

## HUNTERS OUT OF SPACE



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## CHAPTER 1

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In Kansas, spring usually falls on the day before summer. It had been such a day, and now at midnight I was sitting at my desk. Both hands of the clock were pointing to the ceiling--and to the limitless stars beyond. My wife and daughter had long been asleep. I had stayed up to write a few letters but it was not a night for working. Although it was a bit chilly outside, the moon was bright and a bird was singing a glad and plaintive song about the summer that was coming and all the summers that had passed and all that would be. Adding, here and there, a bit of melody about all the good things that happen to birds and men without their knowing why.

Both hands of the clock were pointing upward. And I was half-asleep, and half-dreaming. Remembering all the friends I had--most of them scattered to the four winds by now. And that best friend of all, Doctor Jack Odin! I wondered where he was and how he had fared since he disappeared into that dark cave in Texas.

Suddenly I became aware of a flickering light above me. I looked up. I had thought that the lights were winking, but they were not. The room was lit by a reading lamp, and the ceiling was so shadowy that at first I could see nothing at all. Then I saw the light--or the ghost of a light--gleaming faintly upon--or through--the ceiling. It was the faintest yellow, neither a bull's eye nor a splotch. Instead, it seemed to be a tiny whirlpool of movement--the faintest nebula in miniature with spirals of light swiftly circling a central core. For a second I thought I could see through the roof, and the stars swarmed before me. It was as though I was at the vortex of a high whirlwind of dancing, shining specks of light. Then that sensation was gone, and there were two faint coiling spirals of yellow light upon the ceiling.

The lights began to whisper.

"We are Ato and Wolden," they said. "Remember us?"

I remembered them from the notes that I had pieced together to tell the story of my old friend, Doctor Jack Odin, and his adventure in the

World of Opal. It seemed impolite to tell them that we had never met. So I listened.

"Wolden's work has succeeded," the whispering continued. "We have reduced time and space to nothing. You see us as lights, or as we once put it, 'as flame-winged butterflies,' but we are neither. We are Ato and Wolden. By adding ourselves to another dimension we are hardly recognizable to you. Actually, we are at our starting point billions of miles away! We are traveling through space toward you at a speed which would make the speed of light look like a glow-worm crawling across the dark ground; and at the same time, we are there in your room. Do you understand?"

I didn't, but I have learned that a man can live quite comfortably by merely keeping his mouth shut. So I kept still.

\* \* \* \* \*

My little daughter had been playing in the room before she had unwillingly gone to bed. She had left a red rubber ball upon my desk.

"Look at the ball," the voices whispered. "We will give you an idea of the time-space in which we live."

I looked. Suddenly the little ball twitched, vanished and reappeared. I gazed in wonder. It had been red. Now it was white. I picked it up and a white powder rubbed off upon my fingertips.

"See." The lights whispered. "We have turned it inside--"

The whispering continued.

\* \* \* \* \*

"We are bringing you a gift. Our last gift, probably, because we are weary of your world and the affairs of men. Pygmies! Now, stand back from your desk--"

It was such a command that I fairly leaped out of my chair and drew away from the desk. Still leaning upon it I stared in wonder at the shadow which was forming itself upon the cleared space by the side of my typewriter. At first it was merely a dark square. Then it was a shadowy cube, growing denser all the time until it became a dim shape. The shape grew brighter. There was a tiny spitting sound, like two hot wires being touched together. There was a smell in the room, not unpleasant but not pleasant either--a completely alien smell. A wave of cold air struck me, and passed by, leaving me shivering. Our furnace came on with a start.

Then the lights were gone and I was looking in wonder at a leaden box, about a foot square. It had a hinged lid, and around the middle of it the figure of a snake was excellently carved. It held its tail in its mouth, locking the box securely. Its eyes were two great moonstones that appeared to look up at me with half-blind amusement--winking at the wisdom they had forgotten and the fear that I was feeling.

I touched the box and drew my hand away in pain. It was colder than cold. Desolate, burning cold.

It was two hours before the box became warm enough--or cool enough--to touch. Then, after several experiments I got the snake's mouth open and the lid swung upward on chilled hinges.

Within it was a manuscript. As soon as I looked at it I recognized the handwriting of my old friend, Doctor Jack Odin.

