crew," he said. "Just Barbara and myself."

Hesnar scowled. "You came six hundred lightyears with no crew—with only the female here?"

Barbara stiffened angrily. "I'm a woman, not a 'female'. And I'm the sister of the woman he's going to marry which makes him the same as my brother."

Hesnar stared at her, very thoughtfully. He spoke in Shomarian into the small communicator on his wrist, then gave an order to one of his men.

There was a faint humming sound and John saw that one of the men had produced a camera-like object and had it trained on Barbara.

"What is the reason for that?" he asked.

"A recording must be transmitted of everything," Hesnar answered. "Kilvarl have the ability to hypnotize searchers into not seeing them. You will now tell me your true reason for coming here. Your claim that you are on a mission of exploration is obviously a lie. I am quite sure that the female here is not the equivalent of a well-trained crew of technicians and observers, no matter how pleasantly she may have helped you while away the sleep period hours, and I—"

Hesnar never finished the sentence. Barbara sprang at him like a prowler, her eyes blazing. She slapped his face, with the full strength of an infuriated girl from a 1.5 gravity world.

The blow made a sound like a small explosion and Hesnar was knocked headlong to the floor. He sprawled ignominiously, his eyes wide with incredulous surprise.

"Listen, Shomarian!" Barbara was standing over him, quivering with her indignation. "Don't ever say anything like that again or I'll break your neck!"

The two bodyguards were staring open-mouthed at Hesnar. The camera was still purring and the one who held it, without being aware of it, had it pointed squarely at Hesnar.

Hesnar snarled something at the one who held the camera and the man frantically shut it off. Hesnar scrambled to his feet, his face a livid red and distorted with rage. He grabbed at the disintegrator in his belt and John saw that he was going to kill Barbara as he would shoot down an animal.

He shot as Hesnar's disintegrator came up—a low-intensity shot that would not damage the interior of the ship. Hesnar's weapon was knocked from his hand, to strike the wall and bounce back to Hesnar's feet. Hesnar's hand, still extended in firing position, was white.

"There will be no search, after all," John said. "You'll take me to the city at once—among other things, I want to ask your superiors if it is customary for Shomarian officers to shoot down unarmed girls."

Hesnar's eyes were hate-filled glares in his livid face. He snarled an order at the guards, who looked at John's blaster and did not move.

Barbara stepped forward and said to Hesnar with deceptive mildness:

"There is an old proverb: '*When in Rome, do as the Romans do.*' That's supposed to be the best way of getting along with people in foreign lands. Now, I want to get along with you because you're a high Shomarian officer, very important, and—"

She paused, as though trying to think of something even more apologetic to say. The glaring, puzzled expression on Hesnar's face changed to vindictive triumph.

"So you are aware of the consequences of your actions?" Hesnar's tone was a hiss that matched his face. "I suggest your best chance for mercy is not to whine to me for it but to persuade your temporary joy-mate to hand me his weapon."

"I told you not to say anything like that again." Her mild tone did not

change but her brown eyes had paled to topaz yellow and there was cold, premeditated death in them. 'Now, I'm going to do as the Shomarrians do. I'm going to tell you what a white-livered rat you are, and all your depraved Shomarian ancestors before you, and then I'm going to kill you.'

She said to John in quick flat tones:

"Don't interfere while I kill him!"

Hesnar's jaw dropped as he tried to comprehend the fact that the girl actually intended to kill him, bare-handed, before his own men.

"No!" John said, and spun Hesnar toward the airlock. He blocked Barbara's advance with the other.

She tried to shove past him. "Leave me alone, Johnny— Don't try to stop me—"

"Our white queen, Barbara—do you want to lose her just to get a little bishop?"

"Oh..." Some of the fury began fading from her face and she stopped trying to get past him. "Oh—I forgot." Then she looked at Hesnar again and said, "I'll wait—for now."

"Keep the ship locked," he said in Ragnarokan. "Keep listening. If it looks necessary, take the *Prowler* up out of here at all the G's you can stand."

He turned to the Shomarrians and said, "Well go now."

They went outside and he saw a force of armed guards scurrying out from the cruiser. The vehicle taken by Garron was returning at a high speed.

"We'll go with Garron to this meeting place," he said to Hesnar. "Tell those guards to get back in their ship, and send these two along with them."

Hesnar hesitated, still dark-faced with anger. The communicator Hesnar carried spoke to him, in tones of instruction. When the instructions ended, Hesnar said with a thick undertone of hatred in his

voice:

"I had intended to order the guards back and then take you to the meeting place. The Shomarians are a civilized race and do not harm intruders unless forced to."

The meeting place was in a large room in one of the high buildings within the city; a room that contained a semicircle of desks, all of them with communicators and record-log devices of various kinds. Guards were stationed all around the room.

Hesnar said to him as they entered the room, "You will go with Commander Garron," and went back out. John wondered what Hesnar's next mission might be, and if it would have anything to do with the *Prowler*.

Garron led him to the central desk and as John looked at the man who sat behind it he knew he was looking at the Shomarian leader. He was dark and hawk-featured, with a thin, merciless mouth and small ears set close to his bald skull. The force of his personality dominated the room; an aura of ruthlessness and authority, the cold assurance of a man whose slightest whim was law. He looked vaguely familiar and John realized that Sar-Fane and Hesnar were relatives—probably father and son, which would explain why Hesnar had become a Sector Commander so soon—

Garron bowed to the man behind the desk and said to John:

"Sar-Fane, Temporal *Lord* of the Sons of Shomar, Grand Shepherd of the Shomarian Society, has had you brought here for questioning by himself and various high officials. You will answer all questions promptly and truthfully."

Garron withdrew and John was left alone before his interrogators.

Temporal Lord Sar-Fane was a dark, hawk-featured man with a tight, merciless mouth and small ears set close to his bald skull. There was an air of authority and ruthlessness about him; the cold assurance of a man whose slightest whim was law. He looked vaguely familiar and John realized that Sar-Fane and Hesnar were relatives—probably father and son. Which would explain why Hesnar had become a Sector Commander so soon...

San-Fane spoke in Gern, in flat tones, his obsidian-black eyes as impersonal as though he was giving an order to an animal:

"We have certain means of distinguishing between true and false answers. You will give no evasive answers."

The communicator on Sar-Fane's desk made a report of some kind. Sar-Fane spoke an order into it, then turned to engage in a discussion with the other ten Shomarian leaders.

The five men on Sar-Fane's right seemed to be an advisory cabinet of some kind; their manner was imperious toward everyone but Sar-Fane, deferential when speaking to him.

Three of the men on Sar-Fane's left seemed to be aides. The fourth was a thin, middle-aged man, quick and nervous of movement, the gray hair receding on his high forehead, whose eyes kept darting toward John with almost avid curiosity. His name was Rem Nelfin. John wondered if perhaps the "Rem" wasn't the Shomarian equivalent of "Doctor."

The fifth man stood out as the only friendly person present. They called him "Novla" and asked him numerous questions, glancing often at John with objective appraisal as they did so.

Novla's regard for John was entirely different, like that of a gentle old man defending his son. There was kindness on his face, but still dignified face, and in his eyes as he looked at John there seemed to be an attempt to say: *Don't worry— I'm your friend and I will help you.*

The Shomarian discussion ended. Sar-Fane turned back to John and said:

"You claim that you came six hundred lightyears, from a world called Ragnarok. Why?"

He could devise subterfuges and lies of various kinds— but it was the nature of a Ragnarokan to find lies abhorrent and he could see no reason to lie to them. He would not tell them of the coming of the *Ragnarok* and *Unicorn*, but there was no reason to withhold anything else. If the Shomarrians were the Ghost ship raiders, he would be telling them nothing they did not already know. If the Shomarrians were innocent, they might be able to give him a clue as to the identity of the raiders.

"I came looking for a hundred of my people who were kidnapped from Ragnarok," he said.

There was a thoughtful silence.

"Some of your people were kidnapped?" Sar-Fane said. "And then you came straight to here? Of all possible sectors of space, why did you think you would find them here?"

"The course of the raider ship was determined," he said, then added a separate statement which they would assume to be an explanation of the first, "We have a widely scattered force of special observation ships."

"Were you on Ragnarok at the time?"

The Human-Gern war had just ended and I was two hundred lightyears away when the message telling of the raider came from Ragnarok."

"What was this Human-Gern war?"

John gave a brief account of it, which was followed by several questions regarding the tactics used to defeat the Gerns. Then Novla spoke, not as an interrogator but as a friend:

"The Gerns who landed here spoke of the greatness of the Gern Empire, but they mentioned no imperialistic conquests. These Gern methods of rule that you speak of—through brutal force—are not new to the Shomarian Society, however. The Kilvarl once had an empire of that kind—and there is now evidence that it has been secretly coming into being again. That is why we had to subject you to this brief questioning, to make sure that you, yourself, were not already under Kilvarl hypnosis."

"Kilvarl hypnosis?" He frowned. "Of course I'm not!"

Novla shook his head with a gentle smile. "You would not know, sir. But we are now satisfied that you are not. Which does not necessarily mean there is no Kilvarl on your ship —after a few more questions, we must ask your permission to search your ship and make certain that no Kilvarl is in hiding there. Now, this raider ship—you say that no one saw the beings who were in it?"

"No," John answered. "No one saw—"

He felt the mocker inside his shirt grow tense, then a little paw dug at him, in the way Tip did when something was very urgent. The tiny whisper came in simulation of Barbara's excited voice:

"Johnny, Lora is outside! I'm going to let her in. She's here, Johnny—Lora is here!"

The Shomarians were staring at him curiously, waiting for him to continue with what he had started to say.

"No one saw the raiders," he said. "They used a stun beam of some kind."

As he spoke, he thought: *So you're the ones -who did it— you Shomarians!*

They asked more questions. He answered them, trying to think of some plan by which he could get back to the *Prowler*, wondering how much time he might have in which to act before the Shomarians guarding the Ragnarokans learned that Lora had escaped, and waiting with increasing tension for Tip to say in simulation of her sweet, familiar voice: "Johnny—I'm here!"

A minute went by, then two, three, four...

At the end of ten minutes he accepted the dark acknowledgment: there had been no Lora at the *Prowler*.

There was an unmistakable family resemblance between the two sisters and the Shomarians would long since have known everything about Lora including the fact that she had a younger sister named Barbara. They had created a clever impersonation of Lora and lured Barbara out of the ship. By now a drugged and helpless Barbara would be answering all their questions, not even aware of the fact that she was telling everything she knew, including the coming of the *Ragnarok* and *Unicorn*.

The Shomarians now knew as much about the Ragnarokans and their plans as he did himself.

The communicator on Sar-Fane's desk, which had been making almost continuous reports, made another one. All eleven of the Shomarians listened with obvious interest.

When the report ended, Sar-Fane asked with a strange expression on his face:

"Did you give the girl permission to leave your ship?"

"No," he answered, surprised by the question. "Why do you ask?"

"The airlock of your little ship is standing open."

He could see nothing but question on the faces of all of them and he decided, again, to tell the truth which they would already know if they were the enemy—and which he would be stupid not to tell if they were innocent.

"I had a means of communicating with her," he said. "At about fifteen Gern minutes ago she was lured outside the ship by someone impersonating her sister. What do you—"

"Kilvarl!"

The exclamation came from Novla and the room was suddenly surging with activity. Sar-Fane began giving quick orders into a communicator. Garron ran out of the room, guards following him. Nelfin disappeared, and other officials were either hurrying to unknown duties or else giving orders into their own communicators.

Novla hurried over to John, agitation and worry on his face.

"Sir, this is terrible—there was a Kilvarl on your ship!"

"Why do you say that?" he asked.

"Nothing else could have hypnotized the girl into believing she saw her sister outside. And we have just now received another report: the guards stationed to watch your ship were hypnotized before they could sound an alarm."

"Where is the Kilvarl now?" he asked.

"No one can know. The helplessly hypnotized girl is with *it*, wherever it is. Only the Great Creator knows what it will do—and make her do."

He tried to find some sign of deceit on Novla's face, but could find

none.

"Get me back to my ship," he said. "The fastest way possible."

It was full night outside. Police and military vehicles were everywhere across the field when they reached it, yellow lights flashing and spotlights probing in all directions. Armed soldiers were going in a fast march toward the forest which bordered one side of the field.

A police car was waiting in front of the *Prowler*. The airlock was open.

He went inside, the police and Novla following him. The control room was empty. The screen behind which Fenrir and Sigyn had hidden was down, the space behind vacant.

They searched the ship from end to end. It was empty. Barbara was gone, and her mocker, and Fenrir and Sigyn.

Novla dismissed the police when they were back in the control room and said, "Dr. Nelfin had just suggested a question when the report came in regarding the Kilvarl. You implied that the raider ship was faster than your own. How could this be, when you Ragnarokans can stand higher accelerations than any race known to the Shomarian Society?"

"So far as we know," he said, "it was a third-level ship."

Novla stared at him. "*Third-level?* I pray that you are wrong. What did it look like?" , John got pencil and paper and began a sketch.

"The ones who saw it died a few seconds later," he said, "but they described it as something like this..."

He handed the completed sketch to Novla.

"By the Great Creator!" Novla's voice was a shocked whisper. "They have it—*the Kilvarl have their third-level ship!*"

Novla swung around to look at the communicator. "I must tell Lord Sar-Fane at once. I'll get the connection through Garron's cruiser. Where do I speak?"

John showed him and Novla made his report, his voice still shaken. Sar-Fane made a quick reply and Novla turned to John and said, "Lord

Sar-Fane wishes to speak with you at once. The situation is now one in which both your race and mine are faced with extinction—your race to be enslaved on Kilvar, because you are accustomed to a one point five gravity, and my race to be destroyed because the Kilvarl hate us."

Ten minutes later Novla ushered him into a room which, for luxury, surpassed even those of the Gern ruler. They walked on a carpet so thick that their steps made no sound, across the wide, softly lighted room, and came to the crystal table where Sar-Fane sat waiting for them.

"Be seated, sir," Sar-Fane said to John, and indicated the chair across the table from him.

John took the chair and Novla sat down unobtrusively to one side.

"I assume, sir," Sar-Fane said, "that Novla has already mentioned the magnitude of the peril now facing your race and mine. First, however, I wish to apologize for the unfriendly atmosphere of our first meeting. But you had just come from toward Kilvar and our extremely sensitive detectors had already told us that two large ships, presumably warships, were coming behind you."

Sar-Fane smiled and the coldness of his face seemed to be replaced by human warmth. "It was a suspicious combination, sir, as I am sure you will agree."

"As of right now," John said, "your supersensitive detectors sound suspicious, too. Are you sure you didn't get your information by means of a truth-drug injection?"

Sar-Fane frowned, as though puzzled, then his face cleared. "You refer to the girl?—But we are searching for her now."

He did not reply and Sar-Fane said:

"As for Sector Commander Hesnar's actions—I apologize for them, too. However, he was under the hypnotic influence of the Kilvarl hidden on your ship. By so cleverly diverting attention away from the search, it got the chance to escape.

He waited, again making no reply, and Sar-Fane said:

"You do not fully believe me. This is wise caution—why should you believe us until we prove we are what we claim to be? I shall be very frank with you. There is going to be war with the Kilvarl and Shomar will be their first victim. We have a very special kind of warship here which, if manned by Ragnarokans, could very well mean victory instead of defeat for us."

"Why should you be afraid of a few Kilvarl in a dead city?" he asked.

"A few?" Sar-Fane asked with surprise. "There are thousands in hiding there! And on other worlds are millions. This we know for certain, since their third-level ship could not have been built on Kilvar without our knowledge."

"How could they build ships with paws instead of hands?" he asked. "No matter where they were?"

There was a metal box on the table, set with buttons and knobs. Sar-Fane pressed one of the buttons.

A sphere of light appeared above the box, dissolved, and John looked into a miniature three-dimensional replica of the dead city on Kilvar.

"You are right," Sar-Fane said. "The Kilvarl could never build a ship with paws. But once they had many ships; they exercised a reign of terror over many worlds; they lived in luxury in their ultramodern city and their ships—the Rells."

The image-blurred again, reformed, and John was looking at the statue he had seen, at the bear-like creature which was holding aloft the world of Kilvar.

"That is a Rell," Sar-Fane said. "This statue is typical of Kilvarl humor—it symbolizes the Rell as the bearer of burdens, the slave destined to carry the weight of Kilvar in its hands."

Sar-Fane turned off the projector and said, "I have record tapes in here which date back more than three hundred years, back through the century before the Shomarian-Kilvarl war. I will show you scenes of Kilvarl pillage and plunder and slaughter, of women and children tortured to death, of slave races on Kilvarl-dominated worlds who labored until they died, under constant terror and cruelty."

"Did you Shomarians destroy that city?" he asked.

"The Kilvarl eventually forced us to do so. They already had an empire of thirty worlds when they began raiding the Shomarian worlds. All Kilvarl ships were warships, almost all Shomarian ships were harmless freighters. We had been driven off three of our worlds when we realized we must either build a powerful fleet or be driven all the way back to Shomar. We built the fleet.

"But we are a race of peace and industry. We did not want war and we sent a group of ambassadors to Kilvarl to plead for friendly relations. To these ambassadors the Rell slaves told the full story of Kilvarl brutalities and begged to be saved from further tortures. We learned that the Kilvarl were racial fanatics, convinced that they were destined to rule over all other races. With this conviction was combined an animal cruelty—they derived pleasure from the misery and pain that their ruthless domination inflicted upon other forms of life. At that time they had not yet developed their powers of hypnotism, but all were master telepaths."

There was a silence, then Sar-Fane said, "And we learned that the Kilvarl had picked the brains of a race in the Lesser Magellanic Cloud and had already drawn up the plans for a third-level ship. This, we knew, would mean the end for us if they ever built it. And then while we were asking for peace, their fleet struck Shornar without warning and with every weapon they possessed, plus poison gases and deadly strains of bacteria. We fought the fleet back to Kilvarl, and we fought the Kilvarl in their city. We won—to the everlasting glory of the fighting men of Shomar, we won."

John stood up restlessly, wondering how to tactfully tell Sar-Fane that he was at the moment far more worried about Barbara than interested in Shomarian-Kilvarl history.

"I know," Sar-Fane said. "You want to get back to your ship. Give me just another minute or so to tell you the rest."

"The Shomarians wanted only security from future Kilvarl aggression so we destroyed all Kilvarl ships—we thought—to make them planet-bound. Then we took their only means of building ships in the future, their Rells. The descendants of those Rells are on Shomar now; happy and free, forever grateful to us."

"If you took all the Rells, how did the Kilvarl build a thirdly el ship?" he asked.

"Obviously, they had some ships hidden somewhere and with these ships they went to worlds far beyond the limits of 'h Shomarian Society and forced the natives to build a third-level ship—perhaps many third-level ships."

"How could a little race like mine be of any help to the big Shomarian Society?" he asked.

"You Ragnarokans would be the equal of the Kilvarl in any space battle—you are from a high-gravity world, too. But for any hope of quick and permanent victory we must first have Kilvarl specimens to study so we can learn how to devise mental shields against their ability to read our minds and hypnotize us. We feel sure that you Ragnarokans will be sufficiently resistant to Kilvarl hypnosis that you can be of invaluable service in capturing these specimens."

"How do you explain your story that the Kilvarl hypnotized Barbara, then?" he asked.

"Sir!" Sar-Fane's tone was chiding, as though a not-very-intelligent question had been asked. "She was a mere teenage girl, her mind preoccupied with worry about her sister. You, and the other fighting men of Ragnarok, will be something entirely different. You will be forewarned. You come from a fierce environment of constant danger—you have minds and wills of steel, entirely different from those of the gentle, peaceful Shomarrians. We are confident that—"

An alarm signal sounded from some hidden source in the room, sudden and shrill, then a communicator spoke in quick, excited words:

"Seno vo'non trel et'tenf Efrehtrel shem..."

Novla stared, frozen. Sar-Fane swung in his chair to face the nearer wall, jabbing a button on his desk as he did so.

The wall split, slid apart, and the city was in view below them, the landing field beyond.

Searchlights flooded the field and men were running toward Garron's

cruiser and the other cruiser—presumably crewmen responding to an emergency call.

Sar-Fane said in a dead voice:

"The Kilvarl has stolen our ship—the new one I told you about!"

He saw that the oddly designed ship was gone.

"How could the Kilvarl operate the controls of the ship?" he asked. "How could it ever get inside the ship in the first place?"

"In answer to both questions: hypnotism of the crew."

The boarding ramp of Garron's cruiser nicked back inside, and the ship was lifting from the ground as the airlocks closed. The other cruiser followed a moment later, both cruisers accelerating swiftly as they disappeared from view.

"Get me back to my ship again," he said to Sar-Fane. "By the fastest means possible. Those cruisers can never overtake the Kilvarl, but I can!"

The *Prowler* left the atmosphere of Shotnar behind and was in outer space. The viewscreen showed the two cruisers ahead of him, and the stolen ship far ahead of the cruisers, going straight as an arrow toward Kilvar.

He overtook the Shomarian cruisers. They were trying hard to gain on the stolen ship, going at an acceleration rate that must have had all on board near unconsciousness. Garron spoke to him as he passed, his voice strained from the drag:

"Damage its drive enough to stop it—don't do more—will need that ship badly when Kilvarl attack—"

An ear-splitting howl drowned out Garron's words. He swept the needle around the communicator band. The howl was everywhere. He used the directional locators. The howl was coming from the ship he pursued.

here was nothing he could do but drive on at all the acceleration he could stand. He asked the mocker, "Tip, can you find Freckles on the ship that's ahead of us?"

"No Freckles," the mocker answered.

He wondered what had happened to her. It seemed to him the Kilvarl would have had no use for the mocker except the pleasure of one juicy bite.

The *Prowler* crept up on the other ship, slowly. The Kilvarl was maintaining a speed that would already have killed the Shomarian crew and he knew it would be operating the ship through use of the hypnotized Barbara. Landing the ship without a crew would be a different matter—but perhaps the Kilvarl expected the third-level ship to meet it somewhere and transfer a crew onto the captured ship.

An hour went by. The sun of Shomar was a bright star behind him and he was almost within disintegrator range of the other ship. His hand was on the target-finders when the ship ahead of him exploded.

There was no warning, no evidence that such might happen. The ship was in the viewscreen, the auxiliary cross-hairs of the target-finders coming in conjunction with the stern—and then there was a blinding blast of white light.

The howl was abruptly gone and the detectors chattered madly with the emanations that always accompanied nuclear explosions.

He cut the acceleration to zero and used all detectors in a search of that area of space. The detectors found nothing but small fragments of metal and a cloud of disassociated atoms. No lifeboats had left the ship.

He knew it was hopeless, but he said to Tip, "Try again to find Freckles out there."

"No Freckles," Tip said, his little face very solemn. "Freckles gone."

And Barbara is gone, he thought Poor little brave Barbara...

He sent a full report to the *Ragnarok*, then he called Garron.

"I suppose you saw the explosion," he said. "There is nothing left here. What caused it to explode?"

"I've just now learned how it happened," Garron said. "The ship was so

new that it hadn't yet been fully checked for a flight test. Apparently the extremely high acceleration somehow set off the stores of unsecured disintegrator charges."

Sar-Fane called next, to say:

"Let me extend my sympathy, sir, for the loss of the girl who came six hundred lightyears to help you find her sister. It has been a day of tragedy for the Shomarians, too. We have lost our newest, finest ship and its crew—the ship which we had hoped might stand against the Kilvarl third-level ship."

"I'm going on to Kilvar," he said. "I don't know whether the kidnapped Ragnarokans could be there—but I don't know where else to look."

"I'll transfer you now to Novla," Sar-Fane said. "He is Chief of Extra-Shomarian Relations and will be working very closely with the Ragnarokans from now on."

Novla spoke a few words of sympathy, then said, "Lord Sar-Fane is now ordering Emergency Mobilization of our entire First Fleet. It will reach Kilvar at about the same time your own ships arrive. Are both your ships fully manned?"

"Our entire race is on them."

"Your entire race? The courage of your women and children is amazing, sir, to embark upon such a voyage. And—lest I forget—you had better warn them that some of the Kilvarl guard robots may still be in the city. They are very dangerous."

"I saw one. But where could the Kilvarl be?"

"At one time there was an extensive system of passageways and chambers under the city," Novla said. "I suggest that you investigate them—it has been many years since we checked them, ourselves."

"Why didn't you?" he asked.

"We are not a vindictive race and we had no desire to persecute the Kilvarl. We had—we thought—removed their ability to invade our worlds and we were content to let them live an unmolested existence as the

carnivorous wild animals that they actually are. But we now know that we were wrong."

"I'll see what I can find," he said. "Are those two cruisers going to Kilvar?"

"They are returning to Shomar to take on full crews as well as additional weapons, then will accompany the fleet to Kilvar."

The rest of the journey to Kilvar seemed long and lonely. Tip sat silently beside him and the ship was very still. He was glad when Kilvar was finally reached and the *Prowler* was screaming down through the atmosphere.

It was night in the dead city when he set the *Prowler* down on the hill where the bayonet tree stood. He was far too restless to wait for day and he attached a small searchlight to his metal helmet, locked the *Prowler* behind him, and went down into the city.

The glow of the vast nebula outshone the stars, lighting the ruins with a pale green semidusk and softening their desolation. It also changed the form and color of objects, causing him twice to bring up his blaster against a crouching Kilvarl and discover both times that no Kilvarl was there.

He realized, the second time it happened, that his mind was so preoccupied with worry and questions that he had not stopped to think that not using his searchlight was pointless. It would not attract the attention of the Kilvarl—they were telepathic and were aware of every move he made, anyway.

He turned the light on and began hunting for some entrance to the underground.

He found one; a ragged opening at the foot of a huge mound of rubble.

It was small and torturous for some distance, nothing more than a passageway left by accident when the stone buildings collapsed. There were several dead ends branching off, and there were places where he had difficulty squeezing through.

It ended with a ten-foot drop to a smooth floor. He jumped down, went through a portal-like opening, and found himself in an underground city.

There were passageways and rooms leading out in all directions in front of him. Many of the rooms contained wrecked machines.

Floor, walls, and roofs of the passageways and chambers were of some glistening black material, smoother by far than glass. Curiously, he turned the blaster against one wall, the beam at full intensity. Nothing happened—the wall material was completely impervious.

He felt sure he knew how the passageways had been made, although it was something still only theoretical to the science of Earth and the Gerns. The material must be a sheathing of collapsed atoms, formed when the passageways were made. The sheathing represented the entire volume of rock that had originally been there.

He tried to determine whether or not the passages had been used recently, but could not do so. The passages and rooms of collapsed atoms could never produce telltale dust.

He walked on and on; exploring passageway after passageway, room after room. Hours went by and still he had found no sign of the Kilvarl.

He came at last to a narrow passageway that sloped upward. He followed it, to emerge in a thick grove of trees. Dawn was lighting the sky in the east and the *Prowler* was tiny and far away to the north.

The sun was sending its first shafts of light across the city when he reached the *Prowler*. He made another report to the *Ragnarok*, then called Novla on Shomar and told him of what little he had found.

"Did the Kilvarl make any attempt to influence you?" Novla asked.

"No," he answered.

"They will," Novla said. "They were studying you, to determine the most suitable way of using you. Be very, very wary sir. As for the Shomarians—the First Fleet is now ready to embark for Kilvar. I shall go with it, of course."

"I suppose there's no hope that Barbara was not on that ship?"

"There has been no sign of her here."

"The prowlers—black quadrupeds—have any such bodies been found?"

"No."

"Then they must have been on the ship that exploded...**

He moved about the room restlessly when the conversation was ended. He knew he should eat something, but he was not hungry. He was tired and should rest, but he could not sit still. It was quiet in the *Prowler*, so quiet and lonely that he could endure it no longer. He buckled on the blaster and went outside, to search the city again.

He looked to the east, against the brightness of the sun, and saw her stumbling up the hill toward him—

Lora!

He felt his heart leap with the surprise and gladness of it, then drop as the grim suspicion came:

It could not be Lora—it was another Kilvarl deception. But she kept stumbling toward him, the familiar little dark-haired figure, and he ran to meet her. He reached her, the tears still bright in his eyes, and hugged her to him, knowing that she was no illusion.

"*Lora!*" he said. "I was afraid I would never see you—"

He stopped, feeling the cold premonition that something was wrong.

He tilted up her face, and looked into the expressionless eyes of a zombie.

"What's the matter, Lora?" he asked. "Are you hurt—what's the matter?"

He waited for her reply, feeling a sickness inside him. She was Lora—and she was not Lora. All the life and warmth were gone from her.

"They were killing us," she said in a low, dead voice. "They herded us out of their ship and started killing us. I got away."

"Where—and when?"

"I don't know. To the east, I think. I walked a long way, and then I saw the *Prowler*."

"Who did it?"

"Cats—big yellow cats. They were killing the others."

"Come on," he said, and led her like a child to the ship.

He lifted the *Prowler* and began a systematic search of the country to the east. Lora sat beside him, watching the view-screen without expression. She could tell him little about what had happened to her and the others.

"The cats took us, in a big ship," she said. "They did things to us—they are still doing things to the ones they haven't killed. They were going to use me and the other women for breeding slaves... we told them we would kill ourselves first and they laughed and said *they* would do the killing. They did..."

There was no sign of any physical injury and he had the hope that her condition was only mental shock. He talked to her, thinking that this might help restore her to normal. Although she had not asked him, he told her what had happened after her capture and that the *Ragnarok* and *Unicorn* were coming with the entire Ragnarokan race on board.

She made no comment when he had finished and he said, "Weren't you listening, Lora?"

"I was listening," she said.

He saw that she was unchanged. He wondered what he could do to break the spell she was under, if it could be broken by a countershock. It would be cruel to do that to her, but not as cruel as to let her remain the way she was...

"Barbara came with me to help find you," he said.

There was a long silence, then she said, "I don't see her."

"You'll never see her. She was killed yesterday."

For a brief instant there seemed to be a flicker of life in her brown eyes,

then they were as before.

"Barbara is dead?" she said in the same lifeless voice, "How terrible..."

He did not want to have to do what he did next, but it seemed to him it would be his only hope of bringing her out of the zombie-trance.

He seized her by the shoulder and slapped her twice— hard, stinging blows.

"Lora—*wake up!* He put all the force at his command in the words, "Barbara is dead—don't you even care?"

Her face was twisted with pain and the pain seemed to break the spell. Her eyes widened, dark with comprehension.

"Barbara is dead? *No—please—*"

She looked up at him, trembling, as one fighting hard to retain sanity.

"*Johnny!* Inside. I want to cry—and I can't—"

"What is it, Lora?" he demanded urgently. "Tell me, so I can help you."

"Can't you see what they did to me?" Her voice was like the whimper of a lost and dying child:

"They took my soul, Johnny—*they took my soul!*"

Then the brief return to near-normal was gone and she was a zombie again.

He stroked her cheeks, where the marks of his blows still stood out. She did not move. It seemed to him that now, far more than ever, it was quiet and lonely in the ship.

Ten minutes later the *Prowler* reached the scene of the massacre. It was a clearing in the woods and thirty women and children had been slaughtered there.

Lora spoke, to say, "This is the place where the cats were killing us."

He landed at the edge of the clearing and went out of the ship, leaving

Lora inside.

The ground was scarred with the marks of battle; a battle in which the women and children had fought with clubs and stones and their bare hands. Many of the women still had their hands chained together.

He went out among them. Some he recognized, such as fifteen-year-old Joan Bradford; her weapon, a sharp-edged stone, still in her hand and her heart torn out. But there were many he could not recognize; torn and mangled far beyond the point required to kill them.

This, it seemed to him, proved beyond any doubt the non-human, utterly vicious nature of the enemy.

He used one of the *Prowler's* disintegrators to make graves, then went out again to bury the dead. Lora went with him, to watch silently for awhile, and then silently worked to help for some sign of emotion, but there of expression as she worked. Then he thought of what she had said, "*Inside, I want to cry...*", and he wondered if she was under some hypnotic condition in which she must go through the hell of seeing over and over again the horrors she had witnessed without the relief of any outward expression.

They went back into the ship. He reported to the *Ragnarok*, and ended with the words: "Come to Kilvar with all the acceleration you can take. Maybe we'll get a chance at the Ghost ship in time to save the others."

He reported to Shomar. Sar-Fane received the call, expressed his shock and sympathy and said, "Now you know what would happen if the Kilvarl ever conquered us. The need for Kilvarl specimens is imperative. While the Ragnarokans search the underground for Kilvarl, the First Fleet will stand guard above, to protect you from the third-level ship. The fleet is on its way, now."

Lora was watching him as he talked, and when he was finished, she said:

"We won't have to fight alone. The Shomarians know the Kilvarl — the Shomarians can tell us what we should do."

Her tone was almost normal and he asked hopefully, "Do you feel a little different now — a little better?"

"I will never feel different," she said. "I am what the Kilvarl want me to be."

He took the *Prowler* back to the city and considered what he should do. So far as he could know, the remaining captives were still on the Ghost ship. There was absolutely no way he could try to find them so long as the Ghost stayed in third-level. But there would be much information to be obtained from a Kilvarl in the city's underground, if he could capture one...

He could not take Lora with him and he did not dare leave her in the control room. He had done so at the site of the massacre, realizing later that the Kilvarl could have given her hypno-telepathic commands to destroy him, herself, and the *Prowler* and she would have obeyed.

He made sure the sleeping compartment Barbara had used contained nothing with which Lora might harm herself, then he led her into it and locked the door behind him when he went back out.

He sent another message to Sar-Fane, one in which he described Lora's condition in as much detail as he could and Sar-Fane assured him Shomar's best specialists would be given the information immediately.

The reply from the specialists would be some time in arriving so he did as he had done the night before: he put on the helmet with searchlight attached, locked the ship behind him, and went into the city's underground.

The afterglow of sunset was fading from the sky when he returned to the *Prowler*. He went first of all to see about Lora. She was still sitting on the edge of the bed, as he had left her.

"I couldn't find anything," he told her. "There was no sign of any Kilvarl."

"They can be all around you and you can't see them if they don't want you to," she said. "I know."

He had not eaten for thirty hours and he prepared a meal for both of them. When he took hers to her, she would not eat it.

"The glass of water," she said. "Only the water."

He did not want to lock her in the room again and he made a pallet on the floor, just in front of her doorway, so that he would be awakened if she left the room. She was lying quietly on her bed, asleep or awake he did not know, when he drifted off into his own restless sleep.

We had a dream, one so real that it awakened him.

In the dream he saw the *Prowler* land in the ruined city and saw himself go into the underground passageways. There seemed to be the passing of time, and a ship came down to land lightly as a feather in a clearing far to the east of the city. It was the Ghost ship and the clearing was the one where the massacre had taken place. He saw the Ragnarokans herded out of the ship by a Weasel. Then, with swift efficiency and utter mercilessness, the Weasel clubbed and stabbed and tore them to death.

The Weasel went back into the ship when it was over and the ship went toward the city, to land a short distance east of it. Lora came out of the ship, the ship disappeared, and Lora began her stumbling walk toward the *Prowler*. In the east the sky was lighting with dawn.

He saw—or sensed—the invisible ship stop out in space, almost directly over the city. There it remained, waiting...

Then a voice spoke in his mind, arrogantly:

"This is what happened. Are you intelligent enough to understand why?"

He awoke and sat up. The dream had been vividly real. And the question he had heard in his mind had but one implication: the Shomarrians were the ones who had turned Lora into a zombie...

Are you intelligent enough to understand why?

The Shomarrians had done it to cause the Ragnarokans to hate the Kilvarl and help the Shomarrians kill and capture them...

He had no doubt that it was a dream created by Kilvarl hypno-telepathy. But had it told him what had actually happened? Were the Kilvarl trying to show him the true enemy? Or were the Kilvarl already using their mental powers to create suspicion of the Shomarrians, to start breaking apart, before it ever formed, the alliance that might result in

their downfall.

He called Garron's cruiser, and asked for Novla.

Novla seemed completely unsurprised and undisturbed when told about the dream. "I should have warned you of that," he said. "I made the mistake of forgetting that you don't know Kilvarl methods as we do. Obviously, your mind is sufficiently resistant that they can influence it only when you are asleep. This dream they gave you will be only their opening shot in their attempts to make you distrust us."

"What do the specialists have to say about Lora's condition —have they made their report yet?"

There was a silence, then Novla said:

"I'm sorry, but they know of nothing that can be done for her as of now. They state that she is not under Kilvarl hypnosis; that her mind has been affected by the atrocities and tortures she was forced to witness and experience. Many Shomarians suffered the same fate during the Shomarian-Kilvarl war. But Lord Sar-Fane has ordered a top-priority program of rush research—which means that Shomar's finest and most dignified specialists were routed out of bed to begin the job at once. There is a feeling of confidence that a cure will be found soon—our medical science has advanced greatly since the days of the war."

He went in to check on Lora again. She was lying quietly, her eyes closed and her breathing barely discernable. It was not the slow inhalations and quick, relaxed exhalations of a person asleep, but he did not disturb her. Perhaps she was resting after a fashion, even if she were not asleep...

He returned to his pallet, thinking of what Novla had said about Sar-Fane ordering the specialists out of bed to begin the search for a cure without a minute's delay, and Novla's near-assurance that they would find one.

It was with a feeling of hope, the first yet, and the thought that he should be thankful that the Shomarians were the friends and allies of the Ragnarokans, that he went to sleep.

He had another dream, one that awakened him at dawn.

In the dream he was on Garron's cruiser, watching Novla. Novla was at the communicator, saying to Sar-Fane:

"The barbarian now seems well under control—quite tractable. We could further impress him with Shomarian worth by producing the miracle cure immediately upon our arrival, but I regard this as inadvisable. The female will much better serve our purpose if she dies. What do you say, Lord?"

The voice of Sar-Fane answered:

"We don't need worshipful gratitude from the pack leader —we want anti-Kilvarl violence. His primitive emotions will very effectively block any reasoning powers he may possess if our work remains unchanged. Let the female die."

It was different from the other dream. The first dream had been only a realistic dream. The second one had not been like a dream, but as though he had actually been in the cruiser and had seen and heard Novla through someone else—through Garron.

He got up, more restless and worried than ever, and went in to see Lora. It seemed to him that her condition was worse and he kept hearing Sar-Fane's words: *Let the female die.*

He decided to tell her of the dream, to see if it would stir any memories of capture by Shomarrians instead of Kilvarl. But her only reaction was to say in the lifeless voice:

"The Kilvarl did this to me. I know."

The *Ragnarok* and *Unicorn* were due within a few hours. *He* took the *Prowler* up, decided upon the most suitable area for the camp that would have to be established, then spent the next five hours in a survey of the country surrounding the city.

The detectors revealed nothing other than the high metal content characteristic of most of the hills and mountains. He went back to the city and observed the iron mountain just north of the city with a conjecture forming in his mind:

The metal content of the iron mountain was so high that no detectors

could penetrate to reveal what might be inside. The Kilvarl might have an underground city there—by now, the Ragnarokan captives might be in there...

The *Prowler* quivered suddenly with a double sonic boom, and the *Ragnarok* and *Unicorn* came roaring down from the sky.

"Here we are," the voice of Dale said in the communicator. "We've been pushing right along—even the unicorns are flat-bottomed now. How is Lora?"

He looked at her, sitting quietly beside him and showing no interest in the arrival of the ships.

"I want Paul to be ready to take her over as soon as you land," he said. "Set down in that clearing, just short of where the hills and forest begin."

He spoke to Cliff Schroeder on the *Unicorn* as he followed the *Ragnarok* down:

"Are you all set for action, Cliff?"

"Don't mention that word, 'set'," the voice of Cliff answered. "Our hip bones are now down among the bottom springs of our chairs. That was a tough job, catching up with the *Ragnarok*."

"What did the Earthenans say when you began gathering up your boys?"

"Take 'em and welcome—or words to that effect. Just so long as we left the ships. They also mentioned quite often that it was our ethical duty to explain to the enemy—just as soon as the enemy had smacked us down—that the Earthenans had nothing to do with our foolish expedition of revenge and that, furthermore, they had tried to persuade us not to go."

"I wonder why Hayden's second-in-command, instead of Hayden, represented Earth's military when all of them decided they didn't want us to go to Orion?"

"It seems that Hayden showed up at the meeting with a bad hangover and the radical opinion that the Earthenans ought to give us a little cooperation. So they politely took him off to the hospital, 'to recuperate

from the strain of battle,' and let this Frendle speak words more to their liking. I was surprised to find we had a friend among the Earthenans."

"I'm not exactly surprised about Hayden," he said. "Too bad there couldn't have been more like him. The Ghost ship is around near here, I guess—you had better keep a double watch at all disintegrator stations. The *Ragnarok* will be up to join you as soon as everybody is out of it."

"All right," Cliff said. "I hope the Ghost gives us a chance at it. *God*—to kill thirty helpless women and children like that! Now that we're all here, maybe we can save the others."

He landed the *Prowler* and watched the *Ragnarok* slowly settle her enormous weight down on the ground, with the crunching of rocks and snapping of trees. Lora, sitting small and apathetic beside him, had not yet spoken or showed any sign of interest.

"Well go into the *Ragnarok* now, Lora," he said. "Paul will know what to do for you."

She got up out of the chair, helping herself by holding to the arms of the chair. He saw that she was obeying him the best she could, but when she started toward the airlock she walked with slow hesitation; concentrating on each step as though she had almost lost control of her legs.

He put his arm around her and helped her out of the *Prowler* and down to the ground. Dale and Norman were already coming to meet them.

"Hello, Lora," Dale said, smiling in greeting. "We came to—"

Then his words and smile faded away as he saw that he spoke to only a lifeless facsimile of Lora. He looked at John with pain and question on his face.

"I thought she was just sick," he said. "I didn't know they had made her—like that."

Norman's face had turned cold, like a mask of ice, and in his eyes was the hunger to kill.

"Everything will be all right now, Lora," he said. He brushed the dark

hair back from her face, his tone the gentle one of a man reassuring a child and in conflicting contrast to the savagery in his eyes. "Paul will take care of you... and we'll take care of the Kilvarl."

"No," she said. She looked up at Norman and her words came slower and with more difficulty than they had a few hours before. "The Kilvarl made me like this—Paul can never change me."

Ten minutes later, after the brief preliminary examination, Paul Chiara could only say, "She's at a very low ebb, worse than you had thought. There's no physical injuries to account for it, but we'll make a really thorough check of her now..."

John went back outside, where the boarding ramps were a steady downward flow of Ragnarokans, prowlers, woods goats. The Ragnarokans looked tired, after their many days of acceleration. The woods goats, on short rations during the voyage, began ecstatically cropping the tall green grass in front of the ramps and had to be shoved out of the way. The unicorns, each with two prowlers as guards to keep them from attacking the children, emulated the woods goats as soon as possible; for once too preoccupied to be mad.

He talked with Dan Destry about the arrangement of the camp, answered a multitude of questions from those who passed near him, and was constantly aware of the question in his mind: *What will Paul say about Lora?*

Once he was spotted by the little blonde girl, Eleanor Tyson, who darted her way through the others to run up to him and say, "I can see, Johnny—all of us can, just like you told me! And Bonnie Craig has a new baby, which is why we had to slow down once when we didn't intend to, and my prowler has two new pups, and..."

The Shomarian First Fleet arrived with a thunderous crashing and rolling of sonic booms—battleships, cruisers, scout ships, patrol ships. They spread out in a protective cover over the city and surrounding countryside—an armada of such proportions that old Destry remarked, "I'm glad they're for us instead of against us."

Novla called shortly afterward, his tone cheerful:

"Congratulations upon the swiftness with which your people made the

long voyage. And I can now assure you that the First Fleet will soon be equipped to stand adequate guard against the Kilvarl third-level ships."

"How?" he asked.

"Our Dr. Nelfin—a most brilliant man—evolved a theoretical third-level detector several years ago. Of course, with no ships in third-level to detect, there was no object in constructing the device. But they are being built now and ten of them are already en route to Kilvar on Sector Commander Hesnar's flagship."

"Do we get any?" he asked.

"Most certainly!" Novla said. "Each of your three ships will have a third-level detector installed as soon as they arrive."

Garron spoke, to ask about the Ragnarokan plans to search the tunnels, and was told that Norman Lake was already gathering his forces together.

"We'll keep watch from the air," Garron said, "pending your discovery of the places where the Kilvarl are in hiding. Then we will send ground troops to assist you."

The discussion was concluded by a last warning from Novla:

"The Kilvarl will use every form of deceit they can contrive to cause you to distrust us. Report to me at once, and in full detail, if any Kilvarl contact you in any way."

He went to see about Lora, but Paul Chiara could not yet give him any decision. "By evening we'll have learned all we can learn," Paul said. "If anything hopeful develops in the meantime, I'll send you word at once."

No word came from Paul in the hours that followed. The unloading of the *Ragnarok* was finished and the *Ragnarok* took up a position over the city. Ragnarokan lifeboats made a search of all the area round the city in an effort to find other openings into the underground. Norman and his men, in the meantime, had found two more entrances in the city.

There was another call from Novla, his tone no longer cheerful:

"There is now strong evidence that the third-level ship has been leaving

large numbers of Kilvarl hypnotists on Shomar and that it—or a third-level ship like it—is still doing so.

This means that the Kilvarl are going to make their attack far sooner than we had expected."

The sun was down, turning the storm clouds of the west into Mood-red and metallic purple, when Paul sent word that he could come see Lora.

Paul was in his office, defeat in the way he was slumped in his chair, and John knew the answer before he asked the question:

"Can you cure her?"

"No."

"But there must be something—isn't there anything you can do, Paul?"

"A doctor cannot cure a patient, Johnny. He can only give the patient the chance to do his or her own curing."

"You mean, Lora is..."

"She is very rapidly getting worse. Her trouble is the one thing that no doctor can help her with—she does not want to live."

He went in to see her. She was sitting in a chair, staring unseeingly at the wall. She did not move when he entered.

"We're about ready to start the search of the underground, Lora," he said. "Before morning, we're going to know a lot more about the Kilvarl than we do now."

For a little while she did not answer, then she looked up at him and said with even greater difficulty than when she had spoken to Norman:

"Friends—they will pretend to be your friends. Then they will kill you."

"No—we won't let them do that, Lora."

"I fiends," she said again. "They told us they wouldn't hurt us. And then, when they began to interrogate us..."

She began trembling, her eyes wide with the horror of remembering.

"Pain—and screaming with pain—and the Kilvarl laughing..."

He put his hands on her trembling shoulders.

"It's all over—they can never harm you again."

"Screaming with pain... but not after they were gone." The trembling subsided and stopped. "Not after they were gone... and I soon will be."

Apprehension came like a cold hand around his heart.

"What do you mean, Lora—that you soon will be gone?"

The pale face of a china doll looked up at him.

"*They* took my soul. I'm already dead, but for my heart to stop beating."

He stood with his hands on her shoulders for a little while, the room silent and lifeless around him, then he said:

"You're wrong—you're going to be well again, Lora."

She made no reply and his words seemed to still hang with mocking hollowness in the silent room when he left her.

Norman was waiting when he went back down to the city.

"Everything is ready," Norman said. He looked out across the city, which was darkening with the approach of night. "I'm going into the tunnels—I want to meet some of these things."

"I'll take the *Prowler* and keep watch from above," he said. "You might flush some Kilvarl out into the open and I want to see where they go from there."

The men waiting at the underground entrances were shifting impatiently and Norman gave a prearranged order. Thirty seconds later, and thirty miles above them, flares blazed into life like a score of little white suns. Very slowly, they began their drift back to the ground.

The flares covered such a wide area of the sky that there were almost no shadows on the ground. The beauty of the land that had existed at sunset was gone. All was harsh and grim in the cold white light.

Norman smiled; in the hard light his face was more wolf-like than ever.

"Time to start killing Kilvarl, Johnny. And if they try to hypnotize us into feeling otherwise, we'll just have to remember what they did to Lora and the others."

Norman left and John went back to the *Prowler*. He was thinking again of Lora, hardly aware of the fact that he was at the foot of the boarding ramp, when he was jolted into quick awareness by a voice speaking in his mind:

"Greetings, fool!"

A Kilvarl was standing at the top of the ramp, looking down at him with mocking amusement in its green eyes.

He dropped his hand to his blaster and said, "I've been hoping to meet one of you. Why have you kept yourselves hidden?"

"We have been engaged in our own pursuits."

"Now you are here—why?"

"To point out some facts to you with the hope that you will listen with reason instead of prejudice. May I suggest that we prevent interruptions by going inside your ship?"

They went inside, where he stood between the Kilvarl and the open airlock.

"All right," he said. "Let's hear what you have to say."

" you Ragnarokans came six hundred lightyears to find your enemy. Now you are the trusting pawns of that enemy."

"I met a Kilvarl the first time I was here," he said. "Why didn't it tell me the Kilvarl side of the story then?"

" Your first reaction was to try to kill him. There would have been a

certain lack of dignity in asking you not to fire until he could explain to your satisfaction what he was doing in his own world. Also, there was no evidence to indicate that you would so promptly ally with your enemy to destroy a race you had not even met."

"Why did the mockers sense you Kilvarl only when the Ghost ship was near?" he asked.

"The Shomarrians were appraising the worth of the Ragnarokans as slave soldiers and also considering sending a force of them to Kilvar to learn how many of us still existed and whether or not we were trying to build weapons of any kind. We wanted to learn everything about you that the Shomarrians learned."

"Why did you kill the mocker called Tiny?"

"The easiest route was to first enter the simple minds of the little mockers and then go into the Ragnarokan minds. We did not intend to kill the little mocker—we were not aware of its frail physical condition."

"If you Kilvarl are harmless, why did the Shomarrians send their First Fleet here?" he asked.

"The Kilvarl were only short-range telepaths when the Shomarrians knew us two hundred years ago. But they learned from their Ragnarokan captives that we had developed our telepathic power to such an extent that we had killed a mocker at a distance of six hundred lightyears. Now they can never rest until they have Kilvarl after Kilvarl to study and dissect, until they finally learn the principles of our telepathic powers."

"They said they needed Kilvarl for study so they could devise mental shields against them."

"They want Kilvarl for study so they can build electronic machines to pry into the minds of all the races in the galaxy. With what they learned they could build a fleet of fourth-level ships, with weapons to match—ships that would have a speed of fifteen thousand lightyears a day. Such a fleet would give them power to rule the galaxy beyond the wildest dreams of the most fanatical devotee of Shomarrian Divine Destiny."

"Shomarrian Divine Destiny?" he asked. "They claim the Kilvarl have

that belief."

There was the impression of amusement from the Kilvarl. *"One of the tricks of a propagandist is to indignantly charge the other side with all the crimes and atrocities committed by his own side. This the Shomarrians have done."*

"The Kilvarl are innocent of all the things Sar-Fane said they did?" he asked.

"In your mind is the mental block which will prevent you from believing me," the Kilvarl answered. *"But I will tell you this: the Kilvarl do not have the great powers of hypnotism that the Shomarrians claim we have. The Kilvarl have never had an empire. We have never had a ship—have never been off our own world."*

"What were the Rells—where did they come from?"

*"The Rells came as colonists from toward the center of the galaxy, on a ship gone astray because of damage. They could go no farther so they build their city here."**

"The city was never yours?" he asked, surprised.

"No. We were a race which preferred to lie in the sun and daydream. The Rells worked feverishly to build their city and create many material possessions, which amused us."

He thought of the statue; the one where the Rell was holding aloft the world of Kilvarl.

"'Typical of Kilvarl humor,' " the Kilvarl said in mockery of Sar-Fane. *"The Rells liked to think of themselves as the ones who would elevate Kilvarl to the position of a world of great civilization and importance. This, too, amused us— we had a certain fondness for the busy little Rells."*

"If you Kilvarl cared nothing about science, how could you have developed the idea for a third-level ship?"