Well, it was just as before. It was more of a series of notes and jottings than a story. It took months to piece it together. Several pages were badly burned and spotted. It was hard work and slow work--

And this is the tale that Jack Odin sent me--from Somewhere.

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## CHAPTER 2

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Jack Odin descended into the cavern--or what Keefe had called the Hole--for less than a hundred yards before his strong flashlight sent its lancing beam into a stone wall. At his feet was a crevice which went straight down as though it had been measured by a giant square. He got to his knees and looked over. Playing his light around he detected a few ledges like narrow steps far below. It was pitch-dark down there, and not even his strong light could reach to the bottom. He tried tossing a few pebbles into it; listening he heard the faint rattle of their fall, but could not be sure whether they had landed on one of the ledges or had reached bottom.

Looking about him, he found a weathered bit of limestone that thrust itself up like a small table. It did not look very substantial but it was his only hope. Odin had crammed his ammunition, food and canteen into a knapsack. Looping the rope through it and his rifle strap, he lowered them over until he felt the rope slacken as his gun and supplies rested upon the first ledge. Releasing one end of the rope he carefully drew it back.

\* \* \* \* \*

Now he knotted the rope about the stone and let the two lengths of it trail down toward the ledge. He had kept his flashlight which he thrust into his belt. One other thing, a little miner's cap and light, now came into use. It was warm down there, and as soon as the cap with its lighted lamp was on his head, sweat began to pour down his neck. Suddenly he remembered a scene he had witnessed one morning in West Virginia--so long ago that it should have been forgotten. His car had stalled in a tiny town one evening. He had slept in the only hotel, but had got up before daybreak so he could start an early search for a mechanic. Looking up toward the hills he had seen a silent procession of lights going upward to some unknown mine. There was something grotesque about those climbing lights; the identity of the men was lost, and this was a crawling

thing up there on the hillside. For a moment he felt himself feeling infinite pity for all the men everywhere who spent their days in the dark.

Then he laughed. Better feel a bit sorry for Jack Odin too. Getting ready to lower himself over a precipice, and not having the slightest idea when he would reach bottom. Or whether there was any bottom at all. The blackness beat at the little light. A startled bat left its upside-down perch and fluttered against his face, clicking its teeth in warning.

Well, one could stay here and think until doomsday. So, with a shrug of his big shoulders, he got a firm grip on his doubled rope and slid over the edge. He went down and down until his shoulders ached. Once he got his feet down on an outcropping but dared not brace himself there for fear of loosening his rope from its unsteady mooring above. Then, at last, he came to the ledge with only a few feet of his doubled rope to spare.

After resting the little cap and lamp in a secure cranny he lay flat on his stomach for a few minutes, gulping great draughts of air and trying to rub some feeling back into his aching shoulders. Then he got up and started looking about for some anchorage. Some twenty feet away, he found a little spur of rock.

The second ledge was negotiated in the same fashion as the first. It was scarcely four feet in width. Leaning over it, with his powerful flashlight spraying a beam of light downward, he saw that there were no more ledges between him and the floor of the crevice below. Not even a single out-cropping. The wall was smooth and glassy as though at one time, for ages and ages, water had flown down it and had left a glossy coating upon its face.

Moreover, when he awkwardly dangled his rope into the abyss with one hand, and kept his light upon it with the other, he found to his disappointment that not even a single length would reach to the dimly-seen floor below.

He sat there for a while, chewing at a bit of jerked beef, trying to get his strength back, racking his brains for a plan. But he could think of nothing except getting back to Opal. Then, at last, with a sigh and maybe a curse at the things that happen and maybe a bit of a prayer, he began to tie a loop, lasso fashion, in his rope. Finding another spur of rock became a problem. This ledge was smooth. But in time he found one and drew his loop tightly about it. Rolling the knapsack up into a ball and tying it securely, he threw it over the brink. Listening, he heard it land and bounce two or three times. The gun was slung over his shoulder. The miner's cap and lamp went back upon his head. He stuffed his pockets full of ammunition and slid over the edge. Once he nearly lost his grip on the single strand and slid downward for a yard or two with the rough coils taking the hide off his palms. But he held on. And at last he was dangling at the end of the rope like a plumb-bob. Carefully he

tightened his grip with his right hand and let go with the left. His shoulder creaked, and fangs of pain struck at his wrist and elbow.