"In the beginning we found it interesting to use our telepathic contact with the minds of the Rells to help them with their problems. We could study the data available in the minds of specialists in diverse fields, then

correlate that data and find the solution. We became more and more interested, and set in seriously to learn all we could. With our ability to merge our minds together on a problem, we made many discoveries. The atom-collapsing machines with which the Rells made their underground city was one of our first achievements."

He looked at his watch and saw that Norman and the others would already be back in the tunnels. The Kilvarl's story did not sound very believable to him, yet it seemed to him that he should give the animal the time to finish before Norman and the others began killing...

"They will find no Kilvarl tonight," the Kilvarl said. "But the rest of my story will not take long to tell.

"The Shomarians came to Kilvarl. They then controlled thirty worlds and they were curious to know if the Kilvarl and Rells might be of value to them. Their manner was very friendly. The trusting little Rells did not really believe our warnings and many of them told the Shomarians all they knew, including the fact that the Kilvarl had evolved a theoretical third-level ship to such a degree that the Rells were already drawing the basic plans. The Shomarians sent a large farce of scientists and technicians, posing as ambassadors of good-will. Their attempts to spy were more amusing than dangerous. It never occurred to us that an attack was being planned on Shomar which would destroy us. The Shomarian visitors had been told nothing of it—a necessary precaution—and they had served their purpose and were expendable when the Shomarian fleet struck."

"What happened to the Rells?" he asked.

"One hundred of us escaped into the mountains when it was hopeless to fight any longer. We took what Rells we could with us. The Shomarians took all the other Rells back to Shomar, decided they were of insufficient value to be worth feeding, and killed them. They then scattered a specially developed strain of bacteria on Kilvar which soon killed all the Rells we had saved.

"The Shomarians had our third-level ship plans, had reduced the Kilvarl race to the status of one hundred hunted wild animals, and had destroyed the Rells so we could never build a ship or weapons. They were well satisfied."

The green eyes of the Kilvarl looked at John and beyond him. Cold and distant with thoughts of the past. Its tail was swishing a little. *"But we were not."*

"Why did almost two hundred years pass before the third-level ship was seen in the Human-Gern space sectors?"

"They have been busily using it elsewhere, adding new worlds to the Shomarian empire."

He considered what the Kilvarl had said. It seemed incredible that the Shomarrians should go to the effort and expense of sending an entire fleet to Kilvar to guard against a few thousand almost unarmed animals...

"The Shomarian propaganda was effective," the Kilvarl said. "You Ragnarokans are barbarians, out of your element. You have never before encountered the guile and deceit on which some races build their civilizations. You think the Shomarrians like and respect you. You are too naive to realize that to the Shomarrians you are gullible savages whose capacity for violence they will use to kill and capture Kilvar. Then you will be scattered in the Battle and Labor Corps of the frontier worlds. Your families will not accompany you—none of you will ever see them again. Breeding will be done by artificial insemination, as with any other animals used by the Shomarrians."

The Kilvarl paused, then added:

"I'll tell you three more things.

"The purpose of the First Fleet is to make certain, if you should wake up to the facts too soon, that your ships can be destroyed before they can even get started toward Shomar.

"The so-called third-level detectors will not be installed to detect the Shomarrians' own third-level ship. They will be for the purpose of making your ships completely useless, so that the First Fleet can continue on to its real destination—a newly-discovered world which has given the Shomarrians trouble—as soon as sufficient Kilvarl have been captured."

"And the third item?" he asked.

"Tonight, at a time and place not yet designated, the third-level ship

will land and the rest of the Ragnarokan prisoners will be herded out and slaughtered by robots made to look like Kilvarl from a distance."

He stared at the Kilvarl, thinking, *robots, or real Kilvarl —how would we know which?*

The Kilvarl's tail switched restlessly again.

"There is no reason why I should stay longer. You believe nothing I tell you."

"What has been done to Lora?" he asked.

"The Shomarrians gave her an undetectable drug which produces a trance-like condition of the mind, and used a crude form of hypnotism and post-suggestion on her as she was forced to watch the other Ragnarokans being tortured by pseudo-Kilvarl robots."

"I suppose you know she is dying?"

"She has less than three days to live."

"What can be done to save her?"

"Novla has a neutralizing drug on the cruiser. You should know. You were put in Garron's mind and heard what Novla said to Sar-Fane."

He looked into the green, alien eyes of the Kilvarl and said:

"I wish I could believe you. Twenty minutes from now, Lora would have the drug and Novla would be dead. But what proof can you give me?"

There was the impression of a mental shrug. *"Like the Shomarrians, the Kilvarl can give you no concrete proof. We can, however, save the life of the girl."*

"How?"

"Through use of neutralizing drugs prepared from native plants and use of corrective hypnosis."

"Send an order for another Kilvarl to bring you what you need."

"She will not be treated here."

"Yes," he said. "She will."

"You are sure of that?"

"I'm sure you're a dead Kilvarl if you don't."

"Perhaps." The Kilvarl seemed completely unperturbed. "Kilvarl have rather quick reflexes. I do not intend to remain your polite captive for that long."

"All right," he said. "Where would she have to be taken?"

"To a place unknown to you Ragnarokans. For our own protection it must remain unknown until you have proved we can trust you. No one will go with her."

He looked at the Kilvarl, hesitating, then he made his decision.

"I don't trust you," he said. "Not yet. I'm going to find out who is who in this game before it's over. But right now, I wouldn't trust Lora alone with the Kilvarl or Shomarrians, either one."

"Before the game is over," the Kilvarl said, "it will be too late for what you learn to save either the girl or the Ragnarokan race."

It looked at the airlock and at him.

"I'm going now."

It sprang, whether to go past him or to kill him on the way, he could not know. Its movement was too fast, even though he was expecting it, for him to have time to do other than try to stop it.

He shot, and the beam slashed through the space where it had just been. The second shot, a tenth of a second later, came as its paw struck his shoulder.

That time, the blaster made the peculiar sound a blaster always made when it hit its target at close range.

There was no third shot. The Kilvarl was gone and there was blood in

the airlock.

He went outside and saw that it was raining. There was no sign of the Kilvarl outside, in the unreal combination made by the downpour of rain under the white glare of the flares, and the blood on the ramp was already washing away.

He wondered if the wound was such that the Kilvarl would die later. Then he thought of Lora, already dying, and the cold question came to his mind: *Have I done the wrong thing?*

He went back inside, withdrawing the ramp and closing the airlock. He went to the control room and lifted the *Prowler* above the city. From there he called Dale and Cliff, and had Norman brought into the hook-up.

"Have you found anything, Norman?" he asked.

"Corridors—miles of corridors," Norman answered. "But no Kilvarl."

"There must be other corridors, with concealed doorways," he said. "Have the walls and floors checked for anything that might resemble a hairline crack. As for the Kilvarl—I just talked to one."

They said in almost perfect unison, "*What?*" He told them what had happened. "We'll keep guard in all directions with the few lifeboats we have," he said. "They have only little light-duty disintegrators, though—I'm hoping to be able to get the *Prowler* to the Ghost in time. Cliff, you had better start a roving patrol with the *Unicorn*. The *Ragnarok* had better stay close enough to guard our camp down below."

Cliff acknowledged the order and said, "I'll swing farther south to begin with."

"I'll keep double-alert watches on the *Ragnarok*" Dale said. "But are you sure, Johnny, that the Kilvarl are the enemy?"

"No," he answered. "I'm sure of nothing. Maybe both sides are playing us for cats'-paws. I'm going to call Novla now, and see what he has to say about this."

He contacted the Shomarian cruiser and asked for Novla. After a short wait the voice of Novla said, "Yes?"

"I just had a talk with a Kilvarl in my ship," John said.

"A Kilvarl?" Novla's voice was sharp with excitement "Hold it at all cost! We're coming down—"

"It's gone," he said. "It's not here anymore, so don't get excited."

"*You let it escape?*" There was condemnation in Novla's tone. "Do you mean you had to bungle our very first opportunity to capture a Kilvarl specimen?"

"Our opportunity?" He felt his temper rise. "And there's another thing, Novla—it came as near proving the Kilvarl are not the enemy as you Shomarians have come to proving that you aren't."

When Novla spoke again, it was in the voice of a tired old man:

"I'm sorry for what I said. But I have had no sleep since leaving Shomar and there has been this constant worry about the coming war with the Kilvarl, and the worry that you Ragnarokans, so important to us in this war, might be swayed by Kilvarl hypnotism into turning against us."

"According to the Kilvarl," he said to Novla, "the Ghost ship—your Ghost ship—is going to drop down tonight and the rest of the prisoners will be killed. It also told me you have drugs which can bring Lora back to normal. What do you have to say?"

There was another pause, and then Novla said, "What can I say? The Kilvarl are clever psychologists. It will all be done, exactly as they predicted, and after you have seen the mangled dead, the subconscious grain of doubt will be born in your mind, and the unvoiced question: 'The Kilvarl said the Shomarians would do this... *Did they?*'"

"As for the dying girl—if we knew of any drugs that might save her, they would be on their way already, in the fastest ship the Shomarian Society possesses. I promise you—"

The Emergency alarm sounded, its shrill scream drowning out Novla. The voice of Red Anders, far afield in one of the lightly armed lifeboats, came quick and sharp with urgency:

"*Ghost!* East of Black Mountains—coming down in front of me—"

John's fingers struck the buttons on the control board and the *Prowler* leaped forward at multiple-gravity acceleration.

He saw that the *Unicorn* was hopelessly far away to the south. The *Ragnarok*, of course, dared not leave the camp unprotected.

"It's landed!" Red reported. "I'm holding my beam in one spot against its shield. People are coming out—*our people!*"

The *Prowler* passed over the Black Mountains and two white shapes appeared on the viewscreen, far away up an immense valley; the tiny shape of the lifeboat, and the huge, spiked torpedo that was the Ghost ship. There was the gleam of the transparent force-field shield around the Ghost and the thin blue line of the lifeboat's blaster beam was stabbing futilely at it.

"They're killing them—the Kilvarl are killing them... !

He saw the *Ragnarok* suddenly appear in the rear view-screen. It was driving straight up into the sky, trying to find a position where it could simultaneously guard the camp and get a shot at the Ghost.

At that instant a new ship appeared on the forward view-screen. It was a Shomarian cruiser, still out of range, but diving down like a hawk on the Ghost ship.

"*The Kilvarl are tearing them to pieces!*" There was frantic anguish in Red's voice. "*They're killing them all—can't anyone get here to help me break through their shield?*"

The Shomarian cruiser fired down on the Ghost ship, although it was not yet in range and its beam was turned into a harmless mushroom by the Ghost ship's shield. John's fingers were on the firing buttons of the *Prowler's* blasters, but he was not close enough yet—the Ghost ship's shield was repelling the beams.

It seemed to him the *Prowler* was crawling forever up the long valley. Red was cursing unintelligibly now, like a man crazed with the horror of what he saw and his helplessness to do anything about it. Then he stopped, and spoke two words in a dead voice:

"*It's over.*"

The *Prowler's* beams were still licking harmlessly against the Ghost ship's shield when the Ghost began to lift. The Shomarian cruiser was closer, still firing. Then the Ghost shimmered and he knew, without ever having seen it before, that the Ghost was going into third-level.

The heavy blasters of the *Ragnarok* fired then, the beams passing over the *Prowler* with a thunderous crash and a violent displacement of air that smashed against the *Prowler* like a gigantic hammer. It was at that instant that the Ghost ship vanished.

The blue beams crashed through the empty space where the Ghost had been, and on to a distant mountain peak. The top of the peak erupted in a blue-white flash of light.

"Damn!" It was the voice of Dale. "We came so close to getting it——"

He brought the *Prowler* back on steady course, slowing as he approached the place where the Ghost had landed. The Shomarian cruiser was leveling off, to go back up to the altitude of the rest of the fleet.

He landed beside the lifeboat. Red was waiting there, his face pale and grim with helpless rage, tears in his eyes.

"They killed them all," he said. "Elaine was one of them— Elaine is there—"

He turned away, to hide the way his young face was twisting into crying.

John went out among the dead. It was a replica of the other massacre, even to the chains. Some of them he recognized; among them Elaine, her face white and still under the fall of the cold rain. Some he could not recognize at all...

A roaring came, growing swiftly to a thunder, and the *Unicorn* dropped down near them. Cliff hurried out of it, together with several others. Jim Morgan, in charge of the *Unicorn's* lifeboat field search was one of them. They looked at the dead and away again, their faces frozen in grim expressionlessness.

Red was standing silent and motionless, staring at the still little form that had been Elaine, and blood appeared on his lower lip as he bit into it

in his attempt to keep from crying again.

Morgan went to him, his gray hair almost white under the light of the flares, and laid a big, scarred hand on his shoulder.

"All right, Red," he said gruffly. "Snap out of it, boy. We can't change what's already been done—but there are cats to find and kill, and keep on killing until their debt is paid. Come on—you'll be needed on the *Ragnarok*."

Morgan led Red away and Cliff said to John, "So the prediction was fulfilled. Did Red say the Kilvarl were the real thing?"

"He had no doubts."

Cliff looked again at the scene of the massacre. "I guess we know who the enemy is, now. I'll send out a burial detail and take the *Unicorn* back to the city."

John left a few minutes later. Garron called him just before he reached the city and said:

"Sector Commander Hesnar will arrive within a few hours. The third-level detectors will be installed in your ships immediately afterward."

Novla spoke, to relay the sympathies of Sar-Fane and Sar-Fane's assurance that all the resources of the Shomarian Society would be available to the Ragnarokans in their forthcoming attack against the Kilvarl.

All of which sounds good, he thought as he went on to the city, but it still doesn't bring back the dead or save Lora.

He wondered again if he had been a fool when he refused to believe anything the Kilvarl told him. Lora might now be receiving treatment that would restore her to perfect health if he had accepted the Kilvarl offer.

But if there were only a few thousand poorly armed Kilvarl now making preparations to resist an invasion supported by the might of the Shomarian Society, why had they not tried harder to convince the Ragnarokans that their story was true and they must have Ragnarokan

assistance or be destroyed as a race?

Could it be that the Kilvarl were too proud to ask for help?

Novla called, to say:

"A special report just came in from Shomar; one I know you will be glad to hear, sir. The medical research teams have made what appears to be a break-through. They are now certain they will soon have a treatment developed which will cure the girl."

"How soon?" he asked.

"Within a few days—perhaps even one day."

He spent the following hours in a roving search of the area around the city. He found nothing and he went to the *Ragnarok* when his worry over Lora became almost unbearable.

She was asleep under sedatives; so pale-faced and still that she reminded him of Elaine. He held her cold hand a little while. She did not stir and he went back to Paul's office.

"Even under sedatives," Paul said, "it seems that in her subconscious she keeps reliving the tortures she saw and experienced. We have done everything we could think of—I'm afraid it isn't enough."

"Isn't there any hope, at all, for her?" he asked.

There was a silence, then Paul said, "I'm sorry, Johnny. She has no more than three days left."

He took the *Prowler* down to the city and went outside. He saw, with faint, uninterested surprise, that the eastern sky was bright with dawn, the long night over. Could it have been only two mornings ago that Lora had come stumbling out of the sunrise... ?

The communicator in the *Prowler* signaled and he went back inside. It was another call from Novla, who said:

"Sector Commander Hesnar's ship will arrive in a few minutes and your third-level detectors will be installed at once. The third-level detector already in Commander Hesnar's ship shows the Kilvarl ship to be waiting

above the city now."

Hesnar's battleship came, the largest Shomarian ship he had ever seen. A small service ship left immediately, to go straight to the *Prowler*.

A young officer emerged when it landed, followed by two technicians who carried a thing which resembled a large box made of some dark non-metallic material.

"I am Electronics Officer Gerdvel, sir," the officer said briskly as they entered the *Prowler*. "Now, if you will show me your control room..."

Gerdvel selected a location for the third-level detector, on the wall just above the forward viewscreen, explaining, "In this position, sir, the detector will be visible from every section of the room."

The detector was installed within an hour. A switch was turned and the image of the Ghost ship appeared on the detector's screen. It was not as formless as the pseudo-image produced by the Ghost's spy-ray but neither was it clearly defined.

"Due to several rather technical reasons," Gerdvel said, "it was not possible to produce a detector with greater resolving power. However, it will quite effectively serve its purpose."

Gerdvel had hardly more than left the *Prowler* when Novla called, an undertone of urgency in his voice:

"I've been waiting until those detectors were installed—I didn't want to chance your leaving without it."

"Leaving?" John asked. "What do you mean?"

"The girl, Barbara, has been found on Shomar. She is under Kilvarl hypnosis."

"Barbara—alive?" he asked incredulously. "But she can't be! The ship that exploded—"

"The Kilvarl who stole the ship must have turned her over to other Kilvarl already on Shomar. She has been hiding in the forest north of the city. A few hours ago she made a night raid into the edge of the city and

killed twenty people. Fourteen of them were small children."

"I can't believe that," he said. "Ragnarokans don't kill children."

"I told you, she is under Kilvarl hypnosis and therefore not herself. Shomarian guards had the opportunity to kill her, but this would be unthinkable. All attempts to capture her without harming her have failed so far—after all, she had the strength and swiftness of a wild animal on a one-gravity world such as Shomar."

"I'll start at once," he said.

He called Dale, Cliff and Norman and told them what Novla had reported. Then he said to Norman, "That detector proof iron mountain keeps bothering me. Make up a seismograph crew and see what they can learn."

"If the Kilvarl are back in there," Norman said, "it won't take the Ragnarok's disintegrators long to uncover them. Then we'll get some action."

"Yes... but don't blast into there until I see Barbara."

"You don't think the Shomarians are up to some trick with her, do you?"

"I don't know. I want to make sure, just in case that Kilvarl told me the truth."

He was well on his way to Shomar when it occurred to him that he had not asked the Kilvarl about Barbara. He had assumed that she had died on the exploding ship and had not even thought to ask.

It was night when he reached Shomar. The edge of the city facing the hills was brilliantly lighted and spotlights were sweeping back and forth across the hills themselves.

He was contacted by a small police ship and told:

"Follow me."

They landed between the city and the woods, where several vehicles were waiting. An officer stepped out of one and came to meet him.

"I am chief of the City Guard," the officer said. "Lord Sar-Fane regrets that he cannot be in the city tonight to meet you and my orders are to assist you in any way possible. First, however, for you to fully realize what one lone Kilvarl has done, we must look at an unpleasant sight."

The officer took him to a nearby building and into a large, refrigerated room. There were twenty-nine tables in the room, and on each table was a dead person.

"The hypnotized girl killed nine more last night," the officer said. "This was her first victim—this guard here— and she cut his throat with a jagged piece of flint so she could acquire the weapon with which she killed all the others."

He went from table to table, looking down at the dead. There were five men, three women, and twenty-one small children.

With the exception of the guard whose throat had been cut, all had been killed with the same type weapon.

It was incredible that Barbara could have done such a thing, even under hypnosis. Yet, there were the victims, and the lifeless little faces of the children were looking up at him...

"Let's go," he said. "Call your search parties back out of the woods—I'll find her quicker by myself."

He waited until the search parties had been withdrawn, then he took the *Prowler* in a slow circuit of the woods, flying just above the tree tops. He could see nothing through the dense foliage, but he knew Barbara would recognize the *Prowler* and would, he hoped, come to it.

He landed in the roughest section of the hills, in what would probably be the area in which she stayed most of the time and went outside to wait.

It was warm under the green trees, sweet-scented with the odors of a thousand different flowers, it seemed. There was no sound, other than the faraway hum of the city.

His eyes had become accustomed to the starlight when he saw a black shadow suddenly materialize and come racing toward him with little yelping sounds of ecstasy.

Sigyn!

Sigyn was alive, Fenrir must be alive, too.

"Where is Barbara, Sigyn?" he asked. "Is she all right?"

Sigyn's joy at seeing him again seemed to vanish and she whimpered, in a tone of distress, telling him in her way that something was wrong with Barbara.

He found Barbara a few minutes later; standing in a clearing with a Shomarian disintegrator leveled toward the sound of his approach, her clothes torn, her hair tumbled around her face, and even in the darkness a look of wildness about her.

"Oh—it's only you," she said in a disappointed voice, and lowered the disintegrator. "I was hoping it would be another Shomarian to kill."

Fenrir came running from the trees beyond, as happy to see her again as Sigyn had been. He put his hand on the big, black head and said to Barbara:

"How do you feel."

"Feel? I feel fine—why shouldn't I?"

"The last I heard from you was when you thought you saw Lora outside the ship."

"That was just a Shomarian impersonation of her. I escaped before they could take me prisoner."

"They told me in the city that you've been killing Shomarrians at night."

"I like to kill the Shomarrians—they are our enemy."

"They told me you killed Shomarian children, too."

"Oh, yes—every one I could find. I like to kill little Shomarrians the best of all. Then they can never grow up to be big Shomarrians."

"Where is Freckles?" he asked.

"Freckles?"

"The little mocker you had."

"Oh—the mocker. It fell off my shoulder and got lost, I guess. I never noticed."

"Let's go back to the *Prowler*," he said. She walked beside him, the disintegrator still in her hand.

"I found Lora," he said. "She's on Kilvar."

"On Kilvar? Are the Shomarrians still torturing and killing the Kilvarl there?"

"What makes you think they do that?"

"I've heard them talking to one another and laughing while they told what they did."

"They were talking to one another in Gern?"

"No—in Shomarian. I understand Shomarian."

"What is the Shomarian word for 'tree'?"

She walked a little way without answering. "I can't tell you. It's my secret weapon, knowing what they say, and nobody must ever tell them I know."

They came to the *Prowler* and went inside. There, where there was light, he saw her clearly for the first time. The person he saw was not really Barbara, as the Lora he had found was not really Lora. The dark hair hung tangled and unkempt around a scratched and dirty face which was no longer pretty with her personality, but was impersonally blank and hard. Only her eyes were alive, wild and restless. "When did you eat last?"

"Eat?" She stared at him, as though the question was nonsensical. "I haven't had time to eat, not with so many Shomarrians to kill."

"Killing all the Shomarrians would be too big a job to undertake without ever eating," he said in a reasoning tone. "But, first, you'd better go in and wash up, put on clean clothes, and straighten up your hair."

Her stare was suddenly one of suspicion and the disintegrator in her hand half lifted toward him. "Are you going to have any secret talks with the Shomarians while I'm gone?"

"I'm going to tell them I found you and we're going back to Kilvar," he said. "That's all."

"Are there Shomarians on Kilvar to disintegrate?"

"Lots of them," he said. "Now, go in and clean up." The suspicion faded and she left. He spoke to Tip: "Can you find Freckles?"

"No," Tip answered promptly. "No Freckles—nothing." *Which means,* he thought, *that Freckles was killed...* He withdrew the ramp, closed the airlock, and contacted the Shomarian police ship which had led him in.

"I have the girl and I'm going back to Kilvar now," he said. "Just a minute, please," the Shomarian voice said. "Lord Sar-Fane would like to speak to you."

There was the clicking of communicator interchange, then he heard the voice of Sar-Fane:

"I'm sorry I could not be at Capitol City to meet you again but this Kilvarl situation is becoming more and more serious; so grave that I've been making a personal tour of the ravaged districts."

"Ravaged districts?" he asked.

"Novla was told not to mention it to you, since you were faced with enough problems of your own, but it now seems obvious that the appearance of you Ragnarokans merely speeded up by a few days the conquest that the Kilvarl have been planning for a long time. It is estimated that at least a thousand Kilvarl are now on Shomar, in hiding and hypnotizing person after person into doing their will. In the past twenty hours there have been hundreds of incidents of sabotage, arson, mass poisoning via the city water supplies, assassinations of key Shomarian officials, and three different attempts by hypnotized Capitol Guard police to kill me."

"The Kilvarl did all this?" he asked.

"Shomarrians hypnotized by the Kilvarl have done all this and are doing so this minute."

The elated whisper of Barbara came from behind him:

"I wasn't alone!"

She was bare-footed and half undressed, a towel in one hand and the disintegrator in the other.

"Now we can win!" The burning in her eyes was like a fire. *"Now we can wipe out the Shomarrians to the last whining brat!"*

Sar-Fane spoke again:

"Was the girl unharmed?"

"Yes," he answered.

"I gave strict orders that she not be harmed."

"Whining brats!" There was savage hatred in the whisper. *I killed all I could find!"*

Again, he saw the white little faces of the dead Shomarian children. The heart and soul of Barbara were gone, as the Kilvarl had taken the heart and soul of Lora, But, for Lora, it would all soon be over...

He looked at the ship's chronometer and saw with a feeling of desperate urgency that almost half her hours to live were already gone.

He touched the drive buttons and the forest dropped away under the *Prowler*.

"I'm going now," he said.

"Yes—I understand." There was sympathy in Sar-Fane's voice. "May the Great Creator be with you—and us."

He switched off the communicator and Barbara said with vicious satisfaction:

"It's going to take more than his Great Creator to save him and his race

this time, isn't it?"

When he did not answer the satisfaction flared suddenly into suspicion. She stepped back with the disintegrator aimed at his heart and asked in a low, deadly tone:

"Are you on *their* side?"

He knew, beyond any doubt, that if he said "yes" she would instantly kill him.

"I was after information," he said, "and we learned quite a bit, didn't we? Now, you'd better get on back to cleaning up."

The suspicion slowly faded and she obeyed, taking the disintegrator with her.

They were far from Shomar when she had washed and eaten and finally gone to sleep. He took the Shomarian disintegrator, then, and removed the charge from it.

He reported to Dale, telling him of Barbara's condition, and asked about Lora.

There was a silence that told him the answer before Dale spoke.

"She's going sooner than Paul thought she would. I don't think you'll ever get here in time to see her."

He increased the acceleration and looked at the bright star in the viewscreen; the star that was Kilvar's sun. It seemed very far away.

Norman called several hours later, to first ask, "Is Barbara in there with you?"

"Not right now," he answered, "Why?"

"I think we've found the Kilvarl!" There was exultation in Norman's tone. "I had seismographs set up in the Iron Mountains and we put off some shots. There seems to be a big cavity back in behind that rainbow cliff. The seismo crew is busy with new locations now, to try to get as much information as we can before we blast that cliff down."

"Our campsite comes up pretty close to that cliff," he said. "I think down in the ruins of the city would be the best place for the women and children. The *Ragnarok* can watch all the underground entrances in case any Kilvarl try to come out. Has the Ghost ship moved yet?"

"Not yet. It no doubt will, though—we'll be ready to blast into that mountain shortly after midnight."

He had long since calculated the time required to reach Kilvar and he said, "I'll be there several hours before then."

Barbara came into the control room an hour later, walking with extreme difficulty, her young girl's face sagging and distorted by the pull of the multiple gravities. She sat down heavily beside him and said:

"*Why* are you in such a hurry to get back to Kilvar?"

He wondered if he should tell her the truth, and could see no reason to do otherwise. She would not care...

"Lora is dying," he said.

The fever-bright eyes looked at the viewscreen, where Kilvar's sun was only a star, and back to him.

"Shomar is a lot closer than Kilvar—let's turn back and help the Kilvarl on Shomar."

"What about Lora?" he asked.

"Lora?" Again there was the momentary blankness, as there had been when he asked about the mocker. "Oh—Lora. This is no time to be sentimental—all of us have to work hard to kill the Shomarians because they'll make slaves of all of us if we don't. Let's turn back. Or are there lots of Shomarians on Kilvar to kill?"

"There are Shomarians there," he said, "Thousands of them."

There was no conversation in the hours that followed. Barbara watched the viewscreen like one hypnotized, speaking only once: "They're waiting for us there—Shomarians to kill. I wish we could go faster."

Fenrir and Sigyn, lying on the floor at their feet, watched her with dark,

puzzled eyes. They knew she was really no longer Barbara and they could not understand why. They must have seen the Kilvarl take her, though...

No, he thought. They would have died fighting for her—the Kilvarl must have used its hypnotic powers to get past them and get away with Barbara without them knowing until too late.

But if the Kilvarl could hypnotize the prowlers to that extent, why had it—or they—not gone all the way and turned the prowlers into Shomarian killers along with Barbara?

There seemed to be no answer to the question. Only Fenrir and Sigyn knew, and prowlers could not talk.

They came to Kilvar at last. The city was gold and sapphire in the light of the setting sun and he wondered if it was symbolic that he should have returned barely in time to see the sunlight fade away, as he would see Lora so briefly before she, too, was gone.

He put the *Prowler* against the airlock of the *Ragnarok* and Fenrir and Sigyn went with them into the other ship. Barbara was still carrying the now-empty disintegrator.

Paul Chiara met them in the corridor and said as he watched Barbara closely, "How are you, Barbara?"

"I'm all right," she said. "Where are these Shomarrians we're going to kill?"

"Some are coming right away. Let's get on back where we can be waiting for them," Paul said.

When Barbara was lying unconscious in the chair in Paul's office—she had never felt the tiny hypodermic needle—John took the Shomarian disintegrator out of her hand and shoved it in his belt.

"Has anything new happened?" he asked.

"Two Kilvarl were seen about an hour ago in the tunnels," Paul said. He looked at Barbara. "Did she really kill Shomarian children, Johnny?"

"I saw twenty-one little dead children. All of them had been killed with

a Shomarian disintegrator... and a Kilvarl paw could never hold a Shomarian disintegrator."

Paul sighed. "I'm afraid we can't deny that she did it. But the Kilvarl changed her—she's not Barbara, any more."

Lora's name had not been mentioned and John knew that there had been no improvement.

"I want to see her, Paul," he said.

Paul went with him, down the corridor to the silent little room.

She was lying so white and still that at first he had the terrible fear that she was already dead. Someone had set a vase of wild flowers on the table beside her and they were filling the room with a fragrance of which she would never be aware. He went to her and looked down at her.

"How long?" he asked.

"Very soon."

"Isn't there anything at all that you can do, Paul?"

"We have tried everything. There is nothing left to try."

The black noses of Fenrir and Sigyn reached out to sniff Lora's cheek and Sigyn looked up at him with a forlorn whimper.

"Yes—we're going to lose her, girl," he said to Sigyn, "If only we knew—"

"Johnny—"

Red Anders was standing in the doorway; heavily armed, his unshaven face grim and no longer that of a nineteen-year-old boy.

"Norman just came in," Red said. "He's got one of the Kilvarl."

Norman was in the control room, blood on his torn shirt and blond beard, his eyes bright and restless with the desire for more violence.

"The Kilvarl shot back," Norman said. "It wasn't too accurate. It was at the end of a tunnel—I think there might be a secret opening there and it

didn't have time to get through without my seeing the opening."

Dale, who had been examining an odd-looking weapon, said, "This is the Kilvarl blaster."

The functioning part of it was that of a small, machine-perfect blaster. The butt was large and clumsy, made to fit a Kilvarl paw. It was roughly shaped out of plastic and fastened on with rivets. There were scars in the plastic around each rivet head, to show where a Kilvarl paw had tried to be a hand and use a hammer.

"A Rell blaster," he said to Dale. "And this crude job of improvising a different butt on it was done by the Kilvarl to fit their paws and claws. Is this the best they have in the way of weapons?"

"That's what I was wondering," Dale said.

"A museum piece from the Shomarian-Kilvarl war," Norman said. "They sent an expendable Kilvarl out with it to make us think that the poor Kilvarl have no weapons but a few makeshift things like this, no ship, and we ought to stop trying to hunt them down."

Ed Barber, who had been in charge of the seismograph crew, came into the room with a sketch in his hand. His reading glasses—unusual for a Ragnarokan—were shoved up on his forehead and he had the look of a man who had not rested for a long time.

"Here's a drawing of the interior of that mountain, the best we could figure it," Barber said. "There's a big cavity in there, all right, and what seems to be a network of tunnels."

"How big is this cavity?" John asked.

"Big enough to hold a small cruiser, we think."

"I don't suppose you could make even the roughest kind of a guess as to the number of Kilvarl that might be in there?"

"We make a guess of around six thousand Kilvarl, assuming that a good many would be in the ship all the time. We can't—"

Quick footsteps interrupted him. Bob West, Paul's assistant, came into

the room.

"Barbara has gone wild," he said. "When she became conscious and saw that someone had taken that Shomarian disintegrator away from her it took both of us to get her into an improvised strait-jacket. She has to be conscious for us to try to help her, so there was no choice but to tie her up like a mad animal."

"Go ahead and look that map over," John said to the others. "I'll be back in just a minute."

Barbara was tied in a chair with her hands crossed behind her back. She was struggling to tear free, her face contorted and unrecognizable, her eyes glaring. He stopped in the doorway and her hate-filled glare centered on him.

"*Shomarian lover!*" The words were a vicious hiss. "I'm going to kill you! And my sister, who lied about the Kilvarl— I'm going to cut her heart out!"

She tore at her bonds with such insane fury that he knew *her* heart could not long stand the strain.

"Stare at me, Shomarian lover! I'm going to see the face of every Shomarian lover here dissolve in a blaster beam—"

Paul, who had walked up silently behind her, thrust a hypodermic needle in her shoulder. She made one last convulsive jerk and went limp in the chair, sagging against the bonds which were blood-stained from her efforts to tear herself free of them.

"We'll try the *Arakni* shot next," Paul said. "We can't keep giving her knock-out jolts like the one I just used. I ordered a lifeboat to have Lora taken down to camp—I'll have Barbara taken, too."

"Johnny"—Red spoke from just behind him—"let me take them down in the *Prowler*. It's already here—and besides, somebody ought to have it out on guard until you're ready for it."

"All right," he agreed. "Just so you keep it near the city." When he returned to the control room, the others were listening to the voice of Garron in the communicator:

—We waited to make sure. Now there is no question about it—a Kilvarl third-level fleet is on its way and will be here shortly after sunrise. Here are the coordinates..."

They looked at the screen of the Ghost ship detector and saw a tiny white spot in the area where Garron had said it would be.

"By this time tomorrow—unless we can have sufficient Kilvarl for study—the Shomarian First Fleet will no longer exist." Garron's tone was flat and fatalistic. "Neither will the Ragnarokan ships nor the Ragnarokan race. Then Shomar will go."

The voice of Novla came, tired and worried: "Lord Sar-Fane has declared a state of extreme emergency on Shomar. Sabotage, arson, and assassinations are increasing hourly. A conservative estimate of the death toll is one million, and this is only the beginning."

Novla paused, then said with something like the last faint, desperate hope, "Have you seen any Kilvarl? Commander Hesnar's battleship has a fully staffed laboratory—if we could have Kilvarl soon enough tonight we might devise something such as a telepathic jammer to make it impossible for the Kilvarl in the fleet to communicate with one another."

"I think we've found where they live," he said, and told Novla of the cavern.

Novla was elated and Garron's fatalistic tone changed to one of active decision.

"Now that we know where the Kilvarl are," Garron said, "we must attack at once. You will be assisted by a large ground force of Shomarian troops which will be gathered from the various ships at once. We can attack within an hour. I assume your own forces will be ready by then?"

"I'll call you when they are," he said.

He turned away from the communicator, then turned back to switch it off so that nothing said in the control room would be heard by the Shomarians.

"How come you did that?" Norman asked. "Don't you trust the Shomarians?"

"I don't trust either side, so far. The Shomarrians are going to be ready to attack the Kilvarl within an hour and the time has now come when we have to help one side or the other. If we make the mistake of helping the enemy, we're sunk for good. So we had better look well before we leap."

"I've been thinking the same thing," Dale said. "The war with the Gerns was better—we knew exactly who the enemy was. Here, everything that has happened *could* have been done by either side."

"I'm not so knot-headed that I'm unwilling to look at any pro-Kilvarl evidence," Norman said. "But I haven't seen any, so far."

"Just this blaster here," John said. "Maybe it's a trick, like you figure—but how can we know for sure? This crude job of improvising a butt on it reminds me of the way we had to work and improvise for two hundred years to finally get our fighting chance for freedom. We had hands to work with and no metals. The Kilvarl would have had metals and no hands. Which would be the worse?"

"Do you think they might be trying to build a ship back in that cavern?" Dale asked.

"I don't think one way or the other, yet. But we had better consider that possibility. Suppose that for two hundred years the Kilvarl have been working to build some kind of a crude little second-level ship and that they were proud enough to think they could take a Shomarian battleship with it—as we were vain enough to think we could capture a Gern cruiser with crossbows. Suppose that's why we have seen no Kilvarl, because they're working day and night, kittens and all, trying to finish their ship before we attack—and knowing, now, that they can never do it and their work and hopes of two hundred years will soon be destroyed."

"Physical form—" Dale said. "Maybe we were more ready to trust the Shomarrians because they're like us physically and the Kilvarl are alien animals in form."

"I can tell you this," Norman said, "I don't care whether the enemy walks on two feet, four, or a dozen. I would be just as happy to kill Shomarrians as Kilvarl. But if the Kilvarl aren't the enemy, why haven't they tried harder to prove it?"

"What if we had faced the same situation on Ragnarok?" he asked.

"Suppose a race had come from six hundred lightyears away, to believe Gern lies and help the Gerns kill and capture us, refusing to believe anything we told them. Would we have kept begging them to please believe us and not try to kill us?"

"No—hell, no!"

"There are some things that make it look bad for the Kilvarl," John continued. "The Shomarrians that Barbara killed, that ship that blew up, and Lora's insistence that the Kilvarl are the ones who did that to her. On the other hand, the Kilvarl have been extremely quiet to be the enemy. For one thing, why haven't they used the Ghost ship? Ragnarokans could take that ship and destroy the Shomarian fleet with it. Why haven't the Kilvarl done so?"

"A good question," Norman agreed. "How do we find the answer?"

"The Kilvarl would never come to us, now," he answered. "So I'm going back in the tunnel, alone and unarmed, and ask to see them again. If I don't come back—or if I come back not acting normal—you'll know the Kilvarl are the enemy, after all."

"When are you going?" Dale asked.

"Right now. If the Kilvarl aren't the enemy, maybe I can act soon enough for them to save Lora."

He was halfway to the door when the communicator signaled. Dale switched the speaker-microphone on again and Novla spoke:

"Have the girl ready to transfer to this cruiser as soon as possible. I have some very good news for you."

"Do you mean you can help her?" John asked.

"The break-through I mentioned exceeded all expectations. We can do more than help her—we can have her returned to perfect health in only four hours!"

"Are you sure? There would be no guesswork?"

"Sir. Shomarian specialists do not guess." Novla said, a little stiffly.

"And this is no attempt to gain a hostage, as the Kilvarl offer to cure her was. If you doubt us in the slightest, send an armed guard along with her."

"That sounds honest enough," Norman said, then repeated thoughtfully, "It *sounds* honest enough."

"Your Dr. Chiara has kept the physicians on this cruiser informed of the girl's condition," Novla said. "She now has less than half an hour to live. You must act at once, sir."

"Can't you tell our doctor what to do for her?" he asked.

"The treatment must be performed with the aid of special equipment which your doctor does not have. However, he is welcome to come with her and watch, if he wishes to."

"Did you just now receive word of the discovery of this cure?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. I called you immediately, while the specialists on Shomar were still describing the method of treatment to our physicians here. I knew you would be glad to hear the good news at once."

"I was," he said. "I'm very glad you were so prompt about it. I'm going right down to camp, where the girl is."

He looked up at the Ghost ship detector and thought, *Yes, Novla, I'm very glad you were so prompt—maybe I'm beginning to wake up before we completely cut our throats.*

He hurried toward the door, making a small, inconspicuous sign to Dale as he went by.

Dale followed him out into the corridor and asked, "What's up?"

"Several times in the past, when we spoke doubtfully of the Shomarians there in the control room, we would soon get a call from Novla or Garron with the word of some new development that would cause us to lose our suspicions. This time, right in the nick of time, Novla came up with a cure for Lora so that I won't have to take her to the Kilvarl."

"So get Norman out of there and tell him that I think that Ghost ship detector may be rigged with microphones and viewscreens and that the

Shomarrians know everything we've said and done since it was installed."

The lifeboat Paul had ordered was waiting. He got in, Fenrir and Sigyn with him, and used Tip to learn where Paul had taken Lora. A minute later he landed on the hill, where Lora lay on a pallet by the bayonet tree. Paul was with her.

Fenrir and Sigyn ran to Lora, to sniff her cheek again and then look with question from Paul to John, as though wondering why they did not try to help her.

"When you're at the end of your rope," Paul said, "you'll try almost anything. I had her brought up here because this country looks something like Ragnarok did in the spring and I hoped it might subconsciously revive old memories and hold off the end a little longer..."

He let the words trail away. It was far too late for her to see or know or care that the last rays of sunset had turned the Iron Mountains into ruby and shards of shattered rainbow, the eastern plain into a sea of gold, the Black Mountains into spires and ramparts of red and violet flame, and that the gentle wind blowing through the bayonet tree—so much like the lance trees of Ragnarok—was fresh and sweet with the scents of a summer evening.

"The Shomarrians claim they can cure her," he said to Paul.

"They can?" Paul's face brightened, then changed to question. "They 'claim' they can?"

He told Paul of his suspicions, and said, "Maybe they sincerely want to save her because they're our friends—and maybe they just want to save her so they can have her as a hostage."

"And I'm not supposed to be able to do anything for her down here?"

"They said she could be treated only on the cruiser."

"That could be true—special facilities and all that," Paul said. "But you know the Shomarrians better than I do."

"Which is not at all. I'm going to see the Kilvarl as soon as possible. Then we'll know which is the enemy... or did Novla tell the truth about the

time?"

Paul looked down at Lora then back at John. "He told the truth, Johnny. She has even less time than he thought."

There was a silence but for the whisper of the wind through the bayonet tree, then John said, "You might as well go on back and do what you can for Barbara. If there's no time to learn which is the enemy, I'll have to decide for myself, now, which I want to trust with her and then take her to them."

Ho knelt down beside Lora when Paul was gone and picked up her hand. It was cold and he could feel no pulse. Sigyn whimpered and he realized that the gold of sunset was fading from the mountains and the plain was darkening with the coming of night.

Time was passing swiftly by—he could delay no longer.

He picked Lora up in his arms and looked from the lifeboat to the broken stone of the nearest runnel entrance. One way led to the enemy—how could he know which?

Sigyn whined, a pleading sound that said: *We must hurry or it will be too late*. Fenrir was shifting restlessly, his yellow eyes slanted and a muted growl in his throat. He wanted to kill the ones who had caused Lora to now be dying...

He remembered something: Fenrir and Sigyn had twice sniffed Lora's cheek. Was it because they smelled the same hypnosis drug on her that had been used on Barbara? If they knew who had changed Barbara, they might also know that the same ones had changed Lora.

Although prowlers could not make the sounds necessary for human speech, their intelligence was such that they could understand simple sentences. And like Terran's dogs, but to a much higher degree, they developed a semitelepathic rapport with their masters.

He formed the image of Novla in his mind and said to them, "This Shomarian, and others, will make Lora well. We will take her to them now."

Fenrir flashed around in front of him as he took the first step toward

the lifeboat, to rear up taller than a man on his hind legs and shove back against John's shoulders with his front paws. Sigyn was tugging at Lora's skirt, trying to keep him from taking her to the lifeboat and making urgent sounds of protest; sounds which carried the frantic helplessness of a creature which must warn of a danger and has no voice with which to speak.

"All right," he said. "Suppose we take her to the others"— he made a mental image of a Kilvarl—"like the one you and I saw, Fenrir, the first time we were ever here?"

He turned and started toward the tunnel entrance. They walked beside him, looking up with question and uncertainty, but not trying to stop him.

So the Shomarrians are the enemy? he thought, and to his surprise he was glad that it should be so. The independence and arrogance of the Kilvarl were characteristics he could understand; the Ragnarokans could feel at home among the Kilvarl where they could never have belonged among the smooth, civilized Shomarrians.

Then he thought again of the Shomarian ship that he, himself, had seen explode, of the bodies of the slain Shomarrians, of Barbara's raging hatred, and he said to Fenrir and Sigyn: "Or did the Kilvarl hypnotize you along with Barbara?" It was, of course, a question they could not answer.

Dan Destry was among the guards at the tunnel entrance and he said as he took Lora from John's arms, "We heard by mocker that you might decide to do this. Do you think you should, Johnny, the way there's no proof in favor of the Kilvarl?"

He answered Destry as he laid down his blaster and knife. "Fenrir and Sigyn tried to stop me when I was going to take her to the Shomarrians."

"They did?" Destry looked pleased. "That means we'll be seeing her alive and well again—never did know a prowler to make a mistake."

"We'll soon know." He transferred Tip to Destry's shoulder. "Keep him for me—I don't want the Kilvarl to think I'm going to send out information."

He took Lora in his arms again, ordered Fenrir and Sigyn to wait there for him, and went back into the tunnels.

He came to the tunnel that led toward Iron Mountain and turned up it. He walked on and on and it seemed to him the tunnel was much longer than he remembered it being. Not once did Lora move or show any sign of life and he walked faster, the fear growing that it would be too late when he reached the Kilvarl.

He came, at last, to the end of the tunnel. He shifted his hand, to try to find some sign of a heart beat.

There was none and he thought with a cold and terrible fear: *She's already dead.*

He made his thought to the Kilvarl quick and sharp and clear:

I ask you to save her if you can.

The Kilvarl answer was a mocking question:

"So you have come to the Kilvarl for help, after all?"

"Yes," he said, and waited for the Kilvarl reply.

The reply came as a slight stir from Lora in his arms and the whisper of a drawn breath. He looked and saw the faintest touch of color return to her cheeks.

The Kilvarl are already working to save her: he thought I was right—the Kilvarl are our friends!

The thought of the Kilvarl came in answer:

If we are to let you watch us torture her to death, we must first restore her to consciousness and awareness of pain."

But he could not believe that the statement was more than an example of what the Kilvarl regarded as humor...

The Kilvarl spoke again. *"Go back the way you came."*

He had gone only a little way when he came to an intersecting tunnel, one that had not been there before, and saw the Kilvarl waiting there. It was the Kilvarl he had shot, an ugly furrow ripped across its chest by the blaster beam.

"Go down this tunnel," the Kilvarl said.

He did so, the Kilvarl padding silently beside him.

"If the Shomarians are the ones who raided Ragnarok," he said, "we're soon going to be in battle with them. So I also came to talk about a Ragnarokan-Kilvarl alliance."

"Your worth as an ally remains to be seen. Your trust in the Shomarians has gotten you in a position that you are not yet aware of."

"Such as what?" he asked.

"For one thing, you will not use your ships against the Shomarians. This is not a conjecture—it is the statement of a fact."

"I cannot believe that anything could ever prevent us from using our own ships."

"Then you will learn something tonight. A test of your worth as our allies will follow; a test which Sar-Fane, himself, will give you."

"How will we react?" he asked.

"We do not know. We are telepaths, not seers. Therefore, you will learn little of the Kilvarl while you are in here."

"But you will save Lora?" he asked.

"That is our present intention."

They came to an area where many tunnels and compartments opened into the tunnel they went down. All the tunnels were dark, the only light that of the searchlight on his helmet.

The Kilvarl said when they entered that area, *"Look straight ahead. Do not try to see what we may have in these other passageways."*

He looked straight ahead.

They came finally to what seemed to be the beginning of a very large opening. The nearer part of it was very dimly illuminated.

"Turn off your light," the Kilvarl said.

He did so, but he had already seen what seemed to be the skeleton of a small ship in the darkness beyond.

"Perhaps," the Kilvarl said laconically. *"Carry her to the table to your left."*

There was a small alcove a short distance to the left, a low, wide padded couch, and a Kilvarl so old that he—or she— was silver-gold in color.

He laid Lora on the couch. The gray old Kilvarl sniffed her cheek as the prowlers had done then looked up at John and said:

"Shomarian 'menusi? drug—you humans have blind noses or you could smell it for yourselves."

"You are a doctor?" he asked.

The old Kilvarl swung around to look impatiently down a nearby tunnel and did not answer. The Kilvarl he had shot said:

"Grandmother Shela is not a doctor by human standards, but she can cure the girl."

There was a flash of yellow down the tunnel and a kitten came running with a small metal bowl in its mouth. Its running ended with a quick, graceful leap to the top of the table and he saw that the bowl was almost filled with a green liquid of some kind.

The old Kilvarl, Shela, said to him:

"Lift her to a sitting position."

"This is the medicine that will neutralize the *menusi* drug?" he asked.

The faded green eyes of Shela narrowed and her lips pulled back in a toothless half snarl.

"Do not ask stupidly unnecessary questions—lift her up and give her the medicine."

He put his arm behind Lora's back and lifted her up. He took the bowl

from the mouth of the kitten—who was watching him with bright-eyed curiosity—and held the bowl to Lora's lips.

To his surprise, she began drinking. Her eyes were closed and she was not conscious, yet she drank until the bowl was empty. It would be due to a telepathic command from Shela, of course...

He laid her back down, set the bowl down, and said to Shela:

"Take care of her for me, and make her well again."

Shela, her eyes on Lora, answered with one short word: "Go!"

Again he obeyed without protest, following the other Kilvarl. There was an air of competence and authority about old Shela which made him feel for the first time in days that he would have Lora back.

"Somehow, I didn't expect telepaths to need names for identification," he said to the Kilvarl.

"We also have a spoken language—a relic of the pre-telepathic days which we do not want to discard completely. My name is Darag—given for your information in case the Ragnarokans pass the test and become our allies."

"I'm sorry I tried to kill you," he said. "I was a suspicious fool."

"Yes," Darag said in disturbingly complete agreement *"You were very stupid."*

There was a movement in the half-darkness ahead, then another Kilvarl was suddenly standing before them.

He was the largest and most impressive Kilvarl John had yet seen. About him was an aura of pride and of arrogance so that John thought again of his first impression of the Kilvarl: *Like the lords of all the races.* He knew that the Kilvarl facing him would be the leader of all the Kilvarl.

"This is Volar." Darag said.

"You have seen little." The thought of Volar came quick and cold. *"You will see more only after you have proved you are our allies. Go back to your ship. The Shomarrians have only begun with you."*

Volar turned and was gone. The first meeting with the Kilvarl leader was over.

He looked over at Lora. Old Shela was sitting beside her, the green eyes intent on her. He had the impression that Shela was probing deep into Lora's subconscious, already beginning the work of removing the memories of horror.

"I'll go back and tell the others that we've made a mistake," he said to Darag.

"You have no conception, yet, as to how great that mistake was," Darag replied.

Fenrir and Sigyn were waiting for him just within the entrance; question in their eyes because he had returned without Lora. Dan Destry was waiting outside. His spotlight flashed bright on John's face.

"Well, you look normal enough," Destry said. "And you left Lora with them. Which makes it seem like we're about to change sides."

"I think so," he answered. "I'm going to have a talk with Novla and Garron next, and make them give some answers. Keep your camp communicator hooked in with the *Ragnarok's* control room so you'll know everything that happens there. Start getting all the women and children into the tunnels now, and have the men ready to go at any time it seems necessary."

He picked up his blaster and knife, set Tip on his shoulder, and went to the lifeboat. Fenrir and Sigyn trotted ahead of him, as though eager for the conflicts to come.

Dale was waiting for him inside the airlock. As Destry had done, he turned a bright light in John's eyes.

"You look the same as ever," Dale said. "Dan just sent word that you left Lora there. The Shomarrians have guessed that you did and they already have it planned how to save her. Hesnar, himself, came with Novla and Garron to show us what we should do."

"That's thoughtful of Hesnar. I doubt that we'll do it his way, though."

"You're certain, now, that the Shomarians are the enemy?" Dale asked.

"As certain as anybody could be at this stage. I'm going to be absolutely certain by the time I finish with the Shomarians, and so will everyone who is listening in."

"Red is down there with the *Prowler*, wanting to get started killing Kilvarl. I'll use a mocker to tell him to keep his communicator in circuit with ours and be ready to change his mind."

"When you come back, stand behind the Shomarians, Dale. I want to try an experiment."

He went down the corridor and said to Fenrir and Sigyn, just before the control room door was reached, "Stay by the door when I go in."