\* \* \* \* \*

But he hung on. Playing the flashlight below him, he saw that the floor of the crevice was still many yards away. It seemed to be of sand, but he was not sure. Limestone could be deceiving. Putting the light back in his belt, he began feeling along the wall. It was smooth. Finally, reaching down as far as he could, he found a little hole scarcely large enough for one hand. There was no time left to consider. Getting his fingers into it he turned loose of the rope and dropped down. It felt as though his left shoulder was tearing loose, but he held his grip. Kicking about he found a toe-hold in the wall--and finally another grip for his hand.

In this way, Odin went down for nearly a dozen yards. But at last he could find neither a grip for his hands nor a rest for his feet. He did not care now. The pain in his shoulders was becoming unbearable. Taking one great gulp of air, he released his hold on the wall and thrust his body out into space. The little light in his cap went out. Odin fell through darkness. He fell into soft sand, doubling up as his feet touched it. Odin rolled over and over, losing both flashlight and gun as he tumbled. Then he came up against hard rock, with most of the wind knocked out of him, and lay there gasping, feeling about him with frantic hands for the light and the gun.

\* \* \* \* \*

The old terror of the dark swept over him as he clutched this way and that and found nothing. Then he got a grip on himself and laughed at his fears--remembering that he had matches in his pockets.

The spurt of a match showed him his miner's cap not five feet away. He must have missed it by inches as he was clutching about in the dark. He lit it and soon found gun and flash.

Pointing his light upward, he could faintly see the knotted end of his rope swinging back and forth up there against the precipice. It was his only link with the outside world, and it was far out of reach. He shrugged and played the light about the cavern into which he had ventured.

The walls of the crevice into which he had fallen were never over ten feet apart and in spots were less than three. But the sandy bed sloped noticeably downward, so downward he went. Only pausing occasionally to take a mouthful of water from his canteen or eat a bite or two. His watch had been broken in that last fall. He threw it away.

The air grew hotter. So hot at last that Odin had to pause more often and rest upon the sand. But it too was hot, as though it had never known anything but this one temperature.

Stumbling along, his nostrils and chest burning, and something thumping in his ears, he finally fell to his knees. Jack Odin lay there for

a long time. But the floor of the cavern still led downward. So, with nothing else left in his mind, he got to his knees and crawled on.

That last determination saved him. A cool breath of air struck him in the face. He toiled downward and was soon in a wider cavern that was so cold that he was shivering. He rested again and then went on. The cold grew worse.

Odin came to a tunnel of ice. The faint smell of ammonia set him to coughing. It was nearly as uncomfortable here as the heat had been a few hours before. But he kept on. Finally, there was no ice left on the walls about him. The air grew warmer.

Soon the walls opened out until he could scarcely see them with his flashlight. Playing it upward he could only get a faint reflection from the stalactites hundreds of feet away.

At length Odin came to a vast room where his light could reach neither walls nor ceiling. But in the center of it was a tiny pool, rimmed by white sand and a shell-like lip of limestone. He got to his knees and tested the water. It was clean--but old and old and old. Filling his canteen, he opened his knapsack and prepared a hearty meal. He was dog-tired but before he slept he walked around the little pool. He had heard of fish being found in underground caverns--or even the fossils of things that had once been there. But here Odin found no sign of life. Nothing except traces of the vast underground river that must have once swept through here long ago.

It was a desolate feeling to stand there with his beam of light pushing the dark away. Alone in a place which apparently had never known the beat of life before. And then Odin saw it--

A footprint. A small footprint which must have been made by someone who wore moccasins or sandals. He recognized it at once. He had seen hundreds of those footprints!

A Neebling had been there. How long before he did not know. But, certainly, Odin's theory had been right. The cavern led the way to Opal. Jack Odin was not sure how many times he ate and slept as he toiled his way downward. The long dead river had carved cunningly and beautifully upon the walls of the tunnel. And the dripping waters of centuries had fashioned pedestals, carvings, and statues that were beautiful indeed. Ordinarily he would have been interested in these, for Jack Odin was a man who loved beautiful things, but now he had but one idea: To go on.

Occasionally he found more footprints. But always near the scattered pools. The dwarfs must have kept against the walls and come out upon the sand only to quench their thirst. He wondered about that. And a possible answer came to him. They had been there without a light--feeling their way, almost--although he knew that they could see in the dark to a certain extent. He wondered at their courage. Here, with two lights, the staring darkness and the silent empty spaces were making him shaky.

The descent became sharper. At times he slid down long grades of limestone. Now and then he came to sharp drops where little waterfalls had once been. But there was usually sand below and he was able to leap down without much harm, other than a jolt or two.

But once he came to one of these drops that must have measured a hundred feet. He found a few rocky steps where the little precipice met the wall and clambered down, but it was rough going, and he had to make a jump for it at the last.

\* \* \* \* \*

Picking himself up and dusting the sand from his clothes he thought he saw a white gleam over against the wall. His light found a squat skeleton sitting there grimacing at him. He touched the skull and it fell to powder. Here was one of the dwarfs--a Neebling--but the bones did not belong to this age; the poor fellow must have lain there for centuries.

Doctor Jack Odin was never able to get all of his medical training out of his mind. Examining the skeleton he found that both legs had been broken. Apparently, the little man had been climbing up or down the precipice Odin had just negotiated and had slipped and fallen. His legs shattered, and infection setting in, the Neebling had crawled against the wall to die. Odin could imagine him doing that last task silently. They were akin to the animals that they loved, the Neeblings. They did not complain.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hours and hours later, as Odin toiled his way downward, he became aware of a growing stench in the stale air. Even this was welcome, for he was becoming obsessed with the idea that the cavern had not changed since the long-ago river had died, and that nothing in it could change. It was an odor of rotteness. Where there was decay, life had also been.

By the time he reached the next pool the putrescence which hung on the stale air was almost sickening. There he made his second discovery. A saurian of some sort, with squat legs and long, fanged mouth, had died there. Half-decayed, it made a little phosphor glowing in the dark and its long teeth flashed as he played a beam of light over it.

Noisome as it was, the sight of it made his heart quicken, for here was one of the things of Opal. It must have crawled up here from that silent sea. Then a feeling of gloom and dread swept over him. What had happened down there to make this thing leave its home and crawl here to die!

Odin went on and on, and the smell of the thing behind him slowly faded from the air.

Then, as he rounded a corner, Odin blinked his eyes. Far ahead of him was a red glow. Taking a deep breath, he thought he smelled smoke. Or was it sulphur? He had never been able to get one grim possibility out of his mind. What if some of the fires and lava streams of inner earth should lie between him and the world of Opal?

He had gone too far to turn back. So Odin went on cautiously. As he neared the red glow, he saw that it was only a campfire dying down to coals. But from the darkness came such a clamoring of hisses, groans, and screeches that he could feel goose-pimples popping out on his arms.

His rifle held a clamp for his flash. Making gun and light ready, he advanced cautiously, still unable to determine what was happening except that one hell of a fight was going on. Then a coal burst into quick flame and he could see the struggle. A broad-shouldered man, stripped to the waist, was fighting with one of the saurians. He had closed its long mouth with a huge hand and was striking again and again at the white throat with a broad-bladed knife. The thing was screeching and clawing at the man's arm. Its razored tail was lashing forward--and the man was dodging it as he kept backing in a circle and thrusting the head upward and backwards. Both brute and man were streaming blood. The man made no sound other than an occasional savage grunt as his blade struck deep through the horny hide of the thing. The Saurian became wilder with each blow.

It was a long shot. But Jack Odin made it. Both man and reptile quickened into momentary stone as his light centered its beam upon them. Odin aimed and fired. The heavy bullet shattered the top of the saurian's head.

Then Odin was running forward, calling out in the language of Opal. The broad-shouldered man kicked the wriggling carcass of the thing out of the way and threw a few sticks upon the coals. They flamed up. The man sat down calmly, though still gasping for breath, and began to wipe the blade of his knife upon his thigh.

He had regained some of his breath when Odin reached him. Rubbing a gashed forearm and smiling as though such a meeting were an everyday occurrence he called out cheerfully.

"Ho, Nors-King. I knew you would come. Sooner or later you would be here and we would go hunting together."

The man was Gunnar, successor to Jul, and Chief of the Neeblings!

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## CHAPTER 3

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Going to the pool, Gunnar began to wash his bleeding arms. "Yes, Old Gunnar knew you would be here, Jack Odin, for it was writ in runes of silver long ago that a man will go to the gates of death and brave Old Nidhug the dragon there to find his maid."