He went into the control room. Fenrir and Sigyn stopped just within the doorway, one on each side, to become like ebony statues but for the hatred in their yellow eyes as they watched the Shomarians.

Norman gave him a searching look of appraisal, then a faint smile that said, "So you were right!"

Garron had the hard, almost expressionless look characteristic of him, combined now with a dark thoughtfulness that John had not seen before. Novla looked tired and worried, sitting slumped in his chair.

Hesnar was resplendent in a dress uniform. He took a step forward, smiling in the manner of one not accustomed to it, and said:

"I feel that I should apologize for my actions in your little ship when you were on Shomar. You understand, of course, that the belligerence I displayed toward the girl—and also, I should say on my own behalf, the timidity I displayed toward you—were due to hypnosis by the Kilvarl on your ship."

"Think nothing of it, Commander," he said. "I'm sure your true character will soon become apparent to all of us."

Hesnar's smile vanished and the little mouth tightened with suspicion.

"The girl, sir,"—Novla was looking at him with both question and dread

on his face—"you left that dying girl with the Kilvarl, didn't you?"

"They were working with her when I left," he answered. "She was already getting better."

Novla sighed, exchanged glances with Hesnar and Garron, and said to John with pity in his tone:

"You fell into their trap—they will use the girl as a hostage. Why, sir, did you have to refuse our own offer to save her and turn her over to those animals?"

"Your blunder can be rectified," Hesnar said in a tone of crisp decision. "I have already told the others what we must do—the only thing we can do to save the girl. We will attack immediately, and with such smashing force that we will have Kilvarl hostages of our own to guarantee that they will not dare harm her."

Hesnar spoke into his wrist communicator, a brief order of some kind. John glanced at the viewscreen and saw a cruiser already dropping down toward the ground.

"The ground forces selected from our ships," Garron said in explanation. "Four thousand of our best fighting men."

Dale came back into the room and unobtrusively took up a position behind the Shomarrians. Novla cleared his throat and said, "You are most fortunate, sir, that Sector Commander Hesnar should be here to personally take charge of the situation. He is a most brilliant man, despite his appearance of youth, and he will certainly see to it that you have the girl back again, safe and unharmed, if you do exactly as he asks you to do."

Hesnar turned to John again and said in quick, curt command, "Order your men to assemble at once. We will attack within twenty minutes at the latest. Have them form in ranks before the cliff and—"

The communicator on Hesnar's wrist spoke in Shomarian. Hesnar listened, frowning, then said in angry question to John:

"There is a mass movement of your people toward the tunnel entrances. What is the meaning of this?"

"Safety precaution," he answered. "The women and children are going to be much safer in the tunnels."

"The Kilvarl will hypnotize them—order them all back into the city!"

There was a movement on the viewscreen and he saw that a battleship—the First Fleet's flagship, not Hesnar's—had moved up near the *Ragnarok*. It could with equal ease fire into the *Ragnarok* or into the Ragnarokans in the city...

"I said you must order your people back out of the tunnels!" Hesnar's face was turning dark with his increasing anger. "The Shomarian Society has gone to a great deal of effort and expense to help you Ragnarokans and I cannot tolerate interference—"

"Just a minute," John said. "I want to tell you that the Kilvarl claim you Shomarrians are deceitful."

"Sir!" Novla's tone said plainly that he regarded the statement as very stupid. "Of course the Kilvarl would tell you such lies as that! I have warned you many times—how could you be so naive as to place any credence in the lies of our mutual enemy?"

"You Shomarrians have never deceived us in any way?"

"Certainly not! Never, in any way whatsoever!"

"Then why," he asked, "do you have concealed microphones and viewscreens in those third-level detectors?"

There was a shocked silence, in which even the mouth of Garron dropped open in astonishment as they stared at him.

Novla was the first to recover.

"I—I'm afraid I don't understand, sir. Concealed microphones?"

"And viewscreens. Why are they there?"

"Sir—I cannot understand this sudden baseless suspicion of us! I thought we were allies! How can you—"

"Answer my question—why have you been spying on us?"

Novla sighed and hung his head for a moment, as though in shame. Then he looked up and said:

"We admit it, sir—we spied on you. But we had to, for your own welfare. We—"

"How did you know we had microphones and viewscreens here?" Hesnar demanded.

"That's beside the point, Hesnar. Go ahead, Novla," he said.

"We had to make sure that the Kilvarl weren't influencing you without your knowledge—a difficult task since we do not know your language. We could do this with a fair degree of efficiency only if you were unaware of the fact that we were keeping you under observation. This—ah—spying, even though it was even more for your protection than ours, was an act very repugnant to us and one which only the gravity of the impending Kilvarl offensive could ever have forced us to engage in. I trust you will understand, sir, and forgive us."

"We had a very valid reason for what we did," Hesnar said, his curt tone of command back again. "I gave you some orders. Obey them at once if you want us to save the girl for you."

John spoke in Ragnarokan, without looking away from Hesnar:

"A forthcoming prescription will be mixed with Terran salt. Shoot these three enemies in the back, Dale."

The alarm of men who knew death was at hand flashed instantly across the faces of all three Shomarrians. They whirled to face Dale; Garron's hand reaching swiftly for his blaster, Hesnar pawing frantically and fumbling the draw, Novla with his empty hands half lifted and a pleading "*No!*" of protest.

Dale, his blaster still in its holster, knocked Garron's weapon out of his hand as it came up. He did the same with Hesnar, when Hesnar had finally managed to draw his own blaster.

"Relax," John said to the Shomarrians. "You were in no danger—Dale knew the order was not to be carried out."

They turned back to face him; Novla with the look of a man both shaken and relieved, Garron with the grim look of a dangerous man who has just met his master, Hesnar with black-faced fury.

"That was a test," John said. "I wanted to make sure that you lied when you said you didn't know our language." Novla licked his lips, in his eyes the expression of a man whose mind was darting about like a rat in a cage, trying to find a means of escape.

"But, sir—you do not understand! We learned a few words of your parent language from the Gerns who landed on Shomar—enough that we knew you were ordering this man to kill us. That is all. You are the first Ragnarokans we ever met and we—"

"Shut up!" he said. "You learned our language from the ones taken by your Ghost ship. Now we have found the enemy!"

"And now," Norman said to the Shomarians, "you will get the action you wanted."

He stepped before them and even Garron shrank back a little from him.

"I, personally," Norman said, "with my bare hands, am going to kill all three of you. Remember how you had the Ragnarokan prisoners torn to pieces while they were still alive? You're going to know how it feels to die that way."

"Not now, Norman," John said, watching the way Novla was quaking like speechless jelly in his chair and the way Hesnar's black face had suddenly turned a sweat-filmed gray. "I want to do some questioning. Then we'll keep them around as hostages—we'll use Hesnar as they were going to use Lora."

The Ghost ship detector spoke, in the voice of Sar-Fane, cold with warning:

"You will keep no hostages."

He looked up at the Ghost ship detector. "So you're with us, too? On Hesnar's ship—or on Shomar?"

Sar-Fane ignored the question. *"I have a remote-control device before*

me. There are three buttons on it; a button for each of your ships."

"And so?"

"Each of those third-level detectors contains a small nuclear bomb. These three buttons control those three bombs. Your smallest ship will be destroyed in a moment to prove to you that these bombs exist. Look at it now, and learn that Shomarrians do not make idle threats..."

John looked up at the viewscreen, feeling suddenly very helpless, and thought, *Red will have heard his death sentence through the communicator pick-up—*

The screen flared with pale blue as the full fire power of the *Prowler* lashed out at the Shomarian battleship overhead, and the communicator said in the voice of Red, as though he was talking to himself:

"Elaine, this one is for you—"

Then the viewscreen blazed with the light of a nuclear explosion; a dazzling flash where the *Prowler* had been.

He was blinded by the flash and could see only the bright incandescent glow which followed. The *Ragnarok* trembled with the concussion of the blast and the voice of Sar-Fane asked in metallic tones:

"Do you believe now?"

The glow faded swiftly and the outline of the viewscreen became visible. At that time, ten seconds after the flash of the blast that had destroyed the *Prowler*, the audio pick-ups of the *Ragnarok* registered another sound.

It was the crashing thud of a heavy object striking the ground below.

He went to the control board, his eyes far from completely recovered, and turned on the *Ragnarok's* huge searchlights. The viewscreen lighted and he saw the Shomarian battleship; lying broken and crumpled in the rubble of the dead city.

The Shomarrians were staring in shocked silence, as though it was incredible that it could be a Shomarian battleship they saw.

"Do you realize what you have done?"

Sar-Fane spoke from the Ghost ship detector; belatedly, as though he, too, had been voiceless with shock.

"So you're still with us?" John answered. "I was hoping that you might have been on that battleship. I'm going to take your son into another room, now, and ask him some questions. If he's cooperative about it, he won't get hurt."

"There will be no torturing of Sector Commander Hesnar. Your cruiser will be destroyed if you do not permit him to return to his ship at once."

The communicator spoke in the voice of Cliff as John hesitated:

"Well call his bluff, Johnny. He would blow up the *Unicorn* to save Hesnar's life but not to save Hesnar from some questions. After all, cruisers like this one are valuable loot."

Sar-Fane said nothing and John took Hesnar by the arm. "Come on," he said.

Fenrir and Sigyn, snarling, went with them down the corridor and into the room where Barbara had been tied in the chair.

"Sit down in that chair," he said to Hesnar.

Hesnar sat down and the prowlers crowded up close to him, one on each side of him, their slanted yellow eyes watching him intently as though hoping he might give them an excuse to attack.

"I suppose you realize what they would do if I left you alone with them?"

Hesnar swallowed. "They would kill me instantly."

"Not instantly." He shook his head, smiling. "Prowlers are very loyal. After seeing you try to murder that unarmed girl, they would want you to die slowly, by tearing you apart in small pieces."

"Suppose"—Hesnar swallowed again—"suppose I answer your questions—how do I know you won't let them tear me up, anyway?"

"You have my word that I won't."

"But only your word—that is no guarantee—"

He opened the door behind him and said to the prowlers, "Hesnar doesn't want to take the word of a Ragnarokan. If he gets to screaming so much that it annoys you, tear out his tongue."

Fenrir and Sigyn, with sounds of blood-thirsty anticipation, reared up to shove their snarling faces close to Hesnar's.

Hesnar swallowed again. "So that is your threat—if I don't answer your questions, you will let these beasts tear me to death?"

John made no comment but went to one of the medical supplies cabinets. There was alcohol there, and a bottle of Terran whiskey. He filled a water glass with the whiskey and took it to Hesnar.

"You might feel more at ease if you drank this," he said, and handed it to Hesnar.

Hesnar took it suspiciously, smelled it, then drank in the manner of a man much in need of something to bolster his courage.

"This is hardly the equivalent of our aged Shomarian wine," he said, shuddering, "but—" He took another large drink. "I suppose you gave me this to make me more talkative?" he asked, assurance already returning to him. "There is really no reason why I should not answer your questions—you can do nothing about the situation you now face, anyway."

"At the first lie you tell, I'll turn you over to the prowlers," he said. "How many third-level ships do you have?"

"The one that is here now, and two more almost completed on Fendeen."

"Why did you spy on us during the war?"

Hesnar paused, as though to form an evasive answer. John said to Fenrir:

"He's going to lie. Start on him by ripping your claws down through his—"

"Wait!" Hesnar said quickly. "I'll tell you! It's because your race was going to bring about the defeat of the Gern Empire—and *we are the race which created the Gern Empire!*"

There was a silence as John considered the revelation. Hesnar's thin little mouth twisted in a smile as he watched him.

"So you find it hard to comprehend?" Hesnar asked. "After finally defeating the Gern Empire you find that your grand victory is quite meaningless, that this mighty Gern Empire was merely a puppet faction of the Shomarian Society which you have now elected to antagonize."

"When did all this start?" he asked.

"Five hundred Gern years ago. The Gerns were a race both aggressive and easily influenced by Shomarian sociologists posing as Gerns. Forces were set in motion that would within a few centuries produce the complete integration of all races in that sector, all controlled by Shomarian agents acting behind the scenes."

"If you wanted the Gerns to dominate their space sector, why didn't you give them a helping hand in the war?"

"The Gerns were no longer of value to us if they could not defeat an invading force composed of rabble—of sullen Terrans, of half-frightened ex-slaves from Athena, and of half-animal savages from Ragnarok."

"Why did you kidnap those women and children?"

"As specimens for study—and perhaps for breeding purposes."

"What was the object in driving us from Ragnarok?"

"If we decided you were a race more troublesome than valuable, we had only to reseed every twenty years with the blindness isotope and thereby force you to merge with the people of Earth and Athena and become like them."

"How did you lure Barbara out of my ship—by using her sister under drug-hypnosis control?"

"Yes."

"Did you know about the two prowlers in the ship?"

"No. They sneaked out afterward. We never did see them."

"What was this so-called new warship that blew up?"

"An obsolete freighter which we were going to scrap. It was sent out under robot control and the bomb in it detonated at the proper time from Garron's ship."

"The drug-hypnosis treatment given Barbara was a failure, wasn't it?"

"Shomarians never fail."

"But she ran amuck with you and actually killed Shomarians, didn't she?"

Hesnar hesitated, looked at the prowlers again, and said with hatred, "So you would like to trick me into agreeing and give you an excuse to let those beasts tear me to pieces? The answer, damn you, is *No!*"

"Barbara killed no one? Then who did?"

"How should I know about such minor details? Men from the Special Guard Corps, I suppose."

"You mean that your father deliberately ordered the murder of twenty-eight of his own people, including twenty-one helpless children?"

"They were all taken from among the least essential working classes and represented no particular loss. It would be beyond your limited social comprehension if I should explain that these people were honored in being selected as the ones to make such an important contribution to the furtherance of the Plan."

"What about all these Kilvarl directed attacks that Sar-Fane told me about?"

"There were no Kilvarl on Shomar."

"Sar-Fane claimed he couldn't see me that night because he was in another city inspecting the damage. Where was he, actually?"

"How should I know? Since it was night, I suppose he was in bed with his newest Honor Virgin."

"His newest *what!*"

"Honor Virgin—these are exceptionally attractive girls selected from the working classes to be bred by men of the upper classes to improve the lower class strain."

"I see," he said. "And I suppose the supreme honor for one of these girls would be to be up-bred by Sar-Fane himself?"

"Of course."

"This so-called 'Kilvarl third-level fleet'—is that an electronic gadget a fraction of a lightyear out in space?"

"Yes."

"Do these third-level detectors you put in our ships actually show your Ghost ship?"

"Do you think we're stupid?"

"What would you do with the electronic telepath machines if you could get enough Kilvarl to learn how to build them?"

"What do you think, barbarian?" The effect of the whiskey was increasing. "We would carry out the Plan within our own lifetimes. That is why we went to the effort and expense of holding the First Fleet here and our third-level ship, of creating certain stage effects here and on Shomar and of forcing ourselves to pretend that you and your bearded savages were our equals, and even saying 'sir' to you."

Hesnar drank the rest of the whiskey and tossed the glass aside. It shattered on the floor as Hesnar added, "And you and your pack can do nothing to stop us from getting what we want. You were potentially useful to us. Now that you do not care to serve us, you will learn what happens to those who oppose the will of the Shomarian Society."

"That sounds interesting," he said. "I have a few more questions, then we'll see what kind of tutors you Shomarians are."

When they returned to the control room, Sar-Fane was speaking:

"—and you now have exactly three minutes of time, as measured by your own chronometer, in which to bring Sector Commander Hesnar back into this room."

Dale walking toward the door, stopped and said, "I had just started after you, Johnny. Sar-Fane was going to blow up the *Unicorn*."

"What did you learn from Junior?" Norman asked.

"That the Kilvarl told the truth," he said, "and the Gern Empire was actually Shomarian."

Sar-Fane spoke from the Ghost detector:

"No more time shall be wasted. If I find it necessary to destroy your cruiser, you can do nothing about it. If you kill Commander Hesnar, in return, there will then be no reason for me not to destroy your battleship. So you will cooperate with us now against the Kilvarl or lose your cruiser and all the Ragnarokans on it."

Cliff spoke from the communicator: I think it's another bluff. Call it."

"Shomarrians do not bluff. However, to save both time and needless destruction, you are offered an alternative— a generous reward for your cooperation—the world of Kilvar."

"I'm sure we are inclined to believe you," John said, "as we stand here beside these bombs that you put in our ships under the pretense of friendship."

"Our trust in you is much greater than your trust in us. Give us your solemn promise to cooperate with us and the bombs shall be removed from your ships at once, before the attack ever begins."

"Which is not so trusting of him," Norman remarked, "when he knows we would keep our word if he could ever persuade us to give it."

"There's the matter of ninety-nine of our people that you Shomarrians murdered," John said to Sar-Fane. "I don't think we're quite ready to forget that."

There was a silence, then Sar-Fane said:

"I will make you one more offer, and no more. For your cooperation in capturing as many Kilvarl as possible you will be rewarded with not only the world of Kilvar but also with this—

"Look!"

Dramatically, as Sar-Fane spoke, the Ghost ship appeared in the viewscreen.

It materialized beside the *Ragnarok*, no more than a ship's length away. It was an enormous thing, far larger than the *Ragnarok*, and it seemed to glow with some strange, pale light of its own.

"You are a restless race," Sar-Fane said. *"As I said, the world of Kilvar is yours—but perhaps you would prefer to explore another galaxy. The Greater Magellanic Cloud is less than a year away for Ragnarokans in that third-level ship. Give us your promise to capture as many Kilvarl as possible and you may board the third-level ship with armed men, at once, to watch every move the crew makes as well as to learn from the crew how to operate the ship.*

"The supplies of the First Fleet are at your disposal—you may take whatever you want. Cooperate with us tonight and by this time tomorrow the Race of Ragnarok can already be many lightyears away on its voyage to another galaxy."

Fane's closing words were delivered in a manner as dramatic as the appearance of the Ghost ship had been and John saw that Hesnar and Novla were both completely at ease now, waiting for his reaction with confident expectation.

Norman laughed, a hard, mirthless sound, and Dale said, "I wonder how it would be to shave without a mirror for the rest of your life because you were ashamed to look yourself in the face?"

"I do not understand those references." San-Fane's tone was abruptly brittle with threat *"You have been offered a reward without precedent and one to which you are not entitled. Make your choice now, without delay. Which do you want us to give you: freedom and another galaxy, or your extinction as a race?"*

"We could never go far enough," he said in reply, "to escape what would follow us all the way and never leave us for the rest of our lives—the memory of murdered women and children whose deaths we did not try to avenge, the ghosts of slaughtered Kilvarl, the screams of dying kittens. These would be things beyond your comprehension, so I'll just get to the point, which is this: go to hell."

There was a silence like the one which had followed the destruction of the Shomarian battleship, one in which the three Shomarrians stared in disbelief.

Norman looked at the Ghost ship detector and said:

"Sar-Fane, did anybody ever tell you what the Shomarrians are? You're a breed of parasites who have produced nothing during your existence. Everything you Shomarrians have— such as that Kilvarl third-level ship—was stolen from other, superior, races. So it's no use for you to try to buy the alliance of the Ragnarokans. We could never consider lowering ourselves to the degenerate, parasitic level of the Shomarrians."

John saw that Novla was goggling, unable to believe that anyone could have spoken so of the Shomarrians, and Hesnar's face was black again.

When Sar-Fane spoke, his voice carried the thick undertone of intense hatred:

"You savages will receive the lesson you have asked for. Commander Hesnar, Novla, and Garron will be in their own ships within five minutes or your cruiser will be destroyed."

John looked at Hesnar, thinking, *So long as we have him for hostage, Sar-Fane won't dare—*

As though in answer to his thought, Sar-Fane said:

"Perhaps you would like to use Commander Hesnar for concessions of some kind, such as permission to remove the bomb from your ship? These business discussions will be held after I destroy your cruiser. You now have four and one-half minutes."

"I suggest that you release us at once," Garron said. He exhibited no emotion, his tone that of a man stating a fact. "Lord Sar-Fane will do

exactly as he said."

Novla was out of his chair, ready to go; the kind, gentle look gone from his face like a mask and hard lines of cruelty showing through the fat.

"The Shomarrians have encountered many races of backward primitives," Novla said, his tone like acid. "But the Ragnarokans are unique—the first race of savages ever found which have the intelligence to realize, and the frankness to admit, that animals rather than humans are their peers."

"Thank you for placing us above the Shomarrians," he said. He looked at Garron. "Do you have any parting personal opinions?"

Garron answered without expression, "I am a Shomarrian soldier. You represent the enemy. No personal opinions are required."

"*You!*" Hesnar jabbed a finger at John in imperious command, his face twisted and snarling. "Get your fellow animals, those prowlers, away from that door so I can return to my ship!"

The allotted five minutes was swiftly diminishing. He said to Norman, knowing that Dale would stay with the ship, "Let's get on down to camp."

Dale looked at the Ghost ship detector. "Don't fire on their lifeboat," he said to Sar-Fane, "Not if you want Junior back all in one piece."

John and Norman were getting into the lifeboat, Fenrir and Sigyn with them, when the first thought of any kind came from the Kilvarl. He recognized it as coming from Volar:

"You have passed the test. You have proved yourselves to be a race of hare-brained idealists."

There was the usual mockery in the words, but now it was different. There were the undertones of respect, and a certain comradeship, that had never been in the thoughts of a Kilvarl before.

He saw by Norman's surprised expression that he had received the same thought.

"What are the Shomarrians going to do now?" he asked Volar.

"Sar-Fane is now exceedingly displeased with you Ragnarokans and a force of twenty thousand ground troops will start for Kilvar as soon as they have marched into the ships. Twenty thousand more will follow an hour later. Their orders are to kill and capture every Ragnarokan to the last child, regardless of the cost."

"We'll see if we can't make that order cost him his empire."

There was a sense of amusement from Volar.

"You sound like a Kilvarl."

The lifeboat left the Ragnarok and passed under the Ghost ship. It loomed over them like a pale mountain, more than ever dwarfing the battleship.

"You have to be out like this," Norman said, "to realize just how big that thing is. It could have taken us to another galaxy, all right, with room to spare."

"Maybe it will yet," he answered, then said to the distant Volar, "How much time will we have?"

"The attack against us will begin as soon as the forty thousand troops are in position—about twenty hours."

He used Tip to call Destry as the lifeboat dropped downward and received the assurance, "Everybody's back inside now. Had to leave a lot of our stuff, of course, but we took every crossbow and blaster."

He landed the lifeboat as close as possible to a tunnel entrance, knowing that a Shomarian ship would try to kill them the instant Hesnar was out of the *Ragnarok*. They hurried into the entrance and were no more than far enough back to be safe when the ground shook and there came the crashing roar of disintegrator beams.

"Opening shots of the war," Norman said. "Damn it— we could have used that lifeboat."

Only Destry was there to meet them and John asked, "Where are the others?"

"The Kilvarl opened up some tunnels back under the mountain that none of us knew about and these tunnels have enough ground over them to make them fairly safe," Destry said. "Barbara has been taken back to the Kilvarl and Paul is going to sew up the Kilvarl you shot. All of us are glad that we finally know who the enemy is—but what do we do about that enemy, now?"

"We'll see," he answered. "Tell Charley Craig to get everybody rounded up who has studied electronics, metallurgy, and so on. We'll look at that ship the Kilvarl started." Norman went with him as he hurried ahead of Destry and he spoke aloud to Volar so that Norman could hear what he said:

"There will be about four thousand Ragnarokans for combat, counting boys down to fourteen and quite a few women. How many Kilvarl for combat?"

"One thousand, with the same type of selection. We are not a very large race."

"Total: five thousand," he said, "plus six hundred prowlers. Enemy force; forty-four thousand plus some Weasels and a full battle fleet."

"If only we could have the *Ragnarok* and *Unicorn*," Norman said. "Those bombs we gratefully let them put in our ships—of all the trusting idiots! No wonder the Kilvarl had a low opinion of our value as allies."

They were almost to the first lighted side runnel when a Kilvarl, silvery with age, came out of it and faced them.

Fenrir and Sigyn stopped short, dropping to half crouching positions, ready to spring, the fur lifted a little on their shoulders.

"For a certain reason," the Kilvarl said, *"they are reserving judgment on the Kilvarl. My name is Zorn. I will show you the ship."*

"Are the drive and drive controls ready in the ship?" he asked.

"Not yet," Zorn answered.

They walked on. Fenrir and Sigyn went in front, watching right and left and moving with the wary alertness of prowlers ready to fight at any

instant. They looked hopefully down each side runnel, then went on without further interest in it when they failed to see what they were looking for.

They passed a large room in which vats for the production of synthetic food could be seen and Zorn said, *'A tasteless necessity, so that we can both eat and remain in complete hiding'*

They passed a large runnel which opened into a room at the other end. Machines were in the room, turning out parts of some kind. Kilvarl sat before the machines, occasionally rearing up on their haunches to manipulate controls with their front paws.

A four-wheel cart, loaded high with unfinished parts, went by. A Kilvarl was pushing it, walking on his hind legs, his front paws on the back of the cart.

"Yes—it must be an odd sight to you," Zorn said, and John realized that both he and Norman had stopped to stare.

They walked on again and Zorn said, *"Nature didn't design the Kilvarl for manual labor—whether skilled or unskilled. The results are not exactly dignified -when a Kilvarl pushes a cart. And now, with all of us working on the ship, there are not enough carts."*

This was proved at the next runnel they passed.

They heard a metallic slithering sound and saw four kittens dragging a heavy metal plate by ropes in their mouths; their feet slipping on the floor as they tried to pull the plate still faster.

Hurrying and stumbling behind them came a very small kitten, carrying by one of the projections a plastic insulator almost as large as it was. Its neck was bowing from the weight and, as they watched, the insulator slipped out of the grip of the little teeth and dropped to the floor. The kitten slumped to the floor beside it, panting, its pink tongue out and its bright green eyes watching them.

It rested only a few seconds, however, then it picked up its burden again and hurried to try to catch up with the others.

"Reminds you of the story of the Rejects, doesn't it?" Norman said.

"Remember how, when they built the stockade, the very smallest children were trying to help by dragging in poles that weighed more than they did?"