"And how is she, Gunnar? Where is she?"

But the dwarf did not answer for a few minutes. He stared moodily into the coals, and then feeling behind him in the dark he found a bright shirt and struggled into it. "I was getting ready to take a bath when the thing came at me," he explained simply.

"Gunnar! Where is Maya?"

Gunnar's big hand squeezed Odin's shoulder.

"Steady, lad. I wish I knew. I wish I knew. But you are here now, and we will go hunting together. For you are my friend and Maya is my friend. And I swore by my sword, the Blood-Drinker, to her father I swore it. And to Jul. That I would look after her. But I failed. And is my word no stronger than a puff of wind? I have sworn a new oath. I will find her. Even though we go farther than the graveyard of stars--or beyond the gates of hell, maybe--I will find her."

There was a sob in the squat man's throat and Jack Odin could see by the light of the flickering coals that Gunnar had aged. His face was more seamed. The knots of muscle at each jaw were larger. His hair was gray-streaked and thinner. But those huge shoulders were huger still, and the big gnarled hands kept closing and unclosing as though they were grasping at a throat.

"We will go together, then," Odin said. "But tell me--"

"Then swear it by my blade." And Gunnar took the long sword and harness up from the sand where he had left it.

"My people do not swear by the sword."

Gunnar cursed. "The tongues of your people are like two-edged knives. I have had enough of them. But you are not like them, Odin. I said before that you were a throwback to the men of old-time, when they

went berserker together, or followed the whale's path in their dragon-headed ships. Here, swear by the sword, my sword."

\* \* \* \* \*

And Jack Odin reached forward and touched the sword and swore that he would go with Gunnar even to the edge of the stars--

"Now," Odin pleaded. "Tell me what happened down there."

"It is a long story. And not a pretty one, either. Have you anything to eat?"

Odin produced some bread and jerked beef. As they sat there, with the coals winking red eyes at them, Gunnar told his tale between wolfish bites.

"Grim Hagen planned well." (So Gunnar began). "He planned well, and even yet I hope to kill him.

"That was an evil day when you and Maya decided to go back to outer-earth. An evil day. Some of Grim Hagen's men snared Maya with their thons. There was much fighting. We killed many but many got away.

"I should have known from the black scowl which Grim Hagen had worn those many months that he would not be stopped by one defeat. You will remember, Odin, how I told you of the little flying machines that we strapped on our backs in the old days and went sailing through the air. They were outlawed. But during the time that Grim Hagen held the tower he must have found the plans for the flying machine, or maybe even one of the machines. For when his men attacked us, each one had such a machine. And each man carried dozens of little glass eggs. When they threw them they exploded and dissolved nearly everything for twenty foot around.

"Oh, we fought. We killed many. But it is hard to fight the hawk. One by one they blew up our ships. Then, carrying Maya and a few other prisoners with them, they flew out to sea like a flight of evil birds--no, not birds, for not even the hawk is evil. What was the word that you used for the leather-winged, toothy things that live in the forest?"

"Dactyls," Jack Odin prompted.

"Yes, that's it," Gunnar said as he stared into the fire. "Dactyls. I like that word. It has an evil, bloody ring to it."

He stopped talking to take a huge bite of stale bread that nearly choked him. Then he continued his story.

"Meanwhile, in the city of the Scientists, the same kind of fighting had been going on. We learned later that when Grim Hagen's men winged their way in from the sea, his army had already retaken the Tower. Ato and his soldiers were scattered. Half of them were dead. So, after scattering their explosive eggs across the city, and killing the very old and the very young, Grim Hagen and his men took refuge in the Tower and prepared to withstand our siege. They had learned much from their first defeat, and this time they held it well.

"As soon as we could patch up our ships, we came a-following and joined forces with Ato's soldiers. We assaulted the Tower day after day. Until the ground and the walks around it were black with our dried blood. But they held out. Not once did they try a counter-attack. We should have guessed at what Grim Hagen was planing. But we didn't until one of the prisoners escaped. His name was Zol, and he was a friend of Maya's father. Poor fellow, he is dead now, but if we of Opal went in for monuments we would build one a mile high for Zol. He told us that Grim Hagen was readying the Old Ship for flight into space. Also, he planned to leave the sea gates open.