Norman looked back at the kitten again.

"Determined little fellow, isn't he? He's ready to drop in his tracks and won't admit it."

They walked on a little way farther, and Norman said:

"I wish I hadn't killed that Kilvarl, Johnny. Damn it—I *like* this race."

They came to the cavern. It was lighted this time, and the ship was in plain view.

It was what John had suspected it to be: the skeleton of a ship no larger than a twenty-man scout ship.

Kilvarl were all over the ship, especially around the second-level-shift section. Adult Kilvarl and kittens were everywhere in the cavern, taking materials to the ship and doing other work.

Fenrir and Sigyn took in the scene with quick, sweeping glances, their heads lifted as though hoping to find scent of something. Then Sigyn saw the couches to the left and spoke to Fenrir with a sound that was like an excited squeak...

Lora was there, Shela still beside her. On the couch which had been placed beside Lora was Barbara. Both girls seemed to be sleeping.

Fenrir and Sigyn were two black flashes across the floor as they went to the girls, snarling at a Kilvarl in passing.

Shela turned to face them, a snarl on her own face and a paw half lifted to strike. The prowlers ignored her and reared up over Barbara, to look down into her face and sniff her cheek. A moment later they were doing the same with Lora.

Then they relaxed, all the tenseness and challenge suddenly gone. They turned to look at old Shela with no slightest sign of enmity. Shela, in turn, lost her own defiance. The snarl left her face, the uplifted paw dropped

back to the floor, and she and the prowlers looked at each other for a little while as though each was trying to say something to the other.

The prowlers came trotting back, satisfied assurance on Fenrir's face and a happy grin on Sigyn's. This time, when they looked at Zorn, there was a matter-of-fact acceptance of him.

"The Kilvarl have passed the test," Zorn said.

John looked at the still figure of Lora, wanting to see her again. Shela looked back at him and her quick, curt thought came:

"Now she sleeps. Get on with your work."

They went on to the ship, averting their eyes from the electric welders, used by Kilvarl who looked like monsters in their masks.

The second-level-shift seemed to be fairly well on the way to completion but the drive was days from being ready.

"It doesn't look very promising," he said to Zorn. "I don't see how that drive could be finished in less than four days."

"Unfortunately," Zorn said, *"the drive situation isn't even that good. The additional metal we must have is out in the city, being watched over by the Shomarian First Fleet."*

He used Tip to call Charley Craig and said, "Charley, hurry on back here with every man who can do anything from electronic assembly to hammering a rivet or pushing a cart. There's an impossible job waiting for you."

"What do you think of the Kilvarl fleet?" It was Volar, suddenly appearing from somewhere.

Norman looked with objective interest at Volar's massive shoulders and huge jaws and said, "To be honest, I'm more impressed by you than your fleet."

"I think we can finish your second-level-shift in time," John said to Volar. "Hands are a lot faster than paws. The drive—that will be a problem. What do you have in the way of weapons?"

"We have six medium-duty disintegrators. Enough to break down the disintegrator shield of a Shomarian cruiser— if we could get close enough to it, and be allowed to remain undisintegrated, ourselves, for long enough."

"Well think of some way to get ourselves a Shomarian ship," he said.

He thought of the single alternative, the centuries of running and hiding for the few survivors, and asked Volar, "Do the Shomarrians have animals for tracking?"

"They have gillars," Volar answered. "The Shomarian police use them often—things that resemble Terran wolverines. The Shomarian troop ships will bring two hundred of them so that no more than one Ragnarokan woman or child out of ten will have any hope of escaping capture."

Charley Craig appeared a few minutes later, a giant of a man, his face bristling with a red beard, impatience in his quick movements. Ten men were with him.

"So that's the ship?" Charley said. "Hell, it's not even a full skeleton. No drive—but let's take a look..."

Charley and his men, each accompanied by a Kilvarl to make explanations and answer questions, gave the ship a quick but thorough examination.

"Twenty hours to finish the second-level-shift," Charley said when the inspection was completed. "If we work like maniacs and are lucky besides. But what are we going to use for a drive?"

"Well improvise something," John answered. "That shift is the big job—without it we can't even get the ship out of this cave."

Charley turned to Zorn. "Let's see your workshops, so I can get my boys started. Where in hell"—he was already on his way as he talked—"are they, anyway? Look at those kittens pulling that stuff in with ropes! Jack, send out an order for a tote-crew to come on the run—"

"I'm going to take a look at those Kilvarl disintegrators," Norman said, and left in company with a Kilvarl. John turned to Volar. "I suppose the

transition-lag field in your ship here is the same as in ours—about twenty seconds before the field collapses completely and all the air escapes?"

"Yes."

"Do you Kilvarl have any space suits?"

"No."

"Neither do we, and the Shomarrians would certainly never let the *Ragnarok* drop us any. So we'll have no more than twenty seconds in second-level to capture a ship and get inside it."

"As you Ragnarokans would say, a good trick if we can do it." There was the impression of grim amusement in Volar's thought "*But we shall try.*"

The first of Charley's men came, some walking silently in moccasins and some with the hard tramping of combat boots, the light gleaming with dull reflections on their blasters and knives. They looked with curiosity at the Kilvarl, who looked back with an appearance of detached interest.

Charley was meeting the men as they entered the cavern, giving them rapid-fire orders:

"—all welders to Walt Dorn at the ship—all electronics men to that Kilvarl over there—where's George Ord?—any of you who know hot steel, to the forge room, that way—you boys with more muscles than training, over there for some hard labor..."

The Kilvarl on the ship withdrew as the Ragnarokans arrived to take their places. A group of Kilvarl, most of them showing the silver of age, had sat down some distance away from the ship and were watching the Ragnarokans with what seemed no more than idle curiosity. They would be the top supervisory group, and their appearance of only slight interest would be very misleading. Each one of them would be in full telepathic contact with one of the Ragnarokan crew chiefs or specialists and each Kilvarl would see and hear everything his Ragnarokan counterpart saw or heard.

The first appearance of confused disorder rapidly gave way to

methodical efficiency as he watched. The off-duty hours of study and training during the war—Earthenans had never been able to understand the Ragnarokan urge to learn new things—were showing their worth.

Some minor delays were to be expected, such as the belt-and-string make-shift inner bands which the welders had to put in the big Kilvarl welding helmets before they could use them, but such problems were soon solved.

He saw that Volar was gone. He looked at the ship again, but there was nothing he could do to help there at the moment. The desire to see Lora, held suppressed since he entered the cavern, came stronger than ever. She had been barely brought back from death the last time he saw her... was she still improving?

Shela watched him approach, whatever she might be thinking masked behind the alien green stare.

He wondered why she had been so ready to fight the prowlers. Was it because she had thought they might try to make her leave the girls or interfere with her watch of them? Lora would be gone now, had it not been for Shela's care, and Barbara would within a few days have followed Lora. Did old Grandmother Shela now regard Lora and Barbara as her own children because she was giving them back the life that the Shomarrians had tried to take away from them?

No one could tell by outward physical appearance what kind of a heart an alien being might have. The prowlers, who would lay down their lives for their people, were at first regarded by the Rejects as hell's special demons.

He came to Lora's cot. Her face was like a pale flower against the dark couch but now she had changed. The lines of weariness and pain were gone and she lay like a very tired child who was in a deep and dreamless sleep.

He looked into Shela's unreadable green eyes and said, "You already have her in a natural sleep, haven't you, Grandmother?"

For an instant when he called her "Grandmother" there seemed to be a strange expression in her eyes—surprise, and a sudden softness.

"Yes," she answered.

He touched Lora's cheek and felt the faint warmth of it, rather than the coldness that had been there before.

"How long until she is well?" he asked.

"The drug will be gone from her within fourteen hours. But she is very weak—it will be many days before she is strong again."

He looked down at Barbara and said, "Damn!" Her lips were cut and swollen where she had bitten them, there was a gash on her cheek—Paul had taken three stitches in it— where she had struck her face against something while fighting those who were trying to help her, and her arms were chafed and raw from struggling against her bonds.

Aside from such relatively minor hurts, however, she seemed to be almost normal and was apparently in a natural sleep.

"She will be well within fourteen hours, as strong as ever," She had said.

He looked again at Lora and brushed the dark hair back from her forehead. She stirred restlessly and her hand moved, as though she was trying to reach for something.

"She senses your presence," Shela said. *"She is trying to awaken and find you. You must go now, and let her rest."*

He went back to the ship and saw that most of the grown Kilvarl had disappeared. He wondered how long it had been since any of them had had the chance to sleep. Many of the kittens had arranged themselves in rows along the walls, where they could watch the activity with wide, interested eyes. But half of them were already sound asleep while most of the heads of the other half were drooping. As he watched, two more sank to the floor and were asleep.

He had sent for the camp's communicator and he saw that it had been left in the clear reception area along the wall of the cavern.

He switched it into circuit with several different scanners on the *Ragnarok* and *Unicorn* to get views of both the city and the fleet The

Shomarian cruiser which had brought the four thousand ground troops was gone, but the troops were stationed some distance in front of the rainbow cliff, their medium-duty disintegrators already set up.

The Ghost ship was gone, presumably back into third-level where there would be no danger of any suicide attack by the *Ragnarok*.

Volar came silently up beside him and he said, "Volar, what do you have that we could improvise jets out of? How about liquid oxygen?"

"We have a method of producing oxygen gas at a pressure sufficient for our oxy-acetylene cutting torches," Volar replied, *"But we have no equipment to produce liquified gasses of any kind."*

"We could make some old-fashioned black powder. Black powder in big jets would give a fast thrust but we would have no time to rig up anything but a very crude drive control."

"It could be fairly crude and still put us near a Shomarian cruiser."

"A Shomarian cruiser... we keep wanting one but the hard fact is that even if we had one, we couldn't fight the Shomarian fleet with it. We would get a few ships, then they would get us."

"Very sound logic," Volar agreed, *"but can you name anything better?"*

"You ought to know—it was in my mind when I spoke to you," he said.

"Perhaps you are not aware of the fact that it is contrary to the Kilvarl code of ethics to look uninvited into the mind of a friend. You Ragnarokans are now supposed to be friends."

"I was thinking of the Ghost ship. With it we could dart in and out of third-level, picking off Shomarian battleships and cruisers until they would have no choice but to surrender."

"A Kilvarl ambition for some time—but how do we capture the Ghost? It has only to go into third-level and be safe from all the second-level ships in the universe."

"Can the Ghost look from third-level into normal-space with its

viewscreens?"

"No. Only through one dimension at a time. It has to be in second-level to look into normal-space."

"Can the Ghost get as clear a view from second to normal as it would get if it was in normal-space itself?"

"No."

"Then the Ghost would probably be in normal-space when the attack starts, so the higher officers on it could have a clear view of the show?"

"Yes, if the Ghost is still here by then."

"You mean that it might not be here?"

"Sar-Fane may send it on to the world where the fleet is needed."

"Tell me, anyway, how the Ghost is made, where the control room is, and all that."

"We have some sketches," Volar said.

"A half-grown kitten came running with the sketches a few minutes later. John studied them, asking questions as he did so.

"So this is Sar-Fane's private suite? What's this empty-looking compartment near it?"

"That compartment is used by the Shomarrians for the transportation of any large objects found on new worlds which might appeal to them as being worth taking home. The Ragnarokan prisoners were confined in that compartment."

"Before then, it was used to transport the gold-and-crystal towers which now ornament Sar-Fane's summer palace."

He thought of the way the hundred Ragnarokans would have been herded like woods goats into a compartment not much larger than half the skeleton ship. And then he knew suddenly what he wanted to do; what they would have to do if they could have any hope of defeating the Shomarian empire...

He decided not to mention it to Volar. It was so farfetched, so dependent upon so many as-yet-unknown factors, that he could see it, himself, only in vague and hopeful outline.

"If we shot toward one of those Shomarian cruisers with a high-speed explosives drive, they would disintegrate us before we ever got there," he said. "There's another kind of drive which we could rig up with precise controls. It would be much slower than the explosives drive but this would be compensated for by the fact that it would make our ship look so makeshift and harmless that the Shomarians would have to take time to stare, and then laugh, before it occurred to them that we might be dangerous after all.

"Which would be what?" Volar asked.

"A steam-jet drive."

Volar approved of the idea and Charley was consulted. There would be a central boiler, with pipes leading to the twenty improvised jets; jets which would be located all over the ship so that braking as well as thrust could be applied from any point. There would be a control panel of twenty buttons, each button controlling a solenoid-operated, fast-action steam valve.

"We'll get started on this at once," Charley said. "Just how we're going to do both this and the shift job with only one lathe—but we'll do it, some way..."

"There's one more thing," John said. "There's no reason to have to move that whole ship with those jets. Place the jets with the idea in mind that we'll cut this ship in two, just in front of the control panel, if we can possibly find the time. Tell George to be set up, in that case, to trim the second-level space-warp field so it will enclose the rear half of the ship only—we don't want to take the cut-off front half with us."

He had given a good reason for cutting the ship in two. The fact that it was not the real reason did not matter. There was no need to raise hopes among the others that might never come true...

"And now," Volar said to John. *"You might be interested to know that Sar-Fane has just ordered the Ghost ship back to Shomar."*

He saw his nebulous plan vanishing. "Why?"

"So that it can take him to Kilvarl in time for him to see the show when the Shomarrians attack us."

"I'm glad to hear that. The Shomarrians must not have any doubts about getting what they want."

"They felt that they could have captured far more Kilvarl by using you Ragnarokans, but they think they will still get all they need. And there are Ragnarokan insults to be rectified."

A young Kilvarl appeared with a sheet of synthetic paper in his mouth.

"A map" Volar said.

John took the map and saw that it was of both the city and the surrounding country, extending as far as the western foothills of the Black Mountains. It showed the locations of all tunnel entrances and exits.

He studied the map and said:

"It might be that Ragnarokan women and children would stand their best chances of surviving here in the foothills of the Black Mountains. But they had better go out as four groups, a group for each exit. As Terrans say, don't put all your eggs in one basket..."

"The Kilvarl will be divided among the Ragnarokans," Volar said. *"Kilvarl telepathic powers may be of considerable value to the Ragnarokans—and Ragnarokan hands and weapons may be of considerable value to the Kilvarl."* They decided upon the details, an unseen Kilvarl relaying their discussion to Dan Destry. When they were through, John asked Volar, "How about psychological influence? Suppose you Kilvarl tried influencing key Shomarrians while they were asleep by giving them dreams like you did me?"

"All of them here take a certain sleeping drug which so numbs their subconscious during sleep that this cannot be done."

"And Sar-Fane on Shomar?"

"The same thing."

"Well—that takes care of that," he said.

Volar left a few minutes later and John started toward the ship, to see what he might do to help with the work.

He realized for the first time that he was tired—very tired. How long ago had he last slept? Was it the night he had made a pallet before Lora's doorway... ?

"Come here."

It was a command from old Shela. He went to her, afraid that Lora might have taken a change for the worse.

"Nothing is wrong," Shela said. "You will be of no value whatever when the Shomarrians attack if you do not rest while you can. I have decided that you shall do this."

"Not now," he said. "There are too many things to do—"

"Do not argue. Sit down against the wall there."

It was almost as though his mother was speaking to him when he was a small child, ordering him to do something for his own good. And he *was* tired—so tired that the sounds of the ship building were fading away into a murmur, as the Ragnarok winds had murmured through the lance tree forests when the two suns brought spring and release from winter's imprisonment.

He realized vaguely that he was sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall. In the lassitude that swept over him, he seemed to merge with the boy who had run across the green hills until he was tired, and then had gone to sleep in i oft, green grass, the wind in the lance trees fading away... fading... fading...

A part of his subconscious sounded a frantic alarm and he fought back to conscious awareness as though the sleep had been a tangible enemy. He realized what Shela had done and the drowsiness vanished.

She hypnotized me!" he said, and started to rise.

Sit down!"

"No—not to sleep under hypnotism."

"Do you question my actions?"

Shela's eyes flashed green and her thought was suddenly changed, suddenly very cold and alien. It was as though she was ready to shove him out from her, exile him from any further concern on her part, and his answer would decide her.

In the brief near-silence in the corner, there came a soft sigh from Lora as she moved a little in her sleep. Lora, who would by now have been gone...

"Do you question me?"

He looked into the eyes that were still blazing like green fire.

"Make me sleep, Grandmother," he said.

"The time is near. You can rest no longer."

Shela's thought came into his dreamless sleep like the thrust of a knife. He was awake instantly, fully alert, and already getting to his feet.

He looked at his watch and saw that more than ten hours had gone by.

The attack was less than eight hours away.

Lora was now curled up in her sleep like a child. Barbara had turned over—perhaps half-awakened some time during the past ten hours—and now she lay with her arm protectively around Lora.

"Barbara will be awakened within a few hours," Shela said. *"She will be well, then."*

"And Lora?" he asked.

"She will be awakened in time for you to see her."

He went to the ship and met Charley there.

"We still intend to have that second-level-shift ready in time," Charley said, "and the steam drive, too."

John used Tip to call Dale and said, "It looks like we'll get our ship finished in time."

"The Kilvarl have been keeping all of us posted on the major news," Dale said. "They were vague about the chances our women and children will have if we lose the battle, though. I guess they saw no reason to cause us to worry—but what are those chances?"

He hesitated, then said, "Volar estimates that one out of ten might survive."

"No more than that—only one out of ten?"

There was a silence and John knew Dale would be thinking of his two little girls, who would be among the refugees, and his wife, the tall, blonde Leona, who could use a blaster as well as any man and would be among the women who stayed to fight.

Dale spoke again:

"Everyone on this ship has someone down there. Even the unmarried men have parents and brothers and sisters. What makes it so hard for us to take is the fact that we're so helpless up here. At the first move we should make to go to our families or help them, the bomb would be exploded. If we could only have the chance to fight..."

John said at the conclusion of the conversation, "In case we lose, we had better send a message to Earth while we still can. Send it in code, of course, and warn them about the Shomarrians."

"I'll do that. After all, they're still our distant relatives even if they did disown us."

He talked for awhile with Cliff, who asked a great many questions about the plans for escape of the women and children. Cliff made no mention of the other; the fact that he and the men on the *Unicorn* would be under much more strain than those on the *Ragnarok*. Battleships were worth more than cruisers and the *Unicorn* would be the first to go if the Shomarrians decided it was necessary to destroy one of the ships.

When he terminated the conversation with Cliff he saw that the Kilvarl, Darag, was standing near him. Paul had sewn the wound together and

then sprayed it with a strong flexible temporary-skin solution that would permit Darag to fight without tearing the wound open again.

Darag said, *"There are great contrasts among you Ragnarokans. Lake is a man who is really happy only when he is killing an enemy. Paul Chiara is happy only when trying to heal others."*

"Each one, in his place, is very valuable to us," he answered. "Is there anything new among the Shomarrians?"

"They think that we may have escape tunnels leading out from here. As soon as they have successfully attacked us here, they will use their ship's disintegrators to cut deep trenches in concentric circles around the city and this mountain. Troops will go by the thousands into each tunnel they find."

"Does Destry know of this?" he asked.

"He was told as soon as the Shomarrians made their decision. The refugees are now getting ready to leave immediately. There will be no time to spare."

The hours went by, seeming to go faster and faster as the time for the attack swept nearer. At four hours short of the estimated deadline, the second-level-shift work had narrowed down to the slow, tedious job of installing the electronic components in the assembly shells and connecting the thousands of leads. Only one man at a time could work at each shell, which gave John the crew he needed to begin cutting the ship in two.

It was a job that could have been done quickly by using the Kilvarl medium-duty disintegrators, the beams cut down to short-range, knife-edge focus, but the iron mountain around them could not prevent the escape of telltale hard radiations for the Shomarrian ships to pick up.

"And if the Shomarrians suspected we were building something," John said, "they might blast an opening into here without waiting for the troops to arrive, just to make sure it wasn't something they wouldn't approve of."

The Kilvarl had two oxy-acetylene cutting torches, of which Charley said, "They won't be near enough to get the job done in time, so we'll use all the arc welders we have, a jet of plain compressed air with each arc to blow the molten metal out of the cut. It won't be a very neat job, but we

don't care about that."

Metal plates were put up temporarily to protect the control panel. Other plates were propped and chained into place, around the circumference of the ship so that the molten metal produced by the men working above would not run down on the men working below.

Within an hour the ship was acquiring a ring around it of glowing red. The heat kept increasing and water hoses were used to cool the plates on which the red-hot slag was dripping and making intolerably hot roofs immediately over the heads of the men who worked beneath them. Steam rolled out in clouds and all available suction fans were brought in to carry it away.

By then the steam boiler had been placed in the center of the ship and all pipes and solenoid-operated valves were installed. The last of the jets were being installed. All six of the medium-duty disintegrators were mounted on the ship. They were only temporarily mounted—held in place with chains and clamps so they could be quickly detached and used for retreating defense if the Shomarians gave them no chance to finish the ship.

At one hour short of the estimated deadline, the first Shomarian troops arrived.

Their ships landed near the cliff and the Shomarian troops marched out by the thousands, in dead black uniforms. Nineteen thousand of the troops took up positions before the cliff. The other thousand marched on into the city and took up positions at strategic points.

Dan Destry came into the cavern, to shake his head when he looked at the viewscreen and say, "That's quite a mob."

"Shomar's finest," John said. "How are you doing at your end?"

"All the groups are made up. Most are already on their way back into the escape tunnels, loaded light for fast traveling—blasters, knives, crossbows, and that's about all."

"How are the children and the Kilvarl kittens reacting to one another?" he asked.

"Good, except when some of the smaller children wanted to pet some of the smaller Kilvarl kittens at first. It seems the kittens regard being petted as undignified—there were a few baby-size battles over this which the mothers soon stopped. The somewhat older boys and girls and the half-grown Kilvarl are all full of plans to combine the Ragnarokan blasters and crossbows with the Kilvarl ability to read Shomarian minds into a combination that will slaughter Shomarrians in all directions."

Destry sighed and added, "When you're young, you don't pay too much heed to the odds against you and—"

The thought of Shela came: "*Barbara is awake now.*"

They went to the corner where Barbara sat beside Lora. Her cut lips were still swollen, giving her a pouting expression—one that was belied by the anger smoldering in her eyes.

She spoke to them in greeting and said, "Shela told me what the Shomarrians did to me—that I even wanted to kill Lora. And she told me how Lora almost died from what they did to her. I want a blaster apiece for us."

"I came to get you," Destry said. "I need another good subgroup leader. Lora will go in your group, of course."

Barbara shook her head. "Lora will be too weak to run and hide like the others and she would die before she would go along and slow down the group and maybe cause it to get captured or killed."

"Neither of you will go?" Destry asked.

"You can find others better than I am for the job, Dan. I came six hundred lightyears to find Lora and until the end, whatever it may be, I'm not going to leave her."

She stood up. "I'm going to look at our ship for a minute," she said. "I could have helped on it if I hadn't been doped with Shomarian drugs. What are our chances with it?"

"More or less, you might say," he answered. "Nothing like the opportunity we had when we took that Gern cruiser."

"No hull—no shield," she said, staring at it. "No view-screen to see where you're going in second-level... My lord—that drive! Where are the space blasters stored?"

He went with Destry back to the tunnels where the refugees were preparing to leave. With the exception of the subgroup with which Barbara and Lora would have gone, all the subgroups containing the old or the very young were already on their way.

He met Leona, Dale Ord's tall wife. She was already on her way to the cavern, a steel helmet over her blonde hair, a long knife and two blasters belted around her waist.

"I just saw my little girls off," she said, making it sound casual. "Now I'm ready to meet the Shomarrians. Where do we make our stand?"

"You and the other women will be in the back line," he said.

"Is there anything new from Dale?" she asked, her blue eyes watching his. "I mean, maybe something that he wouldn't want to tell me?"

"Everything is still the same. He's safer than you are, Leona."

"No," she said. "I can fight—and they'll never give him the chance to."

The last group was forming in a connected series of large chambers. Prowlers were everywhere, pacing restlessly as they had done back in the days when the Ragnarokans were waiting for the coming of the Gern cruiser. The entire intermixture of prowlers, young Kilvarl, and armed boys and girls seemed to have a restless swirling effect as though they could hardly wait to meet the enemy.

He met Paul, who said, "Bob and I are the only doctors and how can we know which groups might need us the most?"

There was no answer that anyone could make.

"Actually," Paul said, "where we'll be needed the most for the next few hours will be out there in the cavern where the fighting will take place."

"No," he said, "If we lose, the Shomarrians will take care of our wounded in their own way. If we win, then you and Bob can come hurrying back."

"Yes—yes, I suppose you're right." Paul looked at the Ragnarokans and Kilvarl around them and said, "Nona refused to go with us. She's pregnant—but she said that wouldn't keep her from using a blaster."

He saw Nona, Cliff Schroeder's small, dark-haired wife, kissing their small son before she handed him to the woman who would be his foster-mother. The boy—he was hardly more than a baby—was not so young but what he sensed that he might never see his mother again. He reached out his arms toward her with a forlorn cry of, "*Mama!*" She turned away, very quickly, her lower lip quivering. She almost walked into John before she saw him.

"Hello, Johnny," she said. "I'm not going with Billy... it seemed to me I shouldn't. Am I doing the wrong thing?"

"I would much rather you went with him," he said. "You don't belong back where you're going now."

"He would have had a little sister or brother in only another month," she said. "If I should go along, like I am, I would be a drag to the entire subgroup. Billy's chances are better if I stay. Besides, Cliff wouldn't ever be with us again..."

Once more, the lower lip started to quiver. He patted her on the shoulder and gave her a little push toward the cavern.

Most of the Ragnarokan men had already told their families good-bye. A few had not yet had the chance and were doing so now. They were not demonstrative about it—such was not the Ragnarokan way—but there was the gleam of withheld tears in the eyes of the women and children and the faces of the men as they turned away were hard, and cut deep with lines of worry.

Paul said, "Almost none of the Kilvarl who will stay to fight have come to see their families before they go. The Kilvarl don't have to—they can be in each other's minds and closer together than any physical contact can be."