"Zol saved us. Or saved some of us and a part of Opal. Ato began training divers against the day when the tunnel would be flooded. We moved as many people as we could onto the ledges high up on the walls of Opal. We got our great pumps ready to cope with the flooding.

"Also, Ato and I renewed our assault upon the Tower. But they bested us. They had learned too many of the old secrets. Most of the young men of the Neeblings died there against the walls. That is how we keep our promises, Nors-King.

"But Old Gunnar had a trick or two left. Remember the tale that I read to you in the throne-room of Baldar. The first of the Brons to enter the world of Opal were soldiers sent from some blasted planet in outer space to find a new home. They could fly their ship, but they knew nothing of the science and the magic that had gone into it. We of the Neeblings learned that. And we Neeblings were their historians for a thousand years. Also, it was we who pieced together what little is known of their trip through space. And this is why:

"We of Opal have always kept up with the world above us. About thirty years ago there were some popular stories in your land about Tani of Ekkis whose people came through the void in a spaceship. They traveled slow, and this is how they made the trip. They had discovered something which kept most of the crew under suspended animation for years upon years. That tale was not far from right. For the Brons too had a capsule, red like a ruby, which made them sleep for a score of years. There was an antidote, a yellow liquid like curdled flames. Three drops into the veins and the sleeper would awake. That is how they made the trip. Only a pilot, a co-pilot, a navigator, and a chief engineer were ever awake at one time. Their log-books were brief. But we of the Neeblings have them.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So," (Gunnar continued, drawing a huge forearm across his moist blue eyes) "I persuaded Zol to go back to the Tower. I might as well have run him through, but he was our best and last hope. Wolden gave him a tiny cube, no larger than a ring-case. In it was a crystal with a number of silver wires woven into it, but it was a good transmitter. Better than yours, Jack Odin. For a week we heard from him daily.

"I say it was a week. We were working the clock around and our little sun was misbehaving again. It was a feverish week, not measured by day and night, for the sun would wink on and off as though it were getting ready to give up.

"For a week we heard from Zol. He gave the ruby capsule to Maya. She sleeps and will continue to sleep for twenty years unless the antidote which looks like curdled yellow flame is given to her. I have it. Grim Hagen may kill her or cast her adrift in space, but he cannot awaken her. That hound of hell can taunt her no more. She sleeps, until Gunnar stands by her side.

"Then Zol sent us his last message. Maya was sleeping. He was barricaded in one of the rooms of the Tower, and Grim Hagen and his men were battering down the door. From what we heard in the next few minutes, I suppose that the door gave way and Zol died. Then Grim Hagen's voice came to us, screaming in rage. He had all that he wanted. Even though our princess slept, he would take her into space with him. And she would awaken some day with the smoke of plundered worlds in her nostrils. Yes, she would awaken--to be his slave, even as he had promised us that night in Maya's home when we fought. And I wish I had killed the beast then. But Zol was dead and there was no sense in listening to this man's ravings, so we turned off our radio. And that is the last we ever heard from Grim Hagen.

"It was the next day when he opened the sea-gates and trundled the ship out upon the floor of the sea. We had done all that we could to be prepared. But it was not enough.

"The water came pouring in upon Opal. Half of the people died. Many had taken refuge in ships, and I doubt if a single ship survived that night. Yes, just as the water came flooding in, our little sun went out. We fought. The waters flooded both Valla and the Scientists' City. Here it rose nearly to the top of the Tower. There were only a few forests and meadows in the land that were not flooded. These were high up against the walls. As for the creatures of the deep, the reptiles and amphibians, most of them were dead. Many crawled into the ancient caves and fled upward. Most of them died.

"That is nearly all. We know now that Grim Hagen and his ship, with all his prisoners and loot, took off from the bed of the sea with a flourish which was just like Grim Hagen.

"Meanwhile, Ato and his crews got the gates closed and started the pumps. Only a few men of that crew are alive today, for the tunnel was radio-active at that time. It was weeks before the pumps could force the water back into the Gulf. Most of our plants were lost. My men and I have been foraging in the world above for these--and have helped ourselves to your cattle when we could.

"The waters are back to their old level, but they left a soggy, ruined world behind them. There is a deal of work to be done before it will be