He wondered how it would be if Ragnarokans could ever learn to do that; how it would be if he and Lora could have that feeling of being as one. And then he thought: *But what is it like when you're in the mind of someone you love as that one dies?*

He went back to the cavern. Volar was there with the latest report:

"Sar-Fane and the Ghost ship will soon be here."

"It's quite a bit behind schedule, isn't it?" he asked.

"Some extra time was required for Sar-Fane to get exactly the kind of Honor Virgins he wanted and exactly the right kind of rare wines."

"Is Sar-Fane already drinking?"

"He is enveloped in a rosy glow."

"Is there any hope that he may get drunk by attack time?"

"None. He will only maintain the glow—the stakes are far too high for him to risk any befuddled decisions."

"If something should happen to Sar-Fane—who would take his place?"

"If both Sar-Fane and his son, Hesnar-Fane, should be killed or captured, the five men on Shomar who are the hierarchy's topmost cabinet would appoint one of themselves to replace Sar-Fane."

"If we could take the Ghost ship and the Shomarian fleet here, then send the entire force to Shomar and capture the cabinet members, what would the Shomarian Society do to save itself?"

"There would be no large force of ships sent out by other worlds. The Shomarians ruling those other worlds would be afraid we might invade them next—they would not be eager to leave themselves completely undefended by sending their ships to rescue men already in the hands of the enemy."

"How could fanatics let their godhead and his holy cabinet be captured and do nothing about it?"

"It is now a religion in name only—It has long been an oligarchy in which the only fanaticism is the conviction of the upper rank Shomarians that they are divinely destined to rule over all other races. If the world of Shomar is captured, the Shomarian leaders on other worlds will look to their own personal safety and let the Divine Plan proceed with divine assistance only."

"We would have to go to these worlds, one by one, and relieve them of their Shomarian overlords. The Shomarians would use every kind of propaganda and deceit they could think of to prevent that."

"One of the advantages of being telepathic is that you know who is doing what and can therefore make plans to offset the enemy plans. Destroying the Shomarian rule on these other worlds would require time, but the procedure would be both certain of success and one involving very few casualties."

"What would we do with these Shomarians?" he asked. "Sar-Fane, his cabinet, and all the ones who are responsible for such things as the murder of the prisoners on the Ghost ship and the killing and capturing that they have planned for all of us in here?"

"The Shomarians intend slavery, torture, slow executions, for the Ragnarokans; vivisection and eventual genocide for the Kilvarl."

"Do you think we ought to give the Shomarians their own medicine?" he asked curiously.

"The Kilvarl would regard such punishments as too crude, too unsubtle, and too mercifully brief."

"Then what would you do with Sar-Fane, Hesnar, and the like?"

"Do you remember the paradise island on Shomar's breadbasket world?"

"The one where you would expect to see simple natives dancing along the shore?—Yes, I remember it."

"I suggest we provide it with the simple natives which it now lacks. In that gentle climate, Sar-Fane and his companions would need no clothes. Since there are no enemies of any kind there—aside from a few billion insects—they would need no knives or other weapons. And since the purpose of their exile would be to permit them to devote the rest of their lives to philosophical reflections, we would make sure that no Honor Virgins or women of any kind ever went there to disturb their thoughtful ponderings."

He considered the plan and said, "I think I can imagine what the

emotions would be of the Temporal Lord of the Sons of Shomar as he squatted naked under a tree, slapping at gnats and recalling those glorious days when he had the power to destroy entire races with less effort."

"The same emotions would apply to all of them. It would be the nature of each to blame the others for their plight and want bloody vengeance. There would be no victims ever available but one another. So they could spend the rest of their lives mourning their vanished days of glory, plotting and counterplotting against one another, arranging murders, and slapping at gnats."

"But what about the ordinary Shomarians?" he asked. "It might turn out that a lot of them would be willing to swing over to our side. After all, there are those such as the ones that Sar-Fane had murdered as additional anti-Kilvarl propaganda, and there are those girls, the Honor Virgins, who are forced to give themselves regardless of their own wishes. There should be hundreds of millions who have no reason to want more of Sar-Fane's type of rule."

"You would suggest a screening process to distinguish between the good and bad Shomarians?"

"No Shomarian could lie to a Kilvarl and get away with it. Shomarians would make our best agents of information to send to the outer-worlds—they would know, from personal experience, what life was like under the hierarchy."

"It could be done," Volar said. "And now, I'm afraid we must abandon our ambitious daydreams and face unpleasant reality again. Sar-Fane is now here and the show will soon begin."

They went to the viewscreen and saw the Ghost in normal-space, no more than a mile out from the cavern. Two battleships were already in such positions that the Ghost was shielded from both the *Ragnarok* and the *Unicorn*.

He saw by his watch that the second force of Shomarians was a great deal less than half an hour out in space. Night was coming; the sun was down and the bright afterglow which preceded dusk was in the western sky.

The Shomarian flares blazed into life; six of them, high up and widely

spaced, very bright. They lighted the surface of Kilvar for a radius of fifty miles around the city. The Black Mountains, where most of the refugees would try to elude discovery, were made devoid of any shadows for concealment.

Small cruisers, heavily armed scout ships, and ship's tenders and lifeboats packed with Shomarian search parties, spread out from the fleet like a swarm of insects. Within a few minutes they had assumed circling guard positions which extended as far out from the city as the prairie beyond the Black Mountains. Some of the larger craft landed briefly to unload men and gillars at strategic points of observation. Heavy-duty disintegrators were immediately set up at these places and heavily armed men spread out from them to search the surrounding terrain, their gillars running ahead of them.

Miniature scout ships appeared by the dozens—containing perhaps six men each—and began a roving patrol close to the ground, through the tall trees of the forests, and up the canyons of the Black Mountains. All were armed, as well as equipped with powerful searchlights for probing back into any natural caves found.

He said to Volar, "The chances for escape look to me like one out of twenty rather than ten."

"The Shomarrians have added to their plans since my first estimate."

"Is that largest compartment on the Ghost still empty?"

"It is empty but for some Shomarian workmen and their tools and supplies."

It was the answer he had wanted to hear.

"Good!" he said. "With luck, we'll be in command of the entire Shomarian fleet half an hour from now."

Volar looked both surprised and skeptical. *"And just how do we do that?"*

"There is only one way we could ever capture the Ghost and now we can try it—by materializing our half-ship inside that empty compartment."

The plan was received with much enthusiasm by all despite the few chances for success and many chances for failure, and the attitudes of both Ragnarokans and Kilvarl changed. Before, they had been stubbornly preparing for a battle in which they would take as high a toll as they could of the enemy before they were killed. Now, they were going to have a fighting chance for complete victory.

Their lack of time was their greatest danger and he said to Norman, who had taken charge of the disintegrator installations:

"One disintegrator, hung on a chain so it can be turned in any direction, will be all we'll need on the ship. The others can be used for cavern defense—and to try to hold the Shomarrians away from the ship if it isn't quite finished when they come pouring in here."

He called Dale, who said with satisfaction, "Once you get inside the Ghost, it can dodge into third-level until hell freezes over and do nothing but take you along with it. There's one fly in the ointment—there's a cruiser already in second-level not far from the equivalent of the Ghost's position."

Cliff was hopeful, but more concerned over the presence of the Shomarrian cruiser in second-level.

"To get to the second-level equivalent of the Ghost's normal-space position, you'll have to head almost straight at that cruiser," Cliff said. "They'll never let you reach it, let alone go on past it to the point where you'll drop into normal inside the Ghost."

"The Shomarrians on that cruiser will see the chopped-off rear half of a small ship," he said, "with a comical steam-jet drive. We're hoping that we'll look so harmless that they won't do more than throw up their disintegrator shield."

"Maybe," Cliff said. "Maybe—and again, maybe they'll suspect a trick of some kind and take no chances by disintegrating you." There was a pause. "Well see. If they try that, the *Unicorn* will clear the way for you."

Cliff did not add the rest; that the *Unicorn* would then be destroyed.

Cliff spoke again. "There's no reason for Nona and the others to know anything about something that may not have to happen."

"No," he said. "Of course not, Cliff."

John asked Volar, when he had the chance to do so:

"Just what are those workmen doing in that compartment on the Ghost?"

"Preparing for Sar-Fane's post-entertainment entertainment." Volar answered. "They're erecting a tier of seats at one end so that Sar-Fane and his party can have a clear and comfortable view of the activities that will take place in the rest of the room. These scenes will be transmitted to all Shomarian-dominated worlds for the information of the natives there."

"Information?"

"Education, let us say. The Ragnarokan men and women will be brought in naked, in chains. The punishments to follow will be both very undignified and very painful, although not of such a nature as to interfere with their usefulness as slaves. You and Lake will be executed as the climax to the show."

"That sounds interesting," he said. "I suppose they won't be in any hurry about it?"

"Your executions will require about an hour. Such as is left of your bodies, after they have finished with you, will be sprayed with a preservative and left there in the arena. For the next Shomarian day and night, every public news screen on every world in the Shomarian Society will have on it the view of your remains as a silent reminder of the folly of resisting the will of the Shomarrians."

The time went by, seeming to go slowly with the waiting, swiftly whenever he looked at the ship and saw how much work still remained to be done. By then the ship was like something in some inferno; a solid ring of fire seen through a cloud of steam, the smell of burned clothing and scorched flesh coming from it. It seemed very probable that the ship would be cut in two before the attack but completion of the second-level-shift was still uncertain. It was work that could not possibly be hurried, however—there was no way in which more than one man could reach inside each remaining assembly shell and install and connect the components.

Forty minutes had gone by when the second Shomarian ground force dropped down out of second-level into the atmosphere of Kilvar.

One of the ships detached itself from the others and began unloading Weasels and gillars among the search groups. The other ships landed near the foot of the rainbow cliff. Ten Weasels emerged, shining new ones, then the soldiers marched out; six abreast, double-time, to form in ranks behind the first twenty thousand. The area before the cliff had been a field of black. Now, the supporting troops added a field of gray, one that grew as it formed, reaching almost to the city and more still marching from the ships...

A hand lightly touched his arm.

"Johnny..."

He looked down into the face of Lora; into brown eyes that were not clear and bright, and into a face on which a smile was half trembling.

"Shela said there wouldn't be much time to see you, so I thought I'd come over and say hello before the Shomarrians interrupt us—**

Then she was hugging him tightly, her face pressed against him and her voice muffled and catching:

"Oh, Johnny—I have you back again, and it will all be for such a little time..."

"A little time?" he asked. He held her close to him. "Didn't you know, Lora, that we don't intend to let the Shomarrians get what they want? We're going to have all the time of our lives."

He told her of their plan to capture the Ghostship.

"Do you suppose we can do it?" she asked, looking up with new hope in her eyes. "Do you think—"

"Watch out!"

The cry of warning came from the ship and men were leaping to positions of safety. One last electric arc was blazing, then it went out as the last girder tore apart with a shrieking sound and a shower of

incandescent steel. The front half of the ship jerked, rolled, and the nose clashed down to its resting place on the floor.

The ship was now cut completely in two.

The thought of Volar came then:

"Hesnar and Novla are now boarding the Ghost ship. No time has yet been set for the attack, but it will probably be within ten minutes."

He used Tip to ask George Ord, "How long until you're done with the ship?"

"I'm working in the last assembly shell," George said.

"Keep the Shomarrians off my back for ten minutes and you'll have your ship."

John called Dale and told him that all would be ready within ten minutes.

"Good," Dale said. "The Kilvarl will let us know when you go into second-level and the *Ragnarok* and *Unicorn* will go with you. If the *Unicorn* has to blast that cruiser, there will be a dozen cruisers and battleships come popping into second-level a few seconds later—we'll be waiting to keep their attention away from you." There was a pause. "Do you suppose that will be good enough, Johnny?"

"It should never reach that stage," he said. "After all, in second-level, that cruiser is the equivalent of only a few feet away in normal space. We'll be past it and into the Ghost before the Shomarrians realize what we're after."

He called Cliff, who said of the situation:

"We have double watches and double disintegrator crews. Everything is ready and we'll be glad when it's over, whichever way it goes."

Cliff paused, as Dale had done, then he asked:

"If we can give you fifteen seconds in second-level to put your ship where you want it, there won't be any doubt but that you'll take the Ghost, will there?"

"The Kilvarl will be watching our second-level position in the viewscreens of all the ships," he said, "including the viewscreen of the Ghost. That will be a triangulation fix that will be failproof. They'll direct us to the exact spacial point and tell us when to drop into normal. There will be no doubt, Cliff—once we get into second-level and get into position, the war with the Shomarrians is already over."

"Good. I wanted to know that..."

Lora had been listening silently and when the talk with Cliff was over she said, "What they both really wanted to know was that they won't be dying in vain. They wanted to be reassured that what they do will mean life and freedom for Nona and Leona and all the others." She looked up at him with a sigh. "Must it always be like this for the Ragnarokans, Johnny?"

"How do you mean, Lora?"

"Always this fighting and dying for us. Why can't we someday be like the people in the old fairy stories, our troubles finally over and nothing left but to live happily ever after when our story is ended?"

"We wouldn't like that," he said.

"Why not?"

"Because we would—"

He stopped as he saw Barbara coining, a bolstered blaster about her waist and a knife. She carried another bolstered blaster and knife in her hand.

He asked, suspiciously, "Barbara—did you two talk together before she came over to me?"

"We said a few words," Barbara answered. She put the belt around Lora's waist and pulled the buckle to the shortest hole. "Lora, you're so thin! I can't get the belt any tighter. Maybe you had better just carry the blaster in your hand— you're going to have that belt down around your feet if you don't."

She spoke to John in the same casual tone: "We decided we would stay

out here. I intend to be in the front line— I have some scores to settle with the Shomarians—and Lora refuses to consider staying in back in the second line with the other women."

"You'll both stay back there," he said. "On your way right now—or do you want me to have you carried?"

Barbara looked at him thoughtfully, then exchanged a glance with Lora.

"Well—if that's the way you feel about it!" she said. "Come on, Lora."

Barbara walked away and he frowned after her. Her ready obedience could mean only that she intended to be back when the battle began.

"How many will go on the ship?" Lora asked.

"As many as are left alive around it when it's ready to go," he said. "If you're thinking that you and Barbara will go along—"

"I just asked," she said. She reached out her hand to give his arm a gentle squeeze in farewell, her eyes soft and dark as she looked up at him and smiling a little. "I'll go back now and tell Barbara that you said we must stay there."

She let the belt drop to the floor and walked away. He watched her go, already sure that neither she nor Barbara intended to remain in the second line with the other women.

Volar was gone—he was always appearing and disappearing without explanation—and John sent the mental question: ,

"Volar—what are Sar-Fane's plans now?"

There was a brief wait, then the thought of Volar came:

"Would you like to really know his thoughts?"

For a moment he did not understand what Volar meant, then he said, "You can put me in Sar-Fane's mind?"

"Go ahead."

"Transferring complete awareness will produce a sensation different

from the one you experienced when you merely heard and saw through Garron."

"Go ahead," he said again.

Something like intangible fingers seemed to touch at his mind and he forced away the instinctive desire to resist. Then he was both himself in the cavern, and not himself.

For an instant he seemed to be Volar, somewhere in a small, lighted tunnel. A female Kilvarl was lying beside him, watching him with pain in her eyes and her breath coming with a sound like a labored sobbing.

Then there was the taste of sweet wine in his mouth, a glorious sense of well-being and power, and he was looking into a viewscreen at the Iron Mountains and his mass of troops waiting before it, thinking:

... There, hiding in caves, the animals that can give me the galaxy before I die. How the humble serve the mighty... And those others, those hairy-faced bipeds... 'All things that walk or crawl or swim or fly were created to serve the Sons of Shomar; and those that walk upon two feet as the Sons of Shomar but are not the Sons of Shomar were created to serve, even as the lowliest beast in the field,' Articles of Destiny, fourteen ten...

Taste of the cold, sweet wine again, the tinkle of ice, and the pleasant glow of well-being and idle thoughts.

... All the surviving grown males among the savages will have an unexpected experience in tomorrow's public educational performance... eunuchs make such docile slaves... I think I'll have last night's Honor Virgin turned over to the troops... let her learn the penalty of indifference... Ah... now comes Novla, that fat-faced failure, and my equally incompetent son... How Novla scrapes and bows when he comes near me... Do you already suspect my plans for you, you corpse-to-be... ? All other members of your level can stand at attention and watch the mechanical garrote choke you to death... valuable lesson for them... should inspire them to greater efforts toward furthering the Plan and serving their Temporal Lord with competence... And you, Hesnar, my son, eager to take my place, but afraid to hasten my demise for the very same good and valid reasons that caused me to let my own father die a natural death...

He was Humbolt standing in the cavern, he was Volar sitting close beside his mate, and he was Sar-Fane on the Ghost ship listening to his son saying:

"Why this delay—when are you going to give the order to attack?"

He held up the glass and watched the silver bubbles rise up through the pale-ruby wine, thinking: *Whenever the fancy strikes me, my son, I will give the order that shall change the destiny of a thousand worlds... I know before you ask that you want the savage named Humbolt, to vent your hatred for him in your own way... but his execution will serve a valuable purpose as a lesson to other would-be rebel leaders and you cannot have him for your personal pleasure....*

The contact broke, with a last fleeting impression of being Volar as he watched his mate fight for the breath of life, and he was again John Humbolt in the cavern.

"Volar," he said, "I guess you know I saw where you are— that now I know why you kept leaving here every few minutes?"

There was a silence, then Volar said:

"There was no reason to tell anyone about Thorala— nothing can be done now."

"What is the matter with her?"

"She was injured internally by a Weasel the day you first went to Shomar. We were trying to drag in the last of the materials for the second-level-shift and she was the sitter guard who saw the Weasel coming. She had to hold its attention long enough for the others to get themselves and the material into hiding."

He thought of the way Thorala's eyes had been clouded with pain and the way she had drawn each breath as though it might be the last.

"Why didn't you let our doctor see her?" he asked. "Maybe he could have saved her."

"There is still a little time in which she can be saved by an operation but the necessary facilities are not here. If we capture the Ghost ship we

will have the facilities.

"Now I detect a subconscious thought in Sar-Fane's mind. I think he is going to order the attack to begin."

John turned to look at the ship. The lights dimmed as he did so; an action intended to create a certain disadvantage for the Shomarrians coming in from the brightly lighted outside. The ends of the severed girders, where the ship had been cut in two, glowed red in the dim light. The big boiler in the center of the rear half of the ship was hot; steam coming in a thin jet out of the safety valve. The ship's one disintegrator was hung on chains from a top girder. All the other disintegrators were in the places designated for them in the cavern. Back in the near-darkness of the innumerable alcoves that surrounded the back and both sides of the cavern he could see the Ragnarokans, Kilvarl, and prowlers, Fenrir and Sigyn among them. The eyes of the Kilvarl and prowlers glowed green and yellow and red as they waited. The Ragnarokans were vague shadow-shapes, almost invisible but for the myriad metallic gleams from their helmets and blasters.

The viewscreen showed the last of the Shomarrian troops leaving the last ship. The ship's airlock was already closing— the Shomarrians were taking no chances of any kind of one of their ships being captured by some surprise form of attack.

He could see George's back through the girders as he worked with the last assembly shell and he spoke to him, his voice surprisingly loud in the quiet:

"How much more time will you need, George?"

George's words came muffled as he answered without looking up. "Five minutes—maybe a little less."

Norman, waiting restlessly behind the chain-suspended disintegrator in the ship, called down:

"Did you know, Johnny, that we really ought to try to get hold of a ship honestly someday? We're always conniving around to take them away from the enemy—"

"Attack!"

The Kilvarl warning was given simultaneously to every man in the cavern. Two seconds later the cavern trembled as the disintegrators of a battleship overhead ripped down at the face of the cliff.

John could see it as a tiny image in the distant view-screen; the beams of the disintegrators like a huge blade slicing the cliff from top to bottom and feeding back toward the cavern. The red dust of disintegration, more impalpable than smoke, billowed out and up, half hiding the cliff. Other Shomarian ships were stationed out from the face of the cliff, to signal when the cavern was revealed. The Shomarials did not want the disintegrator beams to destroy any Kilvarl.

A deep roaring filled the cavern as he hurried away from the wall and it was dimly that he could hear Charley shout the order:

"Start the metal foil shower now. As soon as they break through, give them so much foil their detectors couldn't spot a dozen ships in here."

The shower came, shredded aluminum foil blown by a directional fan, filling the cavern from top to bottom with the swirling bits of metal.

He went on to the nose of the ship where the staggered ranks of ships' guards were waiting and turned to face the cavern wall. The roaring increased to a deafening thunder, as though the entire mountain was caving in on them, then a crashing sound came from the wall, sharp and ear-splitting, and the cavern was lighted by a sheet of roaring blue flame where the wall had been.

The flame vanished and there was an instant of silence; an instant in which every type of detector known to the Shomarian Empire would be probing into the cavern. He looked out through the enormous opening onto the flare-lit surface of Kilvar and saw the Weasels and Shomarials already charging through the opening. The Weasels came with long, swift leaps despite their weight. The Shomarials came in a slogging run; big and thick-muscled, with the dead, expressionless faces of men who had been conditioned and disciplined out of all conceptions of such things as mercy or a sense of right and wrong. Like the mindless Weasels, they were created for killing...

The Ragnarokan-Kilvarl forces and the Shomarials opened fire simultaneously; the Ragnarokan-manned Kilvarl medium-duty disintegrators sending their whining blue beams toward the Weasels, the

Ragnarokan blasters a hissing blue ring inside the cavern directed at the Shomarrians.

The Weasels split apart, to race to all portions of the cavern, their bulging eyes observing and sending to the Shomarrians on the ships a picture of everything they observed. A disintegrator along the wall tried to stop a Weasel, its beam mushrooming for a second against the Weasel's shield. The Weasel, still running, fired back at the unshielded disintegrator as its own shield collapsed. The blue beams were parallel for a moment, side by side, as each found its target. Then they vanished and the Weasel crashed to the floor with half its head gone.

The Ragnarokan disintegrator that had stopped the Weasel did not fire again. He knew it never would.

Then the Shomarrians were in the cavern in such numbers that there was no time to watch anything other than to try to keep them away from the ship. They were coming through the opening fifty abreast, two hundred of them per second, falling like Terran grain before the Ragnarokan fire, but their numbers so great that a hundred per second were left to pour into the cavern over the bodies of the slain. They spread apart as they came, going along both sides of the cavern as well as charging straight across the full width of the floor. These, too, were dying by the hundreds but there were thousands more crowding up to the portal from outside. The living ran across the dead, fell before the Ragnarokan fire, and became another layer of dead for the ones behind to scramble across.

The Ragnarokan disintegrators could do little to help slow the rush of Shomarrians. They were trying to destroy the Weasels before one of the Weasels found the ship. The Ragnarokan disintegrators were unshielded, stationary targets; and shielded Weasels were darting in every direction as they simultaneously searched the cavern and fired back at the Ragnarokan disintegrators.

He felt the blaster growing warm in his hand as he kept up a continuous fire against the endless waves of Shomarrians. They were like mindless machines and only death could stop them. He saw the right arm and shoulder of one disappear from a blaster beam and the Shomarrian ran on, no change of expression on his wooden face, reaching for an auxiliary weapon with his left hand. Another beam came, to dissolve the wooden face into nothing, and only then did he fall.

The Kilvarl, possessing only a few of the improvised Rell blasters, could do little—and the prowlers even less—until there was a sufficient number of Shomarrians in the cavern. At the rate of one hundred Shomarrians per second, this did not take long.

By prearranged plan, the blaster fire of the Ragnarokans along the back wall of the cavern suddenly diminished and dwindled to almost nothing. Shomarrian officers shouted orders in tones of exultation and the Shomarrian soldiers increased the speed of their charge across the cavern. Each soldier carried a coil of slender chain on his belt for binding captured Kilvarl. They were all confident, now, that the Ragnarokans had broken in retreat and that they would soon be capturing Kilvarl and carrying them to the ship as well as driving the Ragnarokans to the ends of the tunnels and killing them there.

The front ranks of the Shomarrians were almost to the second line when the women and boys there, unseen in the shadows, opened fire with every blaster in the line. Three ranks of Shomarrians fell before the others recovered enough to open up a return fire, still charging as they fired.

Then the Ragnarokans, Kilvarl, and prowlers who had been crowding along the side passages of the cavern made their flank attack.

They were into the massed, running Shomarrians so quickly that almost no blaster fire met them. The blasters of the Ragnarokans were firing throughout the Shomarrian force and the Kilvarl and prowlers were lunging and dodging and killing. The Shomarrians fired back, too slow to hit more than a few of the Kilvarl and prowlers, and killing more of their own force than Ragnarokans.

The Ragnarokans fought with a blaster in one hand and a knife in the other. The prowlers went between the ranks, under the blaster fire that the Shomarrians turned on the Ragnarokans, to leap up and tear out Shomarrian throats and be gone again before the bodies fell.

But the Kilvarl, as swift or perhaps even swifter than the prowlers and much larger were the deadliest killers of all. They went between the Shomarrians, over them, and around them; yellow blurs that disemboweled and ripped out throats with claws and teeth and snapped necks with heavy paws.

A Weasel came charging toward the ship. John heard Norman's

disintegrator beam whine over his head and saw it hold against the Weasel's shield as the Weasel kept coming.

The shield gave way before the beam and the Weasel crashed to the floor—but not before it was within ten feet of the nose of the skeleton ship and had sent the view of what it saw to the Shomarian ships. And not before it had fired as its shield collapsed.

Norman fell almost simultaneously with the fall of the Weasel, landing heavily on one foot and going on down to the floor. He raised himself back up, to stand on one leg and cling to the ship for support as he used his free hand to fire into the onrushing Shomarrians.

The other leg seemed half cut in two, blood gushing from it like a red fountain.

Ten seconds later there came a shouting of orders from every Shomarian officer in the cavern. The entire force turned and began fighting its way toward the ship.

At the same time, all the Shomarrians coming in through the cavern opening—now slowing as they were forced to climb over the dead—were charging straight toward the ship.

The thought of a Kilvarl came:

"They now know we have a skeleton ship and the orders are for the entire force to concentrate on reaching it; to kill all Ragnarokans and Kilvarl around it and be prepared to destroy it if so ordered. The Shomarrians with the yellow sunburst on their uniforms are the suicide bombardiers."

There were four blasters still active to his left and five to his right. Then there were four to his right, and Jimmy Sanders, to his immediate left, was wavering as he fired with grim stubbornness on his face and a blaster hole through his chest.

Jimmy fell, still firing as he died, the beam going into the dead on the floor before him and there were two blasters to John's left. He sent the thought to the Kilvarl that would be instantly given to the other Ragnarokans:

"We'll drop back to the rear section. Let the Shomarrians waste a few seconds thinking they've gained something by reaching the front end of the ship."

He saw that Norman had taken time to tie a quick tourniquet around his leg—a necessity, since he would soon have bled to death—and was making a hobbling retreat; walking backward so that he could continue to fire into the Shomarrians with one hand and hold to the ship's girders for support with the other.

John was at the severed center of the ship when the blaster on his right stopped as the man who held it died. Another immediately took its place. He looked, and saw that Barbara was beside him.

She stood with her blaster locked in firing position, swinging it back and forth across the Shomarrian ranks, her clothes torn and blood on her face and arm. In her eyes was the same savage enjoyment he had seen so often in the eyes of Norman.

She shouted at him above the sounds of battle:

"I lost Lora. I'm trying to find her."

Damn, damn! he thought. *You will have let her get killed, and yourself, too. ...*

There was a sudden lull in the force of the attack, and a hurried shifting of positions among the Shomarrians.

He said quickly to Barbara, "Flank attack coming against the rear half. Get back around to that other side—she should be there if anywhere—and both of you get back to that second line."

She turned and ran in the direction ordered. But the battle lust was in her eyes and he knew that she was going only to hunt for Lora, that she would never go back to the second line.

He saw that Norman, was beginning the climb back up to the chain-suspended disintegrator. George was dropping down to the floor one arm wounded and helpless, and Jack Taylor was already taking his place.

He ran on, to a place in the guard line where he could quickly reach the control seat the moment the ship was ready. He wondered how long that would be. George had said five minutes. How many had already passed? Two, perhaps? It was difficult to closely estimate the passage of time during battle—

A soft hand touched his arm and the voice of Lora said:

"Here I am, Johnny."

There was a cut across her cheek, she was using both hands to hold the heavy blaster, and her legs were shaky with her weakness despite her effort to stand straight and steady beside him.

Old Shela was with Lora, blood on her paws, her green eyes narrowed and her tail twitching as she looked at the Shomarrians.

"She saved my life," Lora said. "I was trying to get to where you were and two Shomarrians came up behind me."

"What are you doing here?" He made his tone harsh. "Get on back where you belong!"

She looked up at him. In her eyes was not the battle lust that had been in her sister's, but a calm, determined decision.

"I am where I belong, Johnny," she said. "That's why I'm here."

A Shomarrian whistle shrieked somewhere in the back ranks and the momentary lull exploded into the most violent attack yet. The suicide soldiers lunged forward; bombardiers among them with their round, black spheres already in their hands.

The Ragnarokan line did not break—it melted. Men continued to fire as they fell, until the unconsciousness of death stopped them, but that was not enough. The guard line was going. The other Ragnarokan-Kilvarl forces, trying to fight their way to the ship, would arrive too late—

A Kilvarl thought came, quick and urgent:

"Ship ready but for last seven wires. No time to solder and a man's hands too large to get both in the small recess to hold wires down on

terminals."

He thought of Lora's small hands and sent the two-word answer:

"Tell Lora."

He killed three more Shomarrians, so close upon him that they fell at his feet, and was aware of Lora and Shela being already gone as he retreated another step.

The battle continued, the seconds seeming long as he and the others of the rapidly diminishing line retreated step by step.

He wondered if Lora would remember that this half-ship would have no artificial gravity when they went into second-level. The pressure of her fingers against the terminals would cause her to float upward and the connections would be released unless she wedged her knees under the edge of that portion of the shift assembly.

The thought of Shela came:

"I will remind her of that."

There were six blasters besides his own when his back bumped against the ship. Two Shomarrians, farther down the line, were already clambering up through the girders. He shot one as Norman shot the other. Four more Shomarrians were instantly taking the place of the two.

Norman had used a blaster. He saw that Norman was still short of the disintegrator, so busy trying to keep the Shomarrians away from the ship that he had not yet had time to climb the rest of the way to it.

The man who had been at the shift assembly was gone and Lora was in his place, her arms inside the small housing where the seven loose wires waited. Shomarrians on the other side of the ship, breaking through that guard line, were trying to kill her—

The words came:

"Ship ready!"

He swung around and went up through the girders. A Shomorrian beam bit a steel plate above Lora and showered her with hot sparks. She did not

flinch nor move her arms as she held the wires in place.

Other beams came quick behind the first, despite the efforts of Norman and the remaining Ragnarokans to protect her. She turned her face toward John and he heard her words, thin and faint above the roar of battle:

"Quick-Johnny—they're going to kill me and then we'll never get our ship out of here—"

He was still an arm's length from the control panel when he hit the shift button with his hand.

Three Shomarrians were on the half-ship when it jumped into second-level. There was a sudden, sickening sensation of falling, a complete darkness and silence but for the blue light of Lake's blaster beam and the hissing sound of it as it continued to fire.

The sensation of falling caused the Shomarrians to momentarily forget Lora. They had often been in second-level, but always on ships with artificial gravity. The feeling that they were suddenly dropping endlessly downward in darkness caused them to instinctively clutch at the girders beside them for support.

That was all Norman needed to give him time to kill them.

The force of the blaster beam gave the Shomarrians a little shove and they were already entering the limit of the space-warp field and disappearing into normal-space when the last one was killed and Norman's beam was cut off. *

The ship was in a universe of absolute darkness then, but for the faint glow of the luminous jet-control buttons.

The Kilvarl commands began as he hooked his legs under the edge of the control seat:

"Jets one to five, full force—eighteen to twenty, full—cut one to five—six to ten, full—"

A brilliant light enveloped the half-ship as the Shomarrian cruiser in second-level projected a light sphere. The Shomarrians could detect well

with their various instruments, but for a really clear and detailed view, they had to have light...

The air began rapidly leaking away, causing his eardrums to pop. He jabbed and released firing buttons at the Kilvarl commands and wondered what the Shomarian commanders —and Sar-Fane, who would be having the views relayed to his own viewscreen—would be thinking as they looked at the driveless half-skeleton of a ship on which a Ragnarokan was randomly playing with buttons which activated only gray-plumed steam jets while another Ragnarokan, wounded, was pulling himself up to a disintegrator hung on a chain and a girl knelt with her hands inside part of the shift assembly as a lanky old Kilvarl slapped with its paw at the girl's smoldering skirt.

The course of the half-ship was almost straight toward the cruiser and the Kilvarl commands came faster:

"—eleven to fourteen, full—the cruiser is going to fire— the Unicorn will have to distract it—"

He thought, *So they made you do it, Cliff?—They made you and all the others on the Unicorn give up your lives for the rest of us as all of you knew they would do—*

The Kilvarl commands came with almost desperate urgency:

"—six to ten, cut—Sar-Fane suspects—fifteen and sixteen, cut—ten and eleven, full—cut— "Drop!"

He slapped the Drop button.

There was the sensation of implosion as air rushed in upon him, a jarring crash as the half-ship fell two feet to a floor, a terrified, incredulous shout in Shomarian, and four steel walls suddenly around them.

They were inside the Ghost ship.

He went down the girders to the floor as Norman swung the chained disintegrator around to blast an opening in the wall to the left, beyond which was Sar-Fane's luxurious private suite. Lora and Shela were climbing down out of the ship and Lora was calling to him:

"Wait, Johnny—let me go with you and help you—" He dropped to the floor, among the broken remains of two torture-execution platforms that had been built for Norman and himself. He noticed, absently, that they were very similar to the ones used by the Gerns.

The Shomarian workman who had given the frightened shout was gone down a corridor, still shouting. The scream of alarm sirens came, and then the distant sound of men running down the sternward corridor, coming toward the half-ship. These would not be harmless workmen, but armed guards.

There were four escape routes leading from Sar-Fane's suite. Norman was already blocking the two toward the stern by sending the disintegrator beam as a barrier of blue flame through that end of the suite. John sent the thought to Shela as he ran toward the corridor opening in front of him:

"You and Lora watch that first doorway—I'll try to get around to the other door in time to stop them."

Shela sent him a brief, "Yes" of acknowledgment. Lora was on the floor by then, running swiftly in the one-gravity of, the ship despite her weakness, Shela loping beside her.

Volar's thought came:

"Sar-Fane felt the jar and heard the crash as your ship materialized inside the compartment. He and Hesnar and Novla are now running for the safety of the Staff Conference compartment; greatly irritated, but with no real fear that such a minute force can be more than a momentary menace. Guards are already rushing out into the next corridor."

He passed the door which Lora and Shela would guard and ran on, to where the other corridor intersected from the left.

He dived forward just before he reached it, so that he was almost prone on the floor when his head and shoulders passed the corner of the intersection. His blaster was before him and the four guards running toward him, expecting him to appear as another running figure, were enveloped in its fire simultaneously with their belated realization of his appearance at floor level.

He was up and running again as they fell. There were two doors some distance down the corridor, opposite each other. The one to the right led into the Staff Conference compartment, the one on the left into Sar-Fane's suite. Just beyond them was the blue wall of Norman's disintegrator beam, moving steadily toward the doors and leaving emptiness and destruction in its wake.

A shameful thing to have to do to our own ship, he thought But the Shomarians can repair the damage for us—

A guard jumped out through the doorway on the right, his blaster firing blindly down the corridor before his body appeared. John shot the blaster, and then the body.

Sar-Fane's door slid open and Novla peered out, Sar-Fane and Hesnar close behind him. Novla saw the slain guard and John's swift approach and threw himself against the others with a startled yelp. The door whipped shut a moment later.

Volar sent the new information:

"They now know that only Lora and Shela are at the other door. They are running back to it. Guards from other parts of the ship will be in that corridor within a few seconds and Lora and Shela will be subjected to fire from both ends of it."

Norman's disintegrator beam swept closer, across the doorways. John knew the Kilvarl would be telling Norman exactly what to do and he did not slacken his pace, but ran straight on toward the hissing blue wall. It vanished just before he reached it and he had a fleeting glimpse of the Staff Conference room and the high officials crowding like stampeded woods goats out through the farther doorways.

He swung around the edge of the doorway and into Sar-Fane's suite. The disintegrator beam came to life the moment he was clear of it.

He saw that he was in the master bedroom. One person was there; an almost-nude teen-age girl, very pretty, with a dark bruise on her cheek and terror in her wide, blue eyes as she stared at him in frozen motionlessness.

He ran on through the next room, a luxurious lounging room of some

kind, and into the third room. There he found the Shomarrians.

It was Sar-Fane's executive room, with numerous view-screens and a desk with a dozen signal buttons. Hesnar was at the far end of the room, the door already swung open and waiting with his blaster raised for the guards to kill Lora and Shela so it would be safe for him to run out into the corridor. Novla was beside him, using both shaking hands to hold his blaster and chattering something in Shomarrian.

Sar-Fane was by the desk, his eyes wide and glaring with incredulity as he swung his blaster up to shoot, a white-faced Honor Virgin held in front of him as a shield. He was holding the blaster in front of the girl so that it could not be shot from his hand without killing her.

Volar's thought came: "*He knows that a Ragnarokan cannot kill a helpless woman—he is counting on that to let him kill you.*"

Almost straight above Sar-Fane's head was an ornate ceiling decoration; a chandelier-like object of gold and silver, set with rows of diamonds. John sent a blaster beam along the base of it as Sar-Fane's beam swung toward him. He dodged with a sideward leap and the beam ripped into the wall behind him.

Then the broken chandelier crashed down on Sar-Fane's bald head, with such unexpected and painful impact that he staggered backward, the blaster beam dropping.

John reached him an instant later and knocked the blaster from his hand. The girl slumped to the floor in a dead faint as he did so.

The action had taken place so quickly, and Hesnar and Novla had been so intent upon getting out into the corridor as soon as possible, that they were just swinging around in realization of the new development. Their blasters were in their hands, and on Hesnar's face was the same incredulous glare that had been on Sar-Fane's. But on Novla's face, as he saw that Sar-Fane was already a prisoner, was the sick look of a man who recognized unalterable defeat.

The sound of guards running toward the corridor outside was loud and close and he sent the quick command to Lora and Shela: "Come inside!" Then to Hesnar and Novla he said, "Drop those blasters!" and to Sar-Fane, "Order all guard action to stop—now!"

Novla's blaster clattered to the floor, but Hesnar stood motionless, staring with the wild glare of disbelief and hatred. .

Lora and Shela darted through the doorway, to stop to one side of it as the first beams from the guards hissed down the corridor behind them. Sar-Fane had not moved, as though too stunned by his capture to speak. Hesnar's mad stare went from John to Lora and back to John. His lips were working soundlessly, drooling.

Shela crouched, ready to spring, and said to John while she kept her eyes on Hesnar:

"He is so insane he does not know, himself, what he may do. He wants to hurt you in some way worse than merely killing you."

"Savage—hairy, stinking savage!" Hesnar's drooling lips spoke thickly. "I'll make you pay for this! Watch me kill myself—watch me, damn *you*—damn you—"

Hesnar jerked the muzzle of his blaster up toward his heart, with a movement so quick and unexpected that the muzzle was out past his shoulder and pointed at Lora before John saw the ruse and knew with clear and terrible realization that Hesnar was going to kill Lora, and he would kill Hesnar too late to save her.

Then Shela, who would have read Hesnar's intentions a fraction of a second before, was between Lora and the blaster in a leap so swift that John did not see it. The blaster hissed, as Shela's paw struck it, and the beam went through her chest and into the wall to one side of Lora.

Shela's paw struck again, to rip Hesnar's throat to the bone and fling him, dying, out into the corridor. Then she fell to the floor and Lora dropped to her knees beside her with a despairing cry, to lift Shela's head to her lap and plead, "*Don't, Shela—don't die, Shela—*"

But the light was already fading from the green eyes.

Two of the guards in the corridor outside, urged on by the harshly shouted commands of the officer behind them, tried to get through the doorway. He shot them both and they fell across Hesnar.

He could hear others coming and he said to Sar-Fane, "Give that order

to those guards or I'll make you scream it out."

Sar-Fane gave the order and the sounds of approach stopped.

"Now, stop all guard action," he ordered. "All over the ship. Do that and you won't be harmed."

Sar-Fane turned to face him, the glare gone and only the hatred left in his eyes. He seemed almost stoic, although he had forced himself to accept the inevitable.

"Yes," Sar-Fane said in an emotionless voice. "The inferior must crawl before the superior."

Sar-Fane turned to the desk, spoke very quickly into one of the communicators, jabbed three buttons in at the same time, then turned back to face John with his finger on a fourth button and vicious triumph glittering through the hatred as he said:

"And you will soon crawl, barbarian!"

As Sar-Fane spoke, Volar's thought was coming:

"He has just ordered all-out suicide attacks against you and Norman. His finger is on the button that can destroy the Ragnarok."

"Don't move," Sar-Fane said, "or I'll destroy your battleship. Stand there—and sweat while you think about what will be done to you and your mate—"

Sirens were screaming louder than ever and the guards were coming again. Lora was still holding Shela's head and stroking the gold-silver fur that was now damp with tears, saying very softly: "—I followed you out into that darkness, Shela, but now you're gone and I've lost you..."

John did what he realized he should have done before; what the savagely efficient Norman would have done at once. He flipped up the muzzle of his blaster and sent the beam through the finger Sar-Fane had on the button. Then he jerked Sar-Fane's arm around and brought his knee up against the back of it. Sar-Fane screamed as the forearm broke with a crack like the snapping of a dry branch, screamed again as John broke the upper arm, then shrieked in horror as the arm was twisted out

of the shoulder socket and wrapped like a noose around his neck.

"*Cancel.*" John said.

Sar-Fane's eyes were bulging in a face gone gray. He drew a moaning breath and shouted orders in hoarse, desperate tones, pushing the *Cancel* buttons at the same time.

When Sar-Fane had finished, Volar said:

"*All guard actions are now ceasing.*"

"Now," John said to Sar-Fane, "you will inform all officers of the troops below and all your ship's commanders that you have just surrendered unconditionally to the Ragnarokan-Kilvarl alliance. No messages will be sent to Shomar by anyone. And the *Ragnarok* will now pull alongside and its crew will take command of this ship."

Sar-Fane seemed about to hesitate. John gave the broken arm another twist that brought another scream:

"*Yes—yes!* I'll tell them!"

"Tell it fast and tell it true," he said. "Remember, I'll be watching and the Kilvarl will be listening. From now on until the day you die, the Ragnarokans will be watching you and the Kilvarl will be listening."

It was dawn for the third time since Sar-Fane's surrender. John stood on the hill, near the bayonet tree where once Lora had lain dying, and watched her coming up the hill toward him. He could see question on her face, even at that distance, and he knew she was still afraid he might leave Kilvar without her.

Fenrir and Sigyn—both of them bearing minor wounds of battle—were with her. They had been staying with her a great deal of the time lately, sensing her uncertainty and trying in their mute way to reassure her.

But there was nothing for anyone to be afraid of any more. The victory had been complete and final. Not even Shomar knew, yet, that the end had begun for the far-flung Shomaritan Empire. He had written a message for Sar-Fane to send to the holy cabinet on Shomar; one which Sar-Fane had spoken in Shomaritan under the watchful eyes of two Kilvarl. The message

had been brief:

"Victory came very quickly, as planned, with complete surrender. For certain reasons, the public punishment of the Ragnarokans will not take place at the time scheduled. The fleet will return to Shomar on Supremacy Day. There will be many Kilvarl on board the ships; far more than we had ever hoped to capture. It is desired that all cabinet members be in Capitol City -when the fleet arrives. It is very important that there be no more messages of any kind sent to Shomar. The reasons for this, which involve use of the Kilvarl in furthering the plan, will be made known to you when the fleet reaches Shomar."

"Which will leave the holy cabinet puzzled but pleased," Norman had said, "and will set the dissectionists to happily sharpening their knives."

"I think, though," Dale had remarked, "that Sar-Fane was shocked by the degree of your deception, Johnny. You had him tell nothing but the truth—as seen from our side—to keep his cabinet from suspecting the truth. I'm sure that this is supposed to be a lot more unethical than honestly outright Shomarian lies..."

A shadow flickered across the hill on which John stood. It was the *Ragnarok*—the bomb in it long since removed—going to join the armada that was now the Ragnarokan-Kilvarl fleet. The fleet was visible overhead; the vast armada of which Destry had once said, "I'm glad they're for us instead of against us." It would go into second level in a few minutes, with a command force of Ragnarokans and Kilvarl on each ship, and would depart for Shomar. Part of the fleet, and the Shomarian troops who had switched allegiance, would capture the Shomarian capitol city. The rest of the fleet, assisted by the Ghost ship, would capture all Shomarian ships on or near Shomar. This should not be the least difficult with Kilvarl to read the minds of the enemy commanders and know in advance of the Shomarian crewmen what the orders were going to be.

Then Shomar would be leaderless, without a single ship left to defend it, and any appeal for help made by minor officials who had been absent from the capitol city when it fell would result in little if any rescue efforts from other worlds.

Rule by force could be very effective... until the hands that ruled were deprived of their whips. Then nothing was left. Most of the Shomarian crewmen and ground-force troops had not felt any fervid loyalty toward a

society in which they were ordained to be small, unimportant cogs and could never be more. They had fought and died for the Shomarian Society because they would receive food and no punishment if they did so, and would receive no food and severe punishment if they did not do so. They had no conception of such things as freedom or self-reliance. Without someone to provide food for them and tell them what to do they would be bewildered and helpless.

Now, their former supreme leader was a prisoner of the Ragnarokans and Kilvarl, together with all their officers. The Shomarian fleet was in the hands of the former enemy and Shomar, itself, would soon fall. Their reaction had been as much instinct as reasoning: new leaders had replaced the old, so they would serve the new leaders and their simple lives would continue unchanged.

The reaction among the higher Shomarian officers had been different. All of them had been indoctrinated with Divine Destiny and Shomarian Supremacy concepts and many of them were in a near-psychotic state as they contemplated the fact that Shomarian Supremacy and Divine Destiny had been illusions; forever destroyed, now, by a small force of barbarians and animals.

Not all of the higher officers, however, had had their initiative of thought completely submerged. Garron was one such officer. He had said:

"I could never go higher, no matter what abilities I might possess nor how hard I worked. I took orders from strutting young Hesnar-Fane and bowed to him—and I regarded him as too incompetent to be an oiler on my ship. I've seen the social systems on other worlds—before we changed them— and I have often wondered how far I might have gone had I lived under such a system. Having no desire to be executed for heresy and treason, I kept these thoughts to myself..."

"I missed you, Johnny."

Lora stopped beside him and leaned against him so he could put his arm around her. She was tired from the climb, still not completely recovered from the weakness. Fenrir and Sigyn sat down in front of them to look down on the new Ragnarokan-Kilvarl camp which had been set up not far from the eastern foot of the hill, where the forested plain began.

"I just saw Volar and Thorala," Lora said. "Thorala reminds me of Shela

except she isn't old. Sar-Fane's personal physicians must have done a wonderful job for her to be already so near well."

"Volar, himself, was there," he said. "The doctors did a good job on Sar-Fane's arm afterward, I understand, but not with the inspiration toward perfection that they had when they operated on Thorala while Volar stood reared up on the table and breathed down the backs of their necks."

Another shadow flickered across the hill and the *Ghost*— they had decided to name it that—dropped down to land near the camp.

"Norman has been trying out the *Ghost* again," Lora said. "He's happy, now. And that tissue-restorative treatment the Shomarian doctors gave his leg will leave him with only a slight limp."

She looked out across the dead city, where the broken Shomarian battleship lay, and the shallow crater that marked the place where Red Anders and the *Prowler* had died, then turned her head to look toward the camp.

"So many terrible things have happened," she said, "but so many good things, too. We're free, now—we found and whipped our real enemy. The Kilvarl are free and pretty soon a lot of other races will be free. It makes me feel good inside to think of it."

A series of crashing sounds came from the sky and they looked up to see the last of the fleet disappear into second-level.

"Barbara is another one who is happy," he remarked. "She's on what used to be Hesnar's flagship; in the control room and no doubt asking the Shomarrians ten thousand questions about the operation of the ship."

"I was afraid you might have gone with that fleet instead of waiting to go on the *Ghost*," Lora said. "That's why I hurried up here to try to find you."

"I'll go late tonight on the *Ghost*."

"It will be awfully lonesome here, with no one much but the very young and very old left." Her dark eyes looked up at him. "I don't want to be alone anymore, like I was under that Shomarian drug."

"You mean, you want to go, too?"

"I mean that I am going, Johnny. From now on, wherever you go, I will go, too."

There was a silence as they stood close together and looked across the Ragnarokan-Kilvarl camp, which was scattered among the groves of trees. Children, young Kilvarl, and young prowlers were running and playing across the green grass. It was the first real freedom the children and prowlers had known for many weeks.

"They're all the same, aren't they?" Lora said. "The young, I mean. Two legs or four—they like to run and play and know the joy of living. I wish Shela could be here with us this morning and watch the little Kilvarl playing out under the sky for the first time in their lives."

"Darag told me that the Kilvarl are a race who like to lie in the sun and dream. They can do that again, just as soon as our job with the Shomarian Empire is finished, and that shouldn't take so very long."

"No." She shook her head. "I learned a lot about the Kilvarl from Shela. Everything has changed for them. They can't go home again, anymore than we can. For two hundred years they haven't really had any home."

"Kilvar," he said. "The whole wide, green world of Kilvar."

"Kilvar is ours, too, Johnny—but will all of us want to settle down here and never leave it?"

Restlessness stirred again in him at the thought of never leaving, of living out his life in peaceful pursuits while the years of that life went by; the years that were so few and so fleeting to men as compared with the vast time and space dimensions of the universe in which they lived. It was a restlessness he had tried to subdue for Lora's sake, knowing that she wanted no more danger and strife. But it was hard to quiet the longing...

He looked at the *Ghost*, already seeing it leaving the galaxy behind and going out across the great, empty space void at a speed of two hundred lightyears a day while the Greater Magellanic Cloud grew ever larger in the viewscreen. The Kilvarl said that no being from the galaxy had ever been there, that there were things in the Cloud that not even the Kilvarl could understand. The restless ones among the Ragnarokans could go

there—

"And see what is there," Lora said. "But only if we go soon, before it's too late and we're too old."

She had spoken the rest of this thought, to the word, and he asked in surprise, "How did you know I was thinking that?"

"I just did," she answered. "Like other times these past three days when I could feel your restlessness and it would make me afraid you might go away and leave me behind. I guess that Shela being in my mind so much made me a little telepathic. I think that maybe the Kilvarl could teach all of us how to be telepathic."

She looked out across the green parks where the young of three species were playing together—the treble laughter of the children mingling with the high-pitched, joyous yipping of the prowler pups and the purring cries of the Kilvarl kittens.

"When you're young like that," she said, "a world can seem to be a big and exciting place to explore. But we're not that young, anymore... How long, Johnny, until the job with the Shomarian Empire is finished and the *Ghost* will be free?"

"Two years—maybe only one. You don't mean you want to go to the Cloud, Lora?"

"Yes. Don't you?"

"I've been telling myself I should forget it."

"Because you thought I wouldn't want to go—I know. And I thought I wanted for us to settle down to a life of quiet peacefulness—and now I don't want us to do that."

She looked up at him, question on her face. "Why is that, Johnny—why should I feel restless now when I think about it, and not want for us to be like the people in the old fairy tales who lived happily ever after when their troubles were over and their story was ended?"

"You said the reason why, Lora," he answered. "When they settled down to living happily ever after, their story was ended. We want ours to be just

beginning